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EXECUTIVE STRESS A COMPANY KILLER

Stressed-out managers can lead to a burned-out company

By Zohar Abdoolcarim
Economics Editor

By any standard, Effendi Norwawi is an achiever. As chairman of Malaysia's Bank Utama for the past five years, he turned around the once-ailing bank. Today, it is seeking a stock exchange listing.

For the past 14 years Effendi has also been chairman of the Sarawak State Economic Development Corp (SEDC). He has done such a fine job that Malaysia's prime minister Mahathir Mohamad praised the Sarawak SEDC as a role model for the other state development boards.

But now, at the age of 47, Effendi has had enough. He has stepped down from both posts, and reckons it's time for a change. He explains: 'I've been overextending myself and neglecting my family and health for too long. For years my wife and children teased me, calling me a stranger when I came home early. Now my objectives and values have changed. I want to do things dear to me, particularly things to do with society, arts and culture.'

That's not quite what your average high-powered executive in Asia tends to say or think. Conventional corporate wisdom dictates that to reach the top, you labour long and hard and with single-minded determination. And once you reach the summit, in order to stay there, you don't let up for even a minute.

That's the usual success story and the building block behind Asia's economic success as a whole. Many executives thrive under pressure, and get a buzz out of the cut and thrust of business competition.

The trouble lies in going overboard.

Says Barbara McGregor, editor and publisher of Australia's *WellBeing* magazine: 'When you keep pumping adrenalin day in, day out, it can lead to chronic fatigue. The behavioural pattern behind chronic fatigue is that of the overachiever, pushing beyond limits, without giving oneself enough downtime.'

Indeed, for a growing number of execu-

Says Linus Cheung, chief executive of listed Hongkong Telecom: '[A stressful] situation is not only grossly unfair to the employee. It is also unfair to the company and its shareholders, leading in most cases to greatly reduced efficiency in even the best of individuals and almost inevitably to decreased productivity.'

'It is in a company's enlightened self-interest to have its executives lead balanced lives. This naturally incorporates productive work time, but it must also include relaxation and stimulation outside the work place — constructive leisure pursuits and a healthy proportion of family time.'

Reliable statistics are hard to come by, but anecdotal data (as well as assessments by experts) indicate executive stress is on the rise in Asia. As Takeo Naruse, deputy director-general of the Japan Federation of Employers' Associations (*Nikkeiren*), sees it, burnout is an increasing problem. 'The [Japanese] recession is taking its toll on middle management and executives, especially at smaller firms,' says Naruse.

It's happening in booming economies too. Take Thailand. Thais working in highly competitive sectors such as advertising,

securities and consumer products know the meaning of stress, overwork and burnout; if not mental breakdown.

In these high-pressure jobs they face a fair amount of competition from foreign multinationals already in the Thai market. Even though the battles may not be as fierce as they are in Hong Kong, Tokyo or Taipei, there are human casualties paving the road to success.



tives, there's a price to be paid: Mental stress; physical ailments; an unhappy family; an unbalanced life. Going flat out can lead to burnout.

The issue goes beyond the personal. Though few corporations have an active policy to tackle stress in their executive ranks, there is a growing sense among top management that burned-out executives can mean a burned-out company.

Attitude: Dr Vitaya Nakavachara, a prominent Thai psychiatrist, says: 'Businessmen face a lot of stress because of the Bangkok traffic, or because of economic problems, but I think the main factor comes from their attitude. Thais have become more competitive and hostile toward each other because they need to be more competitive nowadays.'

Most of Vitaya's businessmen clients are either senior Thai managers working for foreign multinationals or younger, Western-educated Thais working in high-pressure jobs such as securities trading or sales.

Says Vitaya: 'The younger generation of businessmen work too hard. They try to make more and more money.'

'They have no girlfriends, no social life and because they are so aggressive, they don't have any subject to talk about except business.'

In Japan, this attitude was once considered a badge of honour. That's

changing. The private sector is suffering a massive bulge of managers in their late 40s, recruited when double-digit growth was the norm, promising lifetime employment with continuous advancement.

What Japan calls restructuring is in full swing. Merit pay systems are being introduced. Non-contributors are getting coarse hints — such as hefty pay cuts — to shape up or ship out. Companies bulging at the seams with excess middle managers can no longer afford to keep them.

The added pressure caused by jobs moving offshore, says headhunter Alex Tsukada, president of the Japan arm of Boyden International, means that Japan's unemployment rate 'could easily double by early next year'.

People are waking up to the real impact stress has on productivity. The government now wants Japan's salaried workers to get a life, enjoy their families, take vacations, produce less and consume more.

Lawyers and human rights groups draw increasing attention to problems such as unpaid overtime, workplace discrimination and the infamous *karoshi* — death from overwork.

The message appears to be getting through. 'Everybody knows some kind of

'For years my wife and children teased me, calling me a stranger when I came home early'

— Effendi Norwawi, chairman of Malaysia's Bank Utama

Homare Takenaka, a former director for personnel for IBM Japan.

Japanese companies are now more forthright about encouraging employees to look beyond the bar and the golf course for social interaction and exercise, though it's all pretty ad hoc.

Productivity expert Mamoru Watanabe of management consultancy Monitor Co, who competes regularly in weekend cross-country races, says Japanese middle managers in their 30s, 40s and 50s are becoming more health-conscious and using their spare time to exercise or be active in sports.

Many of the venture firms that are springing up to replace manufacturing giants as the future engine of Japan's economy place strong emphasis on the corporation's responsibility to provide all employees with opportunities for full and satisfying lives.

This emphasis can in some cases lead to unconventional solutions. Software developer BUG Inc lets employees work when and where they like and to take vacations as they choose. Laidback president Hiroyuki Hattori leads by example. Another software development firm — Oracle Japan, a subsidiary of America's Oracle Inc — hires an English sheepdog to walk around its office once a week licking hands.

counselling system is necessary because of the dramatic social changes taking place,' says

Exaggerated: Unfortunately, in many cases there is little help available for the individual in danger of hitting the wall. Anecdotal evidence suggests that corporate claims to have installed professional counselling services are exaggerated.

'The basic response to a guy getting stressed is the boss is supposed to take him for drinks and talk the problem out,' says an up-and-coming manager at one of Japan's biggest and most successful manufacturing companies.

The band-aid approach is common. A few years ago a manager at the same company committed suicide by plunging from an upper-storey window.

The incident was hushed up, being a serious loss of face for the firm. Rather than looking into the issue of stress in the workplace and its possible role in the employee's suicide, the company simply proceeded apace to have alarms installed on all the windows.

More recently, and less dramatically, a 39-year-old assistant division manager, distressed by a missed promotion and the confusion of a transfer from procurements to sales, convinced the company clinic to approve a recuperative leave of several months, on 80% pay.

He returned to work just before the allowable term expired and appears to be functioning well. But while he himself may be cured, his career is not. Colleagues regard the man as a sly shirker whose chances of promotion have shrunk to zero.



COVER STORY

DANGER SIGNALS

How can an executive tell if he or she is heading for burnout? It's hard to say for sure — the study of stress is as much an art as it is a science. But there are some well-established warning signs.

They include chronic fatigue, a feeling that you are tired all the time. At the same time, many stress sufferers also have trouble sleeping at night. There may be trouble concentrating even on simple tasks, a sense of being overwhelmed, unable to cope with all that is expected. This executives find particularly troubling, since their very work requires them to focus and to be on top of things.

The important thing to remember is that stress also has a very real impact on the body. Ulcers and heart disease are just two examples of physical ailments that are stress-related.

There are many other minor physical symptoms that can plague the stressed executive. Headaches, stomach aches and other digestive problems are common, as are back and muscle pains and diminished sex drive. Over-extended professionals may notice an increased vulnerability to ailments such as colds, sore throats or the flu.

"The body's ability to respond to stress becomes exhausted," says Graeme Stuart-Bradshaw, a Hong Kong-based homeopath and naturopath.

Apart from the physical symptoms of burnout, there are behavioural signs. Explains Dr. M. Mahadevan, Malaysia's foremost psychiatrist, "The first line of defence for stressed executives is escapism. Drink. Airmstress. An obsession with physical fitness.

Sometimes they become listless. Their drive has gone. They feel they have no reason to get up in the morning. They become social recluses. They avoid people who were their friends and colleagues. They blame others for their discontent.

There is a sourness, a bitterness. Some become neurotic. They check the figures again and again. They read a report ten times. Their work suffers although they are working harder than ever before.

The point here is that it's not simply the amount of work or weight of responsibility that break body and spirit; sometimes it's the lack of these.

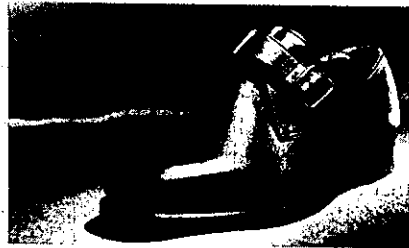
Thomas Nevins, president of Tokyo-based outplacement specialist TMT Inc, notes: 'If you are working for a purpose larger than yourself, if you can see the big picture, and there is significance in your work, you are less likely to burn out.'

Headhunter Alex Tsukada agrees. He says the increased incidence of neurosis and absenteeism among Japan's middle managers relates more to lack of purpose and declining morale than it does to hours worked. 'People don't burn out when they have enough meaningful work to do,' notes Tsukada.

Wendy Lau, managing director of a Kuala Lumpur-based executive search firm, agrees. She reckons that stress is often a response to being in the wrong job. In Lau's case, she had always wanted to be her own boss. A trained chemical engineer, she spent six years as a marketing executive in the chemicals industry before being recruited into an international search firm.

Another move and it was time to do what she had always wanted — run her own

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show: 'I work harder now than I ever did, but I enjoy life more. I juggle my time very carefully and I avoid stress by having two lives — a work life and a home life.'

The trick is to add other dimensions to life. 'People in Asia are often one-dimensional,' says Hong Kong psychotherapist Cathy Tsang-Feign. 'They just work.'

Not Azman Hashim, boss of Malaysia's biggest merchant bank, Arab-Malaysian. He takes his R&R seriously.

'You must make time for your hobbies. You must make relaxation a priority. I just cancel everything else. Work will always be there, so you must learn how to juggle the two.'

Azman, 55, turns into a demon at weekends. There is nothing that this man does

not do — power boat racing, jet skiing, scuba diving, photography, collecting fine art, collecting Ferraris, playing the guitar, reading poetry, golf.

He has written off two cars, a Jaguar and a Porsche 911 Targa, and has set a national record for racing a powerboat between Kuala Lumpur and Langkawi.

Hongkong Telecom CEO Cheung, who is 48, unwinds by reading (non-work material), listening to music, collecting Chinese paintings, among other hobbies.

'And I swim — a lot,' he says. 'Every day if possible. When I travel, I automatically pack my swimming trunks, goggles and ear plugs, along with the suits and ties, the mobile phone, working files and all the other paraphernalia of business.'

Limits: Another trick is to know your limits. Says Dr M Mahadevan, Malaysia's foremost psychiatrist: 'You have to know your own capacity. And, if you are responsible for people, you have to realise that they have a limited capacity too. Don't overreach yourself and don't ask others to overreach themselves.'

It also pays to adopt simple, common sense habits. Eat the right foods. Cut down on coffee, cigarettes and alcohol. (Many people use alcohol as their primary mechanism for relieving stress built up during working hours. This generally has the opposite effect, delivering a double whammy: On top of the original stress, the body also has to cope with the stress of eliminating what is essentially a poison.)

REFRESHER COURSE AT TEMPLE

Few companies anywhere have a proactive management policy to deal with stress in their executive ranks. Phatra Thanakit is one exception. One of Thailand's top finance and securities companies with assets of US\$2.1 billion, it is part of the Thai Farmers Bank group, known for its enlightened management practices.

Phatra has adopted a uniquely Thai approach to preventing burnout in the work place. For 10 years it has been sending stressed-out staffers to a Buddhist retreat in Prachuab Kirikhan Province. The retreat is run by the monastic followers of Phutatatpiku, a Thai monk who, up until his recent death, had a solid following among Bangkok's middle and upper classes.

For one week in February, the Phatra staff at the retreat are totally cut off from newspapers, TV and other contact with the outside world, while they take courses in meditation, contemplation, breathing and basic Buddhism and are fed a strictly vegetarian diet.

Top management at Phatra insist the Buddhist input helps keep the staff psychologically stable and, in the long run, improves teamwork and personal relations within the company.

'In our kind of work, if you have excessive greed it becomes troublesome for your colleagues, and for the firm as well,' says managing director Sripop Sarasan. That sort of thinking may go against the 'greed is good' philosophy that still drives many

finance companies around the world, but Sripop is convinced that too much greed eventually leads to stress, poor working relations and burnout. He says of the meditation courses: 'The most important thing

is to improve creativity. If you have time to sit back and review what you have done for the past year, you can find a way to improve a lot of things, especially coordination with staff in other divisions.'

Meditation will not make Bangkok traffic go away. So the company has invested heavily in a fitness centre for its new headquarters on Rajadapisek Road.

'When you're getting out of work at 6pm or 7pm, at the height of the rush hour, you might as well work out at the centre for an hour and wait for the traffic to die down a bit,' says Sripop.

The company also holds marathon races and sports events once a year in an attempt to keep employees fit, Sripop explains.

'Physical health goes hand in hand with mental health. We believe the health of the individual is one of the most important things, because we're spending most of our time in the office and part of it stuck in traffic. If you don't have good health it will affect your longevity.'

'Our employees make a lot of money here, but maybe they will have to spend it all in the hospital if they don't take care of themselves. That doesn't make sense.'

Peter Janssen



Time for reflection: Phatra Thanakit staff meditate at their annual retreat

COVER STORY

Try to avoid weekend travel so as to spend more time with the family. Organise your time so you can exercise regularly. Many people suffering from stress say exercise is a key component of any stress-reduction programme.

Says Kamaralzaman Tambu, managing director of Asia PR, a Kuala Lumpur-based public relations consultancy: 'If I didn't spend an hour a day in the gym I would go crazy. I encourage my senior staff to do the same.'

Encouragement from the top is key. Jannie Tay, managing executive director of The Hour Glass, a Singapore-listed trading, manufacturing and retailing company knows this. 'Stress comes when you feel you can't cope,' she says. 'But the reason you feel you can't cope is that you have not been able to identify your problems and turn them into challenges.'

'You must make time for your hobbies. You must make relaxation a priority'

Azman Hashim, Arab-Malaysian Bank boss and power boat ace

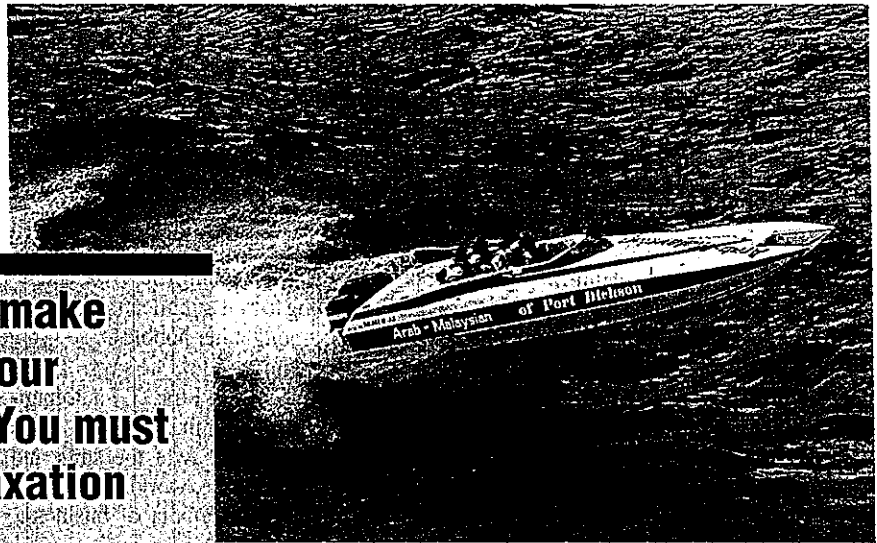
identify what the problem is and so they can't address it. A lot of what I do is sitting down with people and helping them identify what the problems are.

'It seems to work. We have a very low staff turnover rate, around 1% or 2% and

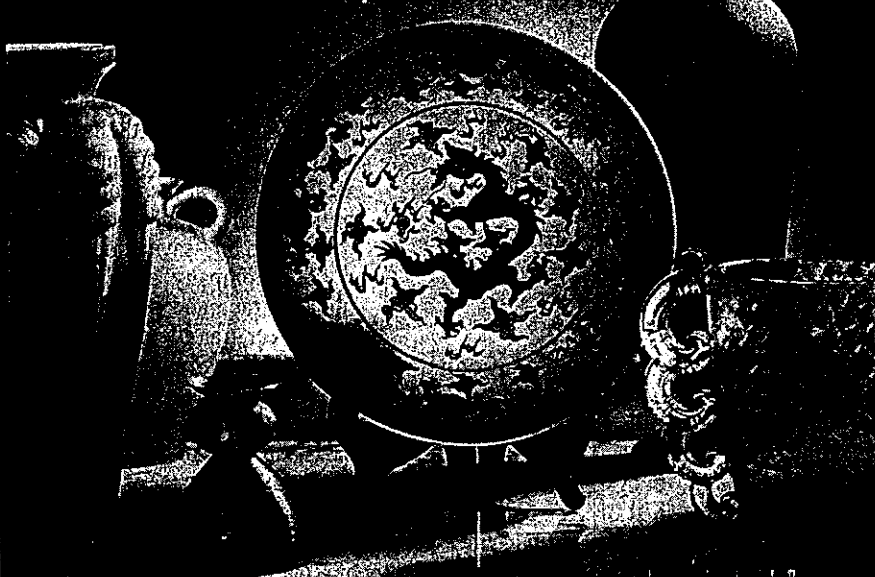
'Employees get stressed because they can't

about three-quarters of our staff have been with us for over five years... We work together as a team. We look after one another. We see the happiness of everyone as a corporate responsibility.' Let it be.

Reported by Sid Astbury in Kuala Lumpur, Peter Janssen in Bangkok, David Hulme in Tokyo and Zoher Abdoolcarim in Hong Kong



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