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The Next Killer App for IT: Leadership

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A study of 3,000 people in various jobs came to the conclusion that IT workers have the most stressful job in the world. IT even beats out the medical field for reported job stress. I think I know why...and what to do about it.

By Hank Marquis

A recent study claims that 97 percent of IT workers say their job is stressful on a daily basis. Four out of five say they feel stressed before they even get to work. Some 25% report that they have taken time off from work to deal with the stress.

The poll reveals that 37 percent blame deadlines, 31 percent blame doing the work of others. Not surprisingly 28 percent say they lack job satisfaction and would like to work elsewhere.

The single largest "cause" respondents "blame" for their stress is their direct manager and their "for lack of support, increasing pressure, interruptions and bullying behavior."

Having experienced quite a bit of this stress myself over that last 27 years working in a variety of IT positions, I think I know why we are so stressed.

The reasons for IT stress are interesting, and I believe mostly come directly from a lack of business/ IT alignment, and poor or non-existent leadership from managers.

Stress? What Stress?

The report says the reasons for IT stress (as reported by stressed IT workers) are: Workload, Feeling undervalued, Deadlines, Type of work people have to do, Having to take on other people's work, Lack of job satisfaction, Lack of control over the working day, Having to work long hours, Frustration with the working environment, Targets.

Either we in IT are a whiny lot, or we lack leadership. I talk every week with clients about leadership, or the lack thereof. A leader is not a dictator, and we have all worked for the dictator-manager. They create mandates without measurements, and thus we in IT don't have the resources we need. The flip side is that we are inefficient and do not follow process, so we mostly work harder not smarter in IT.

All IT organizations are resource constrained. I have yet to meet an organization with a dozen sysops or programmers in the back room playing pinnacle. We are all busy, but are we led? Do we have leaders? Which leads to the question "what is leadership?"

Wikipedia.com says leadership is "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members", and continues "Organizationally, leadership directly impacts the effectiveness of costs, revenue generation, service, satisfaction, earnings, market value, share price, social capital, motivation, engagement, and sustainability."

I guess then, the reasons for IT stress are a direct result of a lack of leadership from IT management, and the answer is sadly, no we don't have enough leaders in IT. I believe this is the reason for our distress and unhappiness as IT workers.

Leading

To lead is to have followers. Followers are people who do what the leader asks of them because they believe in the leader and want to follow -- and not because they have to. This of course leads to the next question: "Why do some people--and not others--attract followers?"

Well, the answer can be seen if you go back to the previous discussion on the reasons for stress: "lack of support, increasing pressure, interruptions and bullying behavior."

Compare this with the previous discussion of leadership: "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members."

The role of a manager in IT ("leader") is to make their staff ("followers") aware of the goals of the organization. Of course this means you need to know your goals, and actually have a few them handy. And herein is a major reason for the disconnect -- many IT managers claim to be "to busy to plan." Strike 1.

If we cannot engage our staffs in understanding why they do things, and show them that what they do has a dramatic and real impact on customers and the business, they will not feel like they are contributing. Strike 2 (and more stress).

If they don't feel like they are contributors, they are not members of an organization. Strike 3 (want another job.)

So, to be a manager in IT today means leading. Leading is authoritative -- empathy and caring

tempered with discipline. An effective manager is not your friend, they are you leader. You follow their lead because they have earned your respect for their competence and how they have led you in the past.

It seems to me then that the next killer app for IT is leadership then. Not some technical prowess, but the ability to motivate, guide, engage, and empower staff. Too bad "Dilbert" is the favorite roll model of many IT workers and managers.

The light at the end of the tunnel just might be necessity, the mother of invention. As technology commoditizes, technical prowess is less and less important to competitive advantage. Today, truly, technology doesn't matter. What matters is how the team uses technology. In other words, leadership is now critical to IT.

ITIL, and to an even larger extent CobiT, stresses again and again the importance of establishing goals, engaging workers, building teams, and following process. As the *IT department* becomes more important than *information technology*, the smart managers will realize that success for their business comes not from "Dilbert", but rather good old fashioned leadership skills.

Let me know what you think of your managers. Could they benefit from leadership skills?

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