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Rules to stay cool in the office jungle

By Stefan Stern

Apart from overwhelming workloads and tickings-off from the boss, few things raise stress levels faster than stress management courses. Tired managers probably feel they have heard it all before. But a new programme of science-based stress management techniques may offer a way forward.

The pace and scope of change in business today is the leading cause of workplace stress. Business gurus and politicians may urge us to embrace change, but the physiological facts indicate that it does us little good. It is often after the sometimes sudden and overwhelming shock of a merger or acquisition that senior managers favour a "big bang" approach, calling for further rapid change, stretch-targets and audacious goals from a depleted workforce.

Human beings are naturally not suited to this style of management, says Chris Sawicki, managing director of the Hunter Kane consultancy, which offers "high performance" training based on the biochemistry of the brain and evolutionary psychology.

Near the centre of the brain is a gland called the amygdala. This is our emotional centre, and it responds quicker than the cortex, where the rational and analytical part of the brain sits. If a sabre-toothed tiger were to appear suddenly from behind a filing cabinet, you would react fast. The amygdala stimulates production of adrenalin, an accelerant for the metabolism. Soon after, another hormone, cortisol, will also be produced: it helps release a burst of energy in the short term, but over the longer term damages our system. Cortisol is produced when we experience negative or anxious feelings, "and the more we produce, the more we produce," Mr Sawicki says.

Human beings still respond to perceived threats with this "fight or flight" biochemistry that pumps out cortisol. This "cortical inhibition" gets in the way of taking a rational approach. High cortisol levels also damage health, says Mr Sawicki: "We produce too much cortisol, and not enough DHEA [dehydroepiandrosterone], which is stimulated by feelings of well-being."

Hunter Kane teaches stress management techniques under licence from Heart Math, the Californian business that devised them. The techniques are designed to improve "heart rate variability" - the range in beats per minute in which our hearts function - to prepare us better for pressurized situations.

A combination of simple breathing and visualisation techniques can help reregulate the heart-beat and thereby rebalance the cortisol/DHEA ratio. Senior executives at BP, Unilever, AstraZeneca, Hewlett-Packard, Shell and National Air Traffic Services have adopted them.

Hunter Kane teaches two simple, and two relatively intricate stress management techniques. One easy method involves breathing in for five seconds, holding the breath and then breathing out for a count of five, and keeping that going for a minute. The result is the sort of heart rate that reduces production of adrenaline and Cortisol.

The other simple technique is called "freeze frame". First, stop whatever you are doing - panicking or fretting aimlessly - and step away mentally from the problem. Then use the breathing technique described above. Next, think back to a moment when you were filled with a powerful sense of

happiness and well-being, and concentrate on that feeling. This will release the positive DHEA hormone and reduce the high Cortisol ratio.

Last, return to the problem in hand, and think what practical and efficient next step would help. Arresting the panic response (adrenaline and cortisol production) enables the cortex. Your solution may not be radical or original, but you will at least be able to see it.

Hunter Kane's two more advanced techniques concern groups and individuals. For groups, the firm suggests using the breathing techniques to establish better conditions for listening. The final stress management techniques require more training and involve listening to a 17-minute piece of music.

Life at work is often too fast and crazy to allow time to step away and visualise a happy moment. Hunter Kane says the techniques can be practised in quieter moments to help build underlying hormonal balance and emotional health.

When bosses go mad they really cannot help it. Their perception has been altered by adrenalin and cortisol, which has stopped them using their rational brain to analyse the situation calmly. Perhaps the biggest threat to businesses today is not new and cheaper technologies or offshoring, but cortical inhibition.

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Hunter Kane is one of the UK's leading companies behind performance-improvement and stress-management programmes, and has trained more than 6,000 people in "Peak Performance" in the last six years. Its corporate clients include Shell, BP, Unilever and Hewlett-Packard and its programmes have been delivered throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America and the USA.

Hunter Kane's "Peak Performance" programme, incorporating HeartMath™ technology, has been scientifically proven to help individuals achieve dramatic sustainable improvements in performance, health, productivity and mental, emotional and physical well-being. The "Peak Performance" programme teaches people how to activate positive emotion through the intuitive power of the heart. "By adjusting the heart's rhythm we alter the electrical impulses sent to the brain, changing our physiology, literally, in a heartbeat," explains Chris Sawicki, Managing Director of Hunter Kane.

In addition to delivering significant benefits to corporate clients, Hunter Kane has also run successful programmes for sports bodies, schools and the police. Hunter Kane is the exclusive licensee of HeartMath™ in the UK and Europe.

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