

# Leveraging Emotional Intelligence for Managing Executive's Job Stress: A Framework

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*Stress is an inevitable outcome of modern day complex life in organizations and needs to be experienced at an optimal level, which depends upon person's characteristics, for making life meaningful and productive. This does not happen most of the times in organizational lives as demands and expectations from inside and outside the organization keep on constantly changing. Researches across the globe have found the relevance of emotional intelligence of the employees which act as a moderator vis-à-vis perception of job stress. This paper is an attempt to meta-analyze available research findings and develop a framework to be used by the industry practitioners. The conceptual model based on research literature is assumed to fill in the gap and also to address the organizational concerns.*

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## **Introduction**

Stress is an inherent part of every profession. It is something like the spices and affects job performance either way depending upon how it has been perceived and experienced. The same level of stress at workplace may be perceived and experienced differently which results into differential productivity amongst the executives in the corporate. It is also true that executives who were recruited and selected have had more or less same level of intellectual quotient but day-to-day experience indicates that there is existence of non-intellectual abilities in these executives which predispose them towards management of job stress resulting into psychological well-being and effectiveness at workplace. Stress at work-place has been a cause for concern in the present day financial meltdown which the corporate world has been experiencing. Stress at work-place for the executives may be considered as a consequence of how the mind and the body function and interact.

## Stress at workplace

Mason (1975) states that the concept of stress has been approached in at least four different ways, namely: the stimulus or external force acting on the individual, the responses or changes in the physiological functions; the interaction between an external force and the resistance to it, and finally, as a comprehensive phenomenon encompassing all the three. Stress is basically an adaptive response, moderated by individual differences that are a consequence of any action, situation, or event that places special demands on a person (Ivancevich & Matteson 1996). Stress at workplace affects not only individual employee's productivity but also of group as well as the total organization's efficiency and effectiveness.

The empirical literatures indicate that there are some occupations which happen to be more prone to stress, such as the managers of restaurant chain (Parker & DeCotiis 1983), school teachers (Cooper & Kelly 1993), lawyers (Krakowski 1984), head teachers of primary and secondary schools and their directors of higher education (Cooper & Kelly 1993). Apart from specific professions where the job stress is invariably felt more, the literatures also depict work

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stress contributors which include role ambiguity, conflicting performance expectation, political climate of the organization, and poor relationships with co-workers (Edwards 2001). Research findings indicate that there are five major factors which make the executive under stress namely, factors intrinsic to the job, role in the organization, video display terminal stress, and relationships at work and career development (Cooper et al. 1988).

Apart from these five groups of factors which are mainly organizational in nature, the persona of individuals, their socio-economic conditions, and their family backgrounds also add on to the experience of stress at workplace (Manshor 2000). Therefore, it becomes imperative for the organizations not to ignore the impact of stress on their employees and their productivity. The role of psychological makeup of the executives need emphasis as the research literatures suggest that the personality traits of persons to have significant impact on the perception of role stress in the organization (Deary & Blenkin 1996). In a number of studies (e.g. Birch & Kamali 2001, Deary & Blenkin 1996), it was observed that out of the five major personality dimensions such as neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, neuroticism has been found to be positively related with job stress. In work settings, the executives who are high on neuroticism are likely to be emotionally unstable and experience negative feeling (Costa & McCrae 1985).

There are research findings which have dealt with what executives do at workplace and the impact of these work behaviors on the experience of stress. Wardwell et al. (1964) found that 'responsibility for people' was significantly more likely to lead to coronary heart disease than 'responsibility for things'. Increased responsibility for people frequently means that one has to spend more time interacting with others, attending meetings, listening as well as handling grievances, etc. In other words, the roles of managing relationships at workplace have its side effect on the psychological health of the individual employees. In the organizational lives, the nature of tasks performed by the executives across functional areas is different, it becomes important to devise different degrees of responsibility for people and responsibility for things. The literature depicts that the responsibility for people creates more stress for people in personnel area whereas the responsibility for things lead to more of perception of stress for people in manufacturing area (Menon & Akhilesh 1994). Menon & Akhilesh (1994) also report that when the roles are more ambiguous in nature to be performed, it is the people of personnel function areas who experience more of stress than the same nature of roles to be performed by people in other functional areas.

The author believes that the prime concern of both academia as well as practicing managers should be to think beyond people versus function specific stress and to make employees emotionally intelligent across functional as well

as management levels in the organization. Though the nature and amount of experienced stress may be different, the reality is that everyone experiences stress while confronting with either persons or any organizational issues. In such a state of affairs, the author suggests for making employees emotion-ally intelligent which will in turn increase organizational abilities for competing even in the turbulent business environment.

### **Leveraging Emotional Intelligence**

The concept of 'Emotional intelligence' (EI) is very recent in the literature of the management science but has revolutionized management thinking across culture and industry. To begin with, it is contended that IQ and emotional intelligence are not opposite competencies but rather a separate one. As a result, it is stated that people with a good mix of IQ and emotional intelligence tend to be more successful in their chosen fields of endeavors than those who have outstanding IQ and under-developed emotional intelligence. The credit goes to Salovey and Mayer (1990) for coining the term of 'emotional intelligence' and since then the management thinkers subscribing to the ideas of differential psychology have

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been researching religiously to help it evolve into a separate management discipline for practice in the world of organizations. The literatures on EI suggest that emotional intelligence is nothing but managing the emotions of self as well as of others in interaction either in personal or in professional lives (Bar-On 1997, Goleman et al. 2002, Mayer et al., 2000, Salovey & Mayer 1990). Emotional intelligence as a concept refers to a set of non-cognitive abilities that influence one's ability to get on in life, working synergistically with IQ to enhance performance and it is the one that differentiates exceptional from mediocre performance (Orme & Cannon 2000).

The notion of emotional intelligence can be found in Thorndike's (1920) conceptualization of social intelligence, Wechsler's (1940) proposition of non-intellective abilities as well as Gardner's (1983) explanation of personal intelligence. An emotionally intelligent individual seems to condition his/her thinking brain to work in close association with the emotional brain to temper the situational response in the most appropriate way. Holahan & Sears (1995) in a longitudinal study over thousand high-IQ men and women followed from childhood through retirement report that those most self-confident in their early years were most successful as their careers unfolded. The research literatures on EI depict many benefits for the organizations as people with high emotional competencies increase overall organizational effectiveness. In many

of the studies, the findings indicate that a sustained focus on emotional intelligence contributes hugely towards building competitive advantage (e.g. Cooper 1997, Cooper & Sawaf 1997). Cooper (1997) while quoting Nick Zenuik, former top management personnel at Ford Motor Company, says that "emotional intelligence is the hidden competitive advantage and if one takes care of the soft stuff the hard stuffs take care of itself". In some of the studies, it has also been found that emotional intelligence is related to positive outcomes such as pro-social behaviors, parental warmth, and positive family and peer relations (Mayer et al. 1999, Rice 1999).

The heredity-environment controversy is in the area of emotional intelligence but not as intense as it is with IQ. It is also true that the management thinkers still keep debating whether or not emotional intelligence can be developed. The literatures on emotional intelligence seem to be tilted in favor of environmental perspective. It is believed that as emotional intelligence is a conditioned response, it not only can be developed, but also honed, over time to encompass various situational horizons including personal tragedies and shocking situations (Parthasarthy 2009). The general observation has been that to some extent, EI may be learned through life experiences (Bar-On et al. 2000) and the development of social and emotional competencies takes committed effort (Cherniss & Goleman 2001, Goleman et al. 2002). However, there are findings from other fields of knowledge as well,

such as psychotherapy, training programs, and executive education provide evidence for people's ability to improve their social and emotional competencies with sustained efforts and a systematic programme. By developing and utilizing emotional intelligence in work and personal lives, all employees and managers will be a "beauty" to his/her environment instead of being the "beast" (Parthasarthy 2009).

Emotionally intelligent persons are those who can maintain their course and stay calm in the face of pressure and disagreement from the important people in their lives (Craig 2002). To add, Parthasarthy (2009) says that emotionally intelligent quality managers will listen to the viewpoints of representatives from all departments of the company and consider them dispassionately when making decisions impacting product quality and quality assurance. The author believes that Darwin's theory of 'survival of the fittest' seems to have support from these research findings on emotional intelligence as executives who are intelligent emotionally have competencies to manage stressful business environment in such a way to bring successes to the organizations. It has also been observed that emotionally intelligent executives are able to motivate and energize their direct reports to achieve optimal outcomes (Lubit 2003).

The literature reviewed indicate tremendous support for the role of emotional intelligence vis-à-vis organizational and personal lives, but the de-

bate on 'nature-nurture' issues in EI seems to remain there for long. The author subscribes to the view of the environmental perspective on emotional intelligence and believes that EI of people can be developed or honed through rigorous training regimes. In other words, such a strong view of the author may be compared with crystallized intelligence of R. B. Cattell. These views find support from the benefit derived after making employees intelligent emotionally. These emotionally intelligent executives are not only self-motivated and energized but also make others around committed and motivated towards work as well.

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### **Emotional Intelligence & Role Stress**

Emotional intelligence may be considered as the only differentiator when it comes to managing stress at workplace. Emotionally intelligent work-forces have got tendencies to perceive and interpret a threatening environment differently and also to find effective solutions to it. Pau & Croucher (2003) observed that there is an inverse relationship between perceived role stress and emotional intelligence of undergraduate students of the UK Dental School and was found that people with low emotional intelligence report more of perceived stress at workplace.

Similarly, Nikolaou & Tsaousis (2002) found emotional intelligence to predict 12% of the variance in perceived role stress of paraprofessionals. These research findings speak volumes of the role of emotional intelligence in mitigating the negative impact of perceived stress on personal as well as organizational health. In other words, modern day organizations where stress is inevitable, emotionally intelligent employees are needed in plenty to provide competitive edge to the organizations.

Gerits et al. (2005) in a two year longitudinal study found that the female nurses who were relatively high on emotional intelligence developed fewer symptoms of burnouts. Ogniska-Bulik (2005) reports that the ability to effectively deal with emotions and emotional information in the workplace assists employees in coping with occupational stress; therefore, it should be developed in stress managing trainings. Thus, the implications of these findings are to help employees develop their level of emotional intelligence for them to be effective in their professional lives. Furthermore, in a study where the UK managers attended a developmental EI training program once a week for four weeks and pre and post measures were taken relating to EI, stress, and health and management performance, it was found that the training resulted in increased EI and improved health and well-being (Slaski & Cartwright 2003). It indicates that the EI training may be useful in reducing stress and improving health, well-being, and performance. Petrides and

Furnham (2006) found that trait emotional intelligence had a positive effect on perceived job control among both employed male and female adults and also noted that emotionally intelligent men felt lesser job stress. It may be because; the emotionally intelligent individuals are able to maintain positive mental states due to their ability to effectively and productively manage their felt emotions.

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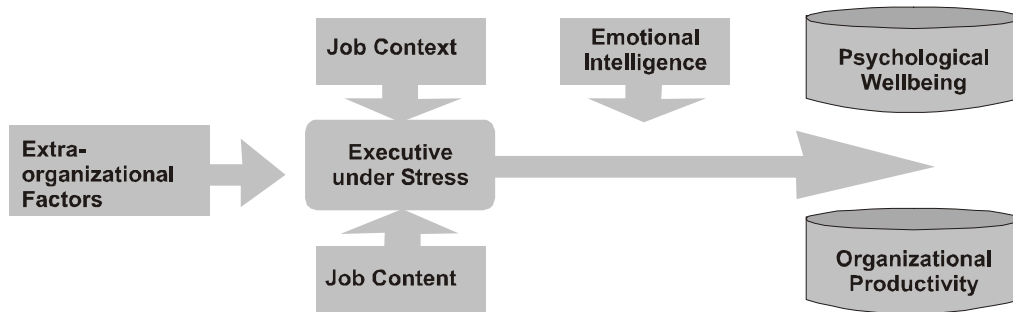
The stress at workplace is in plenty and needs adequate attention of the management thinkers and practitioners. If it is not addressed to the satisfaction of the organizations, it is sure that majority of the humanity in the organizations may develop psychosomatic diseases which will affect personal as well as organizational productivity. The present study of the author is to analyze these different research findings on emotional intelligence vis-à-vis organizational stress/stressor and to develop a framework for use in the industry. Based on the meta-analysis of these researches, the author presents a conceptual model in the section which follows.

### **A Framework**

The research literatures on emotional intelligence are in plenty and can be used for developing a workable model for use in the corporate. The experience

of job stress by the executives, especially in the present financial meltdown, is not good for both personal and professional lives as it negatively impacts the logical thinking brain. In other words, the efficiency of the logical brain of the humanity at workplace is lowered

considerably when the people becomes victims of stressful lives in the organization. It is in this context that the author collated research literature in the areas of emotional intelligence and stress to develop a workable model for effective use in the industry. The framework



**Proposed Framework of Psychological Wellbeing & Productivity**

depicted below is simple and straight for use of the industry in designing organizational architecture as well as training employees for managing stressful events for personal wellbeing as well as organizational productivity.

This framework says that any executive under stress may be due to three factors and if any of them touches the threshold point, he/she is stressed. The job content factor basically talks about the overall personality of a particular job as assigned to the individual executive. It includes variety of tasks, intellectual stimulation, whether the job is central or peripheral to the main departmental/organizational goals, etc. On the other hand, the job context factor relates to helping relationships 360 degree, culture/climate of the department/

organization, etc. Finally, the extra-organizational factor relates to anything outside organization but affecting significantly to one's life at workplace. It may include executives' personal and social details such as, socio-economic conditions, family life, education, aspiration, expectation, maturity, IQ, expertise, etc. These three factors are primarily responsible for making the work life of the executives either peaceful or painful. If the concern-ed executives are unable to manage the demands of these factors, the executives are bound to suffer from job stress which in turn impacts negatively both psychological wellbeing as well as productivity at workplace.

The experience of stress at workplace is inevitable and it can not be

eliminated totally. Hence, the executives need to develop for themselves a kind of psychological attribute called 'emotional intelligence' which will enable them to be happy, healthy, and productive. People with high EI have tendencies which predispose them to behave in such a way that results into managing self as well as relationships at workplace. Such a special kind of psychological skills makes the concerned employee and people around to have stress resistant persona. Lubit (2003) reports that emotionally intelligent executives are able to motivate and energize their direct reports to achieve optimal outcomes. It has also been found that there is a negative correlation between EI and stress at work, indicating that people with high scorers in overall EI suffered less stress related to occupational environment (Nikolaou & Tsaousis 2002). As Prathsarthy (2009) suggests that by developing and utilizing emotional intelligence in work and personal lives, all employees and managers will be a "beauty" to his/her environment instead of being the "beast". Similarly, Slaski & Cartwright (2003) also observed in a study that the training provided to the employees resulted in increased EI and improved health and well-being.

### Conclusions

The making of global economy has in it some undesired offerings as well for the humanity at workplace but those who have well developed emotional competencies may have advantage over others to better manage people, rela-

tionships, roles, etc for their own psychological wellbeing as well as organizational productivity. As it has been said in the previous section, the emotional competencies are not innate but acquired abilities which can be nurtured in the human resources over a period of time. At the same time, the humanity in organization with developed emotional competencies may not remain same for long until and unless it is maintained and sustained through specifically designed training programs at a regular interval. It is contended that one can not make organization free from 'stress' but leveraging the benefits of emotional intelligence competencies can make both personal and professional lives psychologically healthy. The organizations around the globe have started to give due importance to making executives emotionally competent through different training and developmental programs but the emphasis towards it needs to be augmented.

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