

A close-up photograph of four hands, two from the left and two from the right, reaching towards the center and interlacing their fingers to form a heart shape. The hands are light-skinned and appear to belong to different people. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white.

52 IDEAS FOR BETTER WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

52 columns that changed people's thinking,
habits and relationships in the workplace
by Peter Cullen for The Courier Mail

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About the Author

Peter Cullen has led a dual career with dual passions. One was his personal favourite of soul healing and creating spiritual awareness and the other was his corporate life which spanned 31 years, 10 years of which were as a senior manager in international aviation.

Following his corporate career Peter was asked to write a weekly column based on workplace behaviour for the iconic Queensland newspaper The Courier Mail. This provided him with the opportunity to write inspirational columns that supported all types of individuals and how they could make a positive and productive difference to their life at work.

Peter has experienced the soul, spiritual and corporate worlds and is now able to draw on all the necessary experiences he has engaged in over many years to support people with their personal and professional concerns, their passions and their endeavours in a genuine, sincere and empathetic manner.

Introduction

The original intention of writing the weekly columns for The Courier Mail was to create awareness among employees, managers and directors of the important role every person plays in the overall success of a company. When there is happiness, cohesion and trust within a company then greater success will surely follow.

The more subtle intention of the column was to help people to understand how important they are as an individual and to express themselves in a more complete and open manner, thus allowing their soul to more fully express itself.

I received a great deal of feedback from committed readers on how the columns had changed their thinking, habits and relationships in the workplace. The other, more important changes I noticed from the feedback was how people became stronger, more open and self-confident in their dealings with colleagues. This also led to some people pursuing a different direction in life.

The 52 columns in this book have been chosen for two reasons. Firstly, they represent my most preferred writing, and secondly, they provide the opportunity for you to read and focus on one column per week for a year.

How to Use this Book

I offer my columns to you with the suggestion that you focus on one column per week to lift yourself and your interactions with colleagues to create a more positive, productive and enjoyable workplace.

The alphabetical order of the columns provides the opportunity to personally choose the challenges for your growth in your workplace throughout your working year.

There are specific subjects that may be of immediate interest to you or remind you of specific personal incidents in your work environment. You may wish to consider these first.

I encourage you to use these columns as a reference guide, thought provoker and personal stimulus to enhance your life at work.

Are You a Good Problem Solver?

The first and one of the most challenging questions to answer is whether or not you do actually have a problem. People and companies will often think they have a problem but are often reluctant to acknowledge what the problem is let alone how big it may be. It is often easier to allow it to continue instead of taking the time, cost and effort to eliminate it.

Problem solving in itself has many different facets and each one will apply at separate stages of the problem solving process.

Formally appraising the situation will help you to determine if there actually is a problem that needs to be corrected and what it is. An assessment of the problem itself will help you discover what is causing it. This can be followed by an analysis of the different decisions that can be made to correct the problem and the possible outcomes of each decision. Mixed in with the decision making process is the need to assess any potential problems that may occur from the decision you make.

The degree of analysis, cost and time that needs to be undertaken will depend directly on the size and effects of the existing problem.

Having problems in the workplace or your private life tends to undermine your overall sense of wellbeing and happiness. It can slowly eat away at you because it is always on your mind and prevents you from thinking and moving forward the way you would like to. Problems can just as easily eat away at a company's profitability and employee contentment.

It sometimes takes strength and commitment to confront a problem, but if you know the end result is going to be positive, uplifting or even profitable then why not give it a go? Fix the problem and free your mind or company to focus on more productive situations.

Are You Assertive?

A simple explanation of being assertive is to know what your needs are and having the self-confidence to satisfy them. The more complex version takes into account a myriad of thoughts, feelings, personal rights and needs that belong to you together with careful consideration about the people you are dealing with.

Some people are overly assertive and tend to bulldoze their way through everything while others take a more subtle and empathetic approach. The end result can be the same, but the style is completely different.

Being assertive can sometimes be a very fine line between honouring your needs and those of another and may sometimes lead to a form of compromise. This is acceptable as long as you have not lowered your standards or personal commitments, have been honest and clear and are respecting the rights and needs of yourself and others. Value your ideas, feelings and rights and what you believe to be true and allow others to do the same. Being politely honest with yourself and others goes a long way.

Assertive people should always take responsibility for the outcomes of their actions while leaving others to take responsibility for theirs. You are responsible for your thoughts, feelings and behaviour and not those of another. You can be considerate of, but should not take responsibility for, another person's discontent or unhappiness that is created from a particular course of action. That is their responsibility.

Saying no, and in some cases yes, comes naturally for some while others need to work hard to feel and use the strength it takes to be decisive. Honour yourself, be considerate of others and move forward with assertiveness.

Are You Competitive?

Competitive people thrive in an environment that rewards employees for increased sales, higher productivity, larger profit margins or gross revenue. They are typically driven by the next sale, acquisition, higher income or knowledge that they are the best in their field for a week, month or year. They also need to be able to handle and control their emotions and the potential for high levels of stress.

Competition within the workplace can lead to higher performance and productivity but it can also lead to discontent, frustration and isolation because we are not all cut out to work in this style of environment. Employers also need to make allowances for the acceptance of people as individuals according to their needs and their abilities to perform certain tasks.

We are not all suited to a competitive workplace. Some of us are very comfortable doing what we need to do, getting on with the job at hand and knowing they are an essential ingredient to the success of their employer. There is strength and self-confidence in knowing when a position matches your attributes.

It is up to each individual to recognise their own work style preference before they apply for a position. By all means try something new and different to build your knowledge and experience, but also be aware the positions with higher income and benefits may not always be as good as you imagine. Look at the rate of burn out due to stress and ill health in a particular industry before you take a step in that direction. If you decide to proceed then maybe consider a particular time frame and exit strategy.

Go for it if you thrive on competition, acknowledge the rewards and enjoy the outcome.

Are You Happy?

Happiness is very subjective, appears in many guises, has a broad range of parameters and is very individual. It can last for a fleeting moment or days on end. It can be contagious or self-contained. It can be expressed, felt and shared. It can be overwhelming or simply enjoyable.

So what makes happiness the one commodity most people want but few people have? Is it the feeling of blissful contentment, uncontrollable laughter, open and free communication, self-respect and self-worth, compatibility with others, a new toy, unconditional love or trust with mutual respect, the essence of truth or just knowing you are alive and able to walk, see or hear? It can be all of these things and many more.

I like to think the essence of ongoing happiness is to be comfortable and content with who you are, what you do and what you know to be true at any given point in your life.

Look around your work environment and you will notice people with this quality as they tend to stand out. They appear to have some secret knowledge that makes them content and comfortable. They tend to be self-confident, speak positively, are supportive and never criticise or ridicule anybody or anything. They appear to be smiling but may not be. They look relaxed and calm. They get on with what has to be done with a minimum of fuss.

Taking steps towards your own personal happiness may be as simple as a new position with your current employer or modifying your current role and duties. It may take more than that, but if you do not try you will never know.

Momentary happiness can be won and lost in the blink of an eye, however ongoing happiness should be considered as a way of life.

Are You Left or Right Brain Dominant?

Knowing which side of the brain you tend to use the most can go a long way in helping you understand more about yourself and why you are better at some tasks than others. It will also help others to understand why you excel in particular areas.

If you are left brain dominant you tend to be very analytical, decisive, logical, practical, detailed and deal in facts. You will normally find it a little difficult to relax and let go because you will be analyzing what is going on while you are trying to do it.

The right brain dominant people tend to be very intuitive, creative, impulsive, imaginative and considerate of the big picture and all the possibilities. Relaxing and letting go comes easier and using your imagination can be of great benefit when relaxing.

So is one better than the other?

The way to consider this is not to look at which is better or worse but to consider that everybody is different and everybody has special abilities that need to be used and nurtured in the right way. Consider the above attributes of the left and right brain functions and see which most appropriately describes your way of thinking. When you have settled on your decision then acknowledge it as being the way you are.

One of the benefits of knowing which side of the brain you use is to try and ensure you work in a position and environment that is compatible with the way your brain functions. If you are analytical you will find it very difficult to work in creative writing. If you are very creative you will find it difficult working in data research. Left brain dominant people working in right brain dominant tasks, and vice versa, will normally become very frustrated and stressed.

Contentment at work may be just half a brain away.

Are You Valuable?

Do you look at what a company can do for you or what you can do for the company?

The most valuable people in a company are the ones that add to the business. People who add to the business are those who readily try new work practices or actively seek further knowledge from internal or external sources. There will be more opportunities for them as they continue to outstrip the knowledge base of those around them. They build themselves into a valuable asset for the business and when they become more valuable to the business it becomes more difficult to replace them. It also makes it easier for them to move on to bigger and better things.

Taking or expecting everything from the business on the other hand is limited in scope and tends to place you in the basket of people that will not be considered for progression. Takers tend to whine about most things or find excuses for not doing something. They feel it is always someone else's fault and tend to try and elicit sympathy from those around them. It is the 'poor me' syndrome.

Think about yourself as the employee in your current role.

Now ask yourself a couple of questions: am I a person who adds value to the business or am I a person who expects everything from the business?

Now think of yourself as the employer and ask yourself this question: would I employ me as I am?

If you are happy and comfortable with your answer then stay with it, if you are not happy you should take a look at what you can do to improve your current situation. Ask for assistance from a trusted colleague or your HR Department.

Being valuable translates to being needed.

Breathe for Energy and Balance

The next time you are sitting at your desk, hunched over at the computer or on the telephone, check to see how deeply you breathe.

Most people will find their breathing to be very shallow and only to the top portion of their lungs. Hunch yourself over now and see how deep you can breathe. Not very deep, was it?

This shallow breathing is depriving your body of the necessary quantities of air it requires to continue to function the way it is made to. Without enough air you will start to feel tired, your ability to focus will be reduced, your decision making processes will become clouded, you will be less productive and all this normally leads to discontent.

There is a very simple remedy. You can try this exercise right now to feel the difference:

Sit with a straight back, neck and look forward. The ideal breath is to use your diaphragm to breathe into the base of your lungs. The best way to tell if you are doing this correctly is to feel your diaphragm expand first and not your lungs. You can then continue on to fill the middle and the top of your lungs. Do this slowly three times in a row.

You may feel a little dizzy if you are not used to this much air going into your body.

Make notations in your diary to stop at least three times a day, close your eyes and take three long slow deep breathes.

Breathe yourself into more energy and balance.

Can Fluid Help Your Performance?

Most of us have a pretty good idea of how much fluid we should consume in a normal day but many of us do not seem to actually do it. The typical amounts people will consider as being normal are 8-10 glasses a day and normally refer to this as water. Water is also in cordial, juice, herbal teas and other drinks so fluid becomes a more appropriate term.

Personal requirements of fluid in a day can vary from person to person. Take into consideration the amount of exercise you do which causes perspiration, your work environment and air conditioning, which can have a drying effect, or the weather and the level of humidity. 8-10 glasses of fluid a day can be adequate, too little or too much depending on your personal circumstances.

There are some simple signs to look out for if you start dehydrating. The obvious one is thirst. The not so obvious ones are a lack of concentration, tiredness or a dull headache. It is also possible to overload the kidneys if you consume a very large volume of fluid in a short space of time. This can be detrimental to your health.

Being well hydrated means visiting the bathroom around every two hours and passing pale straw coloured urine. Going every half hour is too much and twice a day is way too little. If this is happening to you at the moment then it is something you should consider working on. Keep up your fluid intake at meal time, have a water bottle handy and consider most fluids are beneficial. Some fluids like alcohol are dehydrating as is the consumption of salt.

There is very good evidence which indicates we perform more effectively mentally and physically when we are correctly hydrated.

Can Training Lower Stress?

Is the correct training provided in-house for you to be able to perform the duties as required by your employer or do you need to seek it out externally?

Training can be provided and funded in many different ways and this depends on individual employers and the position held by the employee. There is fully funded in-house or external training, self-funded external training, learn as you go on the job training and the initial induction process. There is also a growing emphasis on salary packaging to retain and recruit good employees which may be worthy of your consideration.

The type of training may be for you to learn how to answer the phone in the company manner, the correct internal/external communication protocols, employer specific selling techniques, improving your computer skills, right through to a university degree or study at an international business school.

There are many benefits to you and your employer if you are trained, or seek training to perform your duties as expected. You will perform at a higher level and be more productive, function in a manner that is suitable to your employer, have more confidence in completing given tasks and feel more comfortable with the position you have.

Trying to perform a task without the correct training leaves you swimming against the tide before you even get started. This can lead to a lack of personal confidence to complete any task correctly which in turn can lead to confusion and frustration which means you will be unproductive due to a lack of job specific knowledge and then your levels of stress will increase dramatically.

Correct training can have a positive impact on stress and productivity.

Cause and Effect

'Cause and effect' is a simple but profound term.

Everything we do or say affects someone or something in a particular way therefore everybody is responsible for their own actions whether they are positive or negative.

How often do you see someone in the work environment that, for one reason or another, is having a really down day? They keep saying how everything is going wrong for them no matter what they do. Their work colleagues then start to feel irritable and uncomfortable because of this person's actions. Then all of a sudden everybody is talking about having a really bad day. It can be contagious!

One person having a really down day can easily cause this effect on the whole work environment.

How much better could it be if someone took a positive approach to this person right at the beginning of the day and was empathetic and supportive? All it takes is someone with a little bit of courage and an open mind. This would quickly and quietly dilute the negative effect they have caused. The day would be brighter for everyone and more productive as a result.

Being and acting positive can be a very difficult task. Seeing the good side of people and their actions does take a lot of thought at times but the end result is always more rewarding than thinking negatively.

It is a pleasure to think and act positively. It will eventually become a habit and the way you affect others will be more supportive and uplifting.

If the cause is positive the effect will be positive.

Clock Watching at Night

Do you watch the clock in the middle of the night?

This can be a regular habit for many people and it tends to be worse when you are working to a deadline and you are behind schedule. I used to watch the clock at night on a regular basis.

I used to make up around 2am and the first thing I would do was look at the clock and see what the time was. Then my thought processes would come to life and start heading in the wrong direction. Thoughts like 'I have 4 hours before I get up to go to work' or 'I need to go back to sleep'.

Then the rollercoaster would start. I would toss and turn and think about work. I would look at the clock and see it was 2:30am. There'd be some more tossing and turning and then another look at the clock. Uh oh, it's 3am and I only have 3 hours left before I get up and get ready for work. I really need to go to sleep right now...

What can I do to go to sleep? Look at the clock. It is now 4am and I know I have a problem. Only 2 hours left before I get up. How will I complete everything on schedule? How can I get back to sleep?

Sound familiar? Not only is there stress at work but also in the middle of the night.

The clock should be used as a tool to help you wake up in the morning and that is all. It serves no purpose to know the time in the middle of the night. Turn the clock away from your line of sight and use it as an alarm only. It will take a few weeks to get used to the change but your sleep pattern will improve.

Coping with Change

How do you cope with change?

Change in your immediate work environment is one of those things that are guaranteed to happen and more than likely it will be on a regular basis. The most frequent changes affect the general tasks you are performing on a regular basis.

How often have you left work and known exactly what you were going to do when you arrived back the following day? Then, on your way to work the next day you knew what was ahead of you. You had a plan to get stuck into everything you had to do and be productive. You felt good about the day ahead.

Your morning at work started perfectly. You were on schedule the way you planned and imagined your day would be.

Then it all starts to fall apart.

Your manager walks over and changes your plan and priorities as something more important to the company has arisen and it needs to be actioned immediately.

This is where you have a choice.

You can choose to be frustrated, irritable and feel victimised because the plan you have been concentrating on has just been pulled apart or you can say to yourself: the company places a higher priority on this new work so I will get on with it and do my best.

There are two objectives to consider that will help you lower your stress levels when this type of change occurs: one is to be flexible and the other is to be accepting of change where practical. Both objectives are desirable from a manager's perspective and your general state of wellbeing will be maintained at the same time.

Change is going to occur. Your degree of flexibility and acceptance will make the difference to the way you feel.

Do You Anticipate Outcomes?

Anticipating an outcome can be a quick mental activity practiced on a regular basis to help you see potential positive or negative outcomes before they occur. It can be used as a mental rehearsal of the process you are about to undertake to achieve your desired result.

Part of the preparation for an interview, discussion or business meeting should be to mentally rehearse the circumstances, questions or responses that may arise. It is a simple case of sitting quietly and using your imagination to create the environment and situations you may encounter before they occur. You can mentally rehearse any situation with your imagination.

This technique also provides you with some very valuable tools that can be used more effectively when the need arises. It helps you to feel more confident, relaxed and focused as you work through the meeting. If you have anticipated correctly you will be able to respond more positively and effectively with a greater depth of knowledge because you will have researched the information that you found missing during your mental rehearsal and strengthened the information you already had.

While you have imagined the process you may go through it is also necessary to remain flexible throughout the meeting as not all circumstances can be thought through beforehand.

Visualising the final outcome is most important. You will need to have a desired outcome in mind as being the best possible result you could achieve while maintaining the awareness of a fallback position in case it is necessary. It is always good practice to see the end result as you want it to be.

My grandfather used to say 'anticipation is 80% of realisation'. I would like to say he was pretty well spot on.

Do You Feel Included?

Inclusive workplace environments are quickly growing as they tend to be very productive, create more innovative solutions and stimulate positive employee behaviour. The way they achieve these outcomes is by inviting, encouraging and respecting employee contributions while promoting an open and supportive workplace with positive and productive communication.

It does require leadership from the top to actively support and encourage this style of environment along with a different way of thinking and acting. When instigated correctly it does foster honesty and trust all the way down the line as open and honest communication is provided and requested without fear or favour while maintaining confidentiality when necessary.

This type of workplace may feel very foreign to some as they may feel threatened by a level of openness they are not used to. It sometimes takes people a while to trust a new environment and then become comfortable in it. It can also be difficult for managers, supervisors and team leaders who may require training to learn the skills necessary to adequately and comfortably lead in such an environment.

A truly inclusive workplace requires everybody to embrace and accept a level of trust and honour in each other and their employer that is rarely encountered in most workplaces. It supports a positive approach to everybody you deal with both internally and externally. It encourages empathetic behaviour while retaining self-respect. It is an uplifting environment to work in.

Have you dreamed about this type of workplace? You do not have to be in an inclusive workplace to practice its principles. What is stopping you from taking a leap forward and being inclusive with your colleagues right now? It only takes one person to make a difference and that could be you. Congratulations for trying.

Do You Have a Vision?

Albert Einstein said 'Imagination is more powerful than knowledge.' Knowledge provides you with the facts of the way things are while imagination allows you to create things the way you would like them to be.

You can use your imagination to develop a personal vision statement that is based on your most ideal life. This statement is used to inspire and energise you towards your own mental picture. It can be very vivid in its content, lead you out of your comfort zone, open your eyes to alternatives and new possibilities and provide desired outcomes five to ten years from the present. The best vision statements are short, powerful, creative and stimulating.

It is important to remember your vision statement provides your ideal outcome and this needs to be considered realistically. It is different to goals and objectives which are more specific in their outcomes and time frames. You can also modify your vision as you progress to ensure you always have something to strive for.

You may reach your ideal vision in five years or even surpass it. There is always the possibility of falling short of your vision, which only means there is room for improvement. Either way, you have progressed towards an ideal and you have gained more knowledge and experience along the way. This in itself is a very valuable commodity.

Having your own vision statement will help to drive you forward to the possibilities that you have not yet realised. It will support your passion and focus your energy on your personally created ideal. It will energise your life activities as you steer a course towards your vision.

Use your imagination, visualise an ideal future for yourself, write it down and then act on it.

Do You Talk to Yourself?

Most people talk to themselves whether they realise it or not. It does not have to be spoken; in fact most self-talk or personal conversations occur in the brain. On a personal level it can be very beneficial if it is positive or totally destructive if it is negative.

So what is self-talk and who uses it the most to the greatest benefit?

Self-talk are the conversations that go on in your head about why you should or shouldn't, could or couldn't, can or can't do something in particular. Positive self-talk is used extensively by elite athletes, astronauts and many successful business people.

Positive, uplifting self-talk helps to push you forward, to extend your existing boundaries and perform at a level that would generally be considered abnormal for you. Self-talk also encourages self-belief which is necessary when you try to make something new happen.

Imagine yourself in a work situation where someone has asked you to fulfill a task you have never tried before. One of two things generally happens: your first thoughts are 'great, a new challenge' or 'I cannot possibly do this'. It is easy to see the positive and negative response.

Would it be possible for you to hold back those first thoughts, gain a greater understanding of the task ahead and then push forward with positive thoughts about the final completion of the task?

Remember you can always refer to the person who allocated the task for further understanding of what is involved or for any possible assistance. Focus on getting the small pieces right and it will all fall into place.

Positive self-talk is ensuring your thoughts are always for the betterment and improvement of yourself and it is self-supporting. Talk to yourself positively and feel good about it.

Eat for Energy and Vitality

Creating and maintaining the right balance of food consumption is quite a simple task for some and very difficult for others. To make matters more complicated there is a wide variety of special diets and supplements for you to choose from if you want to go down this track, and let's not forget the many people who must adhere to a special diet due to medical concerns.

Science has proved eating right can have a dramatic effect on your psychological and physiological state of wellbeing. It can increase your level of energy and vitality, boost your immune system, strengthen your resilience to stress and help you to be a happier person.

Planning your intake of food in advance can help reduce or eliminate the intake of less favourable foods as it automatically encourages you to eat specific food groups.

Commonly recommended quantities of specific food groups and portion sizes per day are easy to follow. They include the minimal intake of fats, oils and sweets, 2-3 servings of milk, yoghurt and cheese, 2-3 servings of meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs and nuts, 3-5 servings of vegetables, 2-4 servings of fruit, 6-11 servings of bread, cereal, rice and pasta and at least 8 servings of water. Common sense needs to be applied for the serving size that is right for you as an athlete will require a great deal more than a person sitting at a desk all day.

Make it a habit to prepare your lunch at home and take it to work. This will ensure you maintain your positive eating habits.

If you are in doubt about your food intake or feel you may have special dietary concerns then please seek medical advice.

As the old saying goes, 'you are what you eat'.

Effective Team Work

There are many businesses promoting their inclusive company culture and how well their people work together as a team. They can go to great lengths to establish this perception in the business environment in order to establish a reputation of being a favourable place to work.

But how often does this perception match reality?

The concern with the term 'teamwork' is its interpretation and application. It is generally only relative to the individual level of engagement in each company. One company's standard of team work can be very different to another but they both use the same term to promote their culture.

Effective team work doesn't just happen. It is created and moulded over time and requires constant reinforcement from leaders and team members. People at all levels require training on how to function as a team and what it means to be an individual in a team environment.

New team members should have this training included in their induction so they understand the company culture and team member relationship from day one.

Outstanding teams can produce amazing results in the areas of productivity and profit. Improvements can also be seen in absenteeism, staff attraction and retention. People want to come to work because it is an enjoyable place to be.

On the other hand it only takes one person to destroy a great team. If a team member feels isolated, ignored or superior to other team members their attitude may become negative. This can be very destructive if left unchecked. An individual's attitude can quickly change and poison a whole team. This is when leadership, either from another team member or leader, plays an important role.

Effective team work plays a significant role in the performance of a company. It can also make a difference to your personal happiness.

Emails can be a Stressor

How many emails do you handle in a day and how effective are you with them? They can be very troublesome and cause undue stress if they are not handled appropriately or they can be a blessing in fast communication when used properly.

I have seen inbox and sent items folders with hundreds of emails left sitting there while the deleted folder is empty and the mail folders column is bare. On the other hand, having too many mail folders can make for stressful times while you try and locate that one important email. Neither of these approaches is a good way to manage your emails and will quickly lead to confusion and frustration.

Some other annoying practices are copying in everybody on your email, not spending a moment to think about a response and how it should be worded or the correct use of capital letters. Email content can very easily be misinterpreted or misunderstood as there is no body language to accompany the written word.

There are some simple and effective methods to consider when using email which include: only cc people in your original email and your response if they need to know; think carefully about your wording as it is easy to offend; always be clear and concise; always be polite; minimise or eliminate the use of capitals in general text; delete unwanted emails; create effective folders; and remember you still have a telephone you can use, or you could choose to speak with someone face to face.

Understanding a little more about emails and their appropriate use can streamline your workload, reduce your frustration, lower your stress and improve your attitude towards effective communication. Make emails work for you, not against you.

Energise Your Lunch

There are five main food groups with multiple categories of foods within each group. Nearly all of these could be consumed for lunch in one form or another. Making sure they are eaten in a healthy form is another matter entirely with such an extensive choice of take away and self-serve outlets.

How often do you feel sleepy, mentally sluggish or irritable after lunch? This is normally the effect of eating unhealthy or too much food during the middle of the day. Fried, saucy, rich or high sugar content foods will normally do this to you every time. Over eating will have the same effect.

Choosing to purchase your lunch often provides little choice in the contents or type of preparation of the food. Taking a small amount of time at home the night before you go to work will allow you to plan for fresh healthy foods of the correct quantity.

Home prepared lunch can also offer a wider variety of choice. Carbohydrate based foods like pasta, rice, or bread, couscous, bagels, lavash, flatbreads (pita), focaccia or damper can easily be accompanied by some protein foods like ham, corned beef, skinless chicken breast, tinned tuna or salmon in spring water, low-fat cheese or legumes. Add plenty of vegetables for vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre, e.g. lettuce, tomato, cucumber, grated carrot, snow pea sprouts, celery, capsicum, mushrooms, zucchini, eggplant, beans, pitted olives, spinach, asparagus, pumpkin, sweet potato, and avocado. Additional flavour can be added with herbs and spices such as parsley, chives, basil, chilli, coriander, pepper, lime, curry powder, pureed tomato, salt reduced soy sauce, chutneys, or relishes.

Preparing your own fresh and healthy lunch ensures you eat the food that will provide you with the necessary energy to sustain you through the afternoon and keep you feeling mentally and physically alert.

Do You Enjoy Your Lunch Break?

Lunch time can be a great opportunity to pay a bill, buy some groceries or clothes, visit an ATM or do some window shopping. While this may occasionally be necessary, is it enjoyable?

Alternatively you may be sitting in a lunch room with a group of colleagues eating your lunch and not really communicating with each other because you are trying to have some quiet time. Is this enjoyable?

If you really do enjoy any of these activities then that is terrific.

There are however other ways to give yourself some personal space and time to rejuvenate physically, mentally and emotionally from the morning's work and prepare for the afternoon feeling refreshed and positive.

There are some magnificent parks, gardens, rivers and coastlines in so many cities.

These areas are ideal locations to enjoy your personal space and preferred activity. You may decide to walk casually along a pathway and simply take in the scenery, sit quietly and read a book, share a sandwich with a friend, close your eyes and let your thoughts wander wherever they wish to go or be more energetic and go for a jog. The list of possible activities is only limited by your imagination.

If you can make the decision in the morning to undertake an activity at lunch time, it will more than likely happen. Plan ahead and reward yourself with some personal time.

Make the most of your lunch break to do something that makes you feel good.

Fail to Fail

Failing can easily be described as falling short of success or achievement in something expected, attempted or desired.

It can be a devastating experience emotionally, physically and spiritually. It can cause breakdowns or depression and will, more often than not, affect friends and family as well as the individual.

But what if you have an attitude of failing to fail? In other words, what are the positive outcomes of not being able to achieve that something you expected, attempted or desired. What if your thought process was not about failure but about learning and experiencing and how you have grown as an individual?

What if you accepted the outcome and learnt from the positive aspects that have taken place or are yet to unfold. Yes, it is very difficult to see the positive side of a devastating experience however time and your attitude can show you the benefits of what has taken place.

You may continue with what you are doing or get steered in a different direction, take up new work, spend more time with friends or family, move house or become more content with what you already have at your disposal. They can all be positive and productive outcomes if you want them to be.

Supreme athletes do not recognise failure. They recognise another step in the positive direction of achieving their desired outcome. They continue to train, learn and work toward their goal. They are focused and committed and learn from any misfortunes they encounter along the way. Some may alter their direction, but they keep moving forward with a positive and productive attitude.

Don't look at failure as the end of your dreams. Look at the opportunity to learn more about yourself and what you need to do for yourself to achieve your goals.

Family Support

Where would your career be right now without the support of your family?

This relates to all aspects of your family: your mother, father, siblings, partner and children. Most of them will play an important role in your career as you move through life.

Stop and think for just a moment and see if you can remember some of the many times you have been given support. Was it a lift to work when you slept in; a late cooked meal hot and ready when you returned; looking after the family and house while you are on a business trip; clothes washed and ironed; a prepared lunch for you every day to take to work; or an ear to listen to you when you had a bad day?

There are so many more ways in which we are all supported by those who are close to us and love us for who we are and what we do.

Now stop and think about how many times you say thank you, or even more importantly how you support them in return.

It is too often we accept all that is done for us without really considering what is actually taking place in the home by those who love us.

Our families require our support. They need our time, our love, our thoughtfulness and our recognition for all the things they do.

When was the last time you chipped in to wash the floors, do the washing up, clean the bathroom, mow the lawns, go on a family picnic or spend some form of quality time with your family?

Families need to be considered and held as a high priority. That is where they place you.

Fear is Destructive

Fear is a four letter word that starts with 'f' which should be eliminated from your emotional responses. It prevents us from moving forward to achieve or discover new things about ourselves and others and can turn healthy, stable and balanced people into an emotional and physical mess.

How often have you thought about taking on a new role or project and then rejected the thought because you felt afraid to take the next step? Have you softened your response to a situation because you were afraid the outcome may involve you too much or create confrontation? This is self-sabotage and it limits your potential to fulfill your capacity as an individual.

If you take away the word 'fear' and replace it with the word 'challenge', then you suddenly have a whole new way of approaching any situation.

'Challenge' sets up a positive and productive thought process that allows you to tackle the same situation from a completely different. It suddenly becomes a process to work through, master and control. The outcomes are uplifting and the sense of accomplishment is very rewarding.

You will find abilities and knowledge that have laid dormant because you have been afraid to challenge yourself in new and potentially exciting situations. You will learn to challenge yourself and situations as they are presented and this helps you to learn, grow and understand more about yourself and how to accomplish previously feared tasks. You will become a stronger and happier individual with higher self-esteem and self-confidence.

Throw out the fear, bring in the challenge and find yourself heading into a bright new world.

Honestly Speaking

People say there is a time and a place for everything, but honesty is one of those characteristics that cross all borders at all times. Being open and honest places you in a space where people know they can rely on you for the truth.

Add to this the capacity to retain information in confidence and suddenly you have become a rare individual with a different level of respect from your colleagues and employer.

It is true you do not have to mention something if you are not asked the specific question, but you do need to be realistic about this. If you have specific information that may be detrimental to your employer then you have to weigh up your loyalties and the severity of any outcome as a result of you withholding information. Respect can also be earned from loyalty.

Taking honesty a step further, it is a great personal characteristic to know when to listen and when to speak. Take time to assess a situation before you speak as it may be inappropriate timing or completely unnecessary to provide the information you have. It may end up being more disruptive than helpful. There is no point in blurting out the truth if it is to the personal detriment of someone else or your employer. Use your honesty wisely.

Being honest can take a lot of courage and personal strength as it is not always easy to speak the truth when lying sometimes appears easier. You always have a choice, but is it worth suffering the ongoing stress lying causes as you ponder whether or not someone knows and what the ramifications of your actions might be?

Honesty and the wisdom of its use is a very powerful and sought after personal characteristic.

How Can You Improve Productivity?

There will always be people who see a negative or a positive in the word productivity and that normally depends on which side of the fence they sit. The word productivity generally means a lift in production of outputs with little or no variation to inputs. Management normally wants an increase in productivity with the aim of higher profits while employees would be happier to maintain their current level of productivity. Employees generally feel higher productivity means harder work and longer hours which tends to create the 'us and them' barrier.

The old employer approach of working harder and longer for higher productivity may still be valid but it is losing ground to the more supportive and proactive approach of looking after the employee's general state of wellbeing to achieve greater returns.

There have been many studies on the psychological, physiological and behavioural improvements of people who undertake exercise, eat healthy foods and practice relaxation techniques on a regular basis. The employee benefits include improvements in their resilience to stress, levels of energy, tolerance, general health and personal wellbeing. Employers benefit from higher performance and productivity, staff attraction and retention, improved motivation and morale, greater participation rate and employees with a sense of balance between work and family life.

This significant change in the understanding of people and productivity is not new, however it is relatively recently that the broader acceptance of introducing these methods into the workplace is being acknowledged for producing positive outcomes.

The costs to attract, replace and educate new people can be astronomical when compared to the cost of maintaining or improving the wellbeing of the people that are already there. Retain your employees, nurture their wellbeing, improve their performance and productivity and keep your costs down.

How Good is Breakfast?

You have probably seen advertisements on television promoting the importance of breakfast for kids to help them perform better at school. Well, what about the adult portion of the population?

Breakfast should be a priority on everybody's list. It actually sets you up for the day and promotes short-term memory, energy and vitality, mental and physical alertness, focus and concentration, lower levels of stress and a healthier body weight.

So what makes a good breakfast? Carbohydrates should be an integral part of any breakfast as the body breaks these down and turns them into glucose. Glucose provides your brain, nerves and red blood cells with the energy they require to function properly. If the morning dose of carbohydrates is not provided then your brain, nerves and red blood cells are starved of their vital energy source and your performance levels during the day are greatly reduced.

A good breakfast could be Bircher style muesli, boiled eggs and wholegrain toast, a fruit shake with yoghurt and honey, omelette with mushrooms and tomato, raisin toast with honey and fruit or whole grain cereal with fruit. Wherever possible, always try and use low fat milk and yoghurt and fresh fruit.

Some people think they do not have time for a good meal at the start of the day but there are some simple things you can do to hasten the process. Prepare a bowl of muesli with milk the night before and let it sit in the fridge overnight. This also allows the multitude of flavours to blend through the mix while softening the ingredients. It tastes great. A bowl of wholegrain cereal is very quick and simple to prepare. If you still think you are pushed for time you could try getting out of bed 10 minutes earlier.

Eat breakfast, feel the improvements and perform at a higher level during your day.

How Smart Are You?

It is a normal reaction to think of an IQ test as a gauge to how smart you are but not all successful people have a high IQ and not all people with a high IQ are successful. Having a brain with a greater capacity to understand issues, resolve concerns and produce results can be an advantage but it is not the be all and end all.

There are many different areas that we can relate to as being smart. We can be smart with investments, common sense, people, creativity, anticipation, innovation or street smart to name just a few. These 'smarts' do not necessarily rely on a high IQ, but it does help if you can recognise your own strengths. These strengths are an innate part of each of us as an individual and when recognised and used correctly they can produce beneficial outcomes.

Would you be happier in a position where you could maximize the use of your main strengths?

Some of us are fortunate enough to recognise our strengths while others simply have not thought about it. Talk to a friend, family or trusted colleague and ask them where they think your main strengths lie. Another alternative is to seek out an Organisational Psychologist or Career Counsellor to run you through a series of exercises and discussions which should help point you in the right direction. You may get a very pleasant surprise.

Always remember that your capacity to learn and grow continues throughout your whole life. We all hear of people going back to study at TAFE or University to further their knowledge and career and this pathway is open to all of us.

Recognise your strengths, build on them when and where possible and apply your own style of 'smart' in your life.

How Well Do You Sleep?

Sometimes I have a great deal of difficulty settling down to a sound night's sleep, which is normally because of all the things that have taken place during the day.

This difficulty is not limited to any one thing or situation and is entirely dependent on how I have handled or treated a set of circumstances during the day.

The worst thing I can do is hold on to something negative or disruptive. You know when something keeps eating away at you and you wish you had said this or done that to make the situation a little less concerning and it just keeps rolling over and over in your head and will not leave you alone.

So what can you do about it?

The first thing to do is accept what has taken place immediately after the event, know that it cannot be changed no matter how much you think about it and give yourself permission to move on regardless of the outcome. There are also a wide variety of remedies that can be used if necessary. These include mental or physical relaxation exercises, herbal teas, aromatherapy, calming music, reading a good book, a healthy discussion on the day's events with a partner or close friend or a scented hot bath. Some people I know have taught themselves a simple mental trigger or self-hypnosis to engage sleep.

As you can see there are a lot of remedies to try. One might work a treat on one occasion but not another so experiment and have a few you can rely on.

Sleep soundly and you will think faster with more clarity, be more creative and productive and suffer less from stress.

Is Listening Hard Work?

Listening is something we do without even thinking about it. It is an automatic response to any sound that is made whether it is made by speech or an object. It is one of our main sensory devices as it keeps us informed of what is taking place all around us on a continual basis. Sounds can change the way we feel, think and act just as much as the spoken word.

We tend to have different approaches to listening to what people have to say. Some of us are active and patient listeners while others just switch off and think of other things they feel are more important while still looking at you. Then there are those that cannot stop talking long enough to hear what anybody has to say. Which one do you think fits your style of listening?

Listening properly is hard work. It takes concentration, patience, constant eye contact, positive body language and the ability to maintain focus on what is being said as well as responding and interacting in a constructive manner. A person working hard at listening will learn and understand more, gain greater respect from others and be more likely to implement activities as instructed. This makes them more productive because they get tasks right the first time.

It is a very good feeling to be able to finish a task without constantly referring back to the person who made the initial request. It is frustrating to complete a task only to find out it is incorrect or incomplete because you haven't listened properly.

Take the time and make the effort to actively listen. You may think it is too difficult, not necessary or even boring but I can assure you the end result is very satisfying.

Lead the Way

Where are the good leaders in your company?

Leaders can be managers, supervisors or team members. Some are born leaders while others learn from specific training or personal experience. They tend to be engaging, encouraging, and supportive with a healthy dose of empathy and understanding.

In amongst all this they will challenge you, build your confidence and coach you along the way.

Being challenged to improve your performance or productivity to reach a goal beyond your comfort zone can be a little scary, however if the right level of knowledge, encouragement and support is provided it can prove to be very rewarding on a personal level. In some industries it may also be highly rewarding financially.

Having the right challenge and support and then reaching your goals automatically builds your self-confidence which in turn lifts your self-esteem. A rise in your confidence is one of the most positive outcomes of accepting and meeting a challenge. The personal satisfaction of making it happen can be addictive and may spur you on to new challenges and goals.

The encouragement and support that is required from a good leader is also known as coaching. They should work with you to define a new goal, keep you updated on your progress, listen to your concerns, provide positive feedback and most of all help you to believe in yourself and your ability to succeed.

Leadership is normally associated with appropriate direction from the company owners or managers. They tend to provide the structure and vision for the business so people look at them for direction, however leadership can just as easily come from team members.

Take a leading role yourself and offer words of encouragement and support to a colleague.

Objectives and Goals

Next time you are talking to a friend or colleague ask them what they want out of life. The response will usually relate to one or all of health, wealth or happiness. These desires seem to be ingrained in most people and each person may express a different level of desire or preferred quantity of health, wealth or happiness in their life. The end result is most people want to work less with substantial funds to enjoy life and do what they most prefer, with good health.

Then ask the same person how they are going to achieve their desires. This is where it starts to get a bit tricky. You can expect all manner of responses here. Some will have a clear cut path and others will just say they do not know. Some know how to achieve their desires and others have a wish list.

Let's just stop for a moment and think about how we might be able to better achieve our desires.

Instead of a wish list, have objectives. Instead of desires, have goals. Objectives are the building blocks and foundations that guide you forward. Achieving your objectives will ultimately help you achieve your goal.

An example might be your desire or goal to manage a division of a company. Your objectives become the process you follow to get there. The areas you need to look at for your objectives may be the need to improve your academic qualifications in the required area, what on the job experiences or skills do you need and what time frame are you going to place on these objectives and the final goal. Information on more specific requirements for your objectives may be available through your HR department or manager.

Work out specifically what you want, plan how to get there and all you desire may be realised.

Optimist or Pessimist?

Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

I was meeting with a friend to catch up on the last couple of months and to also exchange ideas on our current business directions. We spent a reasonable amount of time discussing optimism and pessimism because it is amazing how much your attitude can affect your life and the life of others close to you, especially in the workplace.

The pessimist is always the one who struggles to find good in anything. They think every idea is bad, every thought is gloomy and there is really nothing in the world that is very interesting. Stop for a moment and think about how you feel when you are around this type of person. Do you want to run away, put your head in your hands with frustration and end up with a headache due to tension and stress?

Then there is the optimist, the one that can see the good in everything, is cheerful and bright and ready with a helping hand or a polite suggestion to make things better or easier. They can see the positive in any situation no matter what the circumstances are. They are normally great to be around and enjoy life. How do you feel around this type of person? Do you feel energetic, uplifted and beyond the reach of tension and stress?

Like most things in life you do have a choice. You can choose who you want to spend your life with socially and in the workplace. You can choose to see the positive and be the optimist. You can choose the positive direction in your life. You can have the rewards of a positive attitude with improvements in your psychological and physiological wellbeing.

Our discussion finished and fortunately we are both optimistic people. We parted company feeling great about the future and free of tension and stress.

Perception of Success

What is your perception of success?

Success is one of those words that can hold a different meaning for each person you talk to. There is however a common thread to success.

People perceive success as having achieved a certain goal. This goal could be related to finally achieving a certain position within a company and the salary that goes with it, signing up a complicated and hard fought contract or even just getting a job. Then there is the goal of joining a company that has reached the heights of success which may be due to their level of professionalism, financial integrity, work philosophy, or sheer size.

At the end of the day it is your version of success that is most important.

Stop for a moment and take a good look at those people you most admire in business or who you believe have reached the pinnacle of success. They normally have something in common.

They enjoy what they are doing. They have found something they are good at and they enjoy each experience they encounter. They happily put in the hours because it does not feel like work and it feels positive and constructive with uplifting outcomes.

A successful person may be anyone from an apprentice to a sales executive to a Chief Executive Officer. The main point here is that they enjoy what they are doing. They may not have lofty aspirations or positions but they still enjoy doing their work. These people are the cornerstone of any business and should be nurtured and cherished.

People who enjoy their work will normally be more productive than someone who is there because they have to be.

Try and think of success as how much you enjoy your work.

Performance Appraisals

How do you treat performance appraisals?

There can be a great deal of mixed emotions and stress in the lead up to performance appraisals. Some people believe they are being victimised and the whole appraisal process is manufactured to suit the employer while others feel they are a really good opportunity to assess how they and the organisation are progressing.

To be honest there probably are a few organizations that use the appraisal process in a negative manner, however I believe they are in the minority. It is to the benefit of all parties if the appraisal is conducted in an open, honest and positive manner with clearly defined guidelines, objectives, outcomes and expectations for your future and that of the organisation.

The process should be considered an ideal opportunity for you to gain an understanding of your strengths, weaknesses and future direction and to learn how they can be further developed to maximise the outcome for you and your employer. It is an ideal time to suggest what training you may need, which direction you may follow and to ask your employer where they feel you should be headed.

An appraisal is a two way process and requires a solid and prepared contribution from both parties. Ensure you have the relative documents or data to support any request you may make. Take the time to do your research and only tender the facts that support your case. Try not to allow emotions to overtake the appraisal process as this will only cloud the circumstances and any decisions that may need to be made.

An appraisal can be a rewarding experience if it is treated openly, honestly, without bias and with the intention of improving yourself and the organisation.

Positive Stress Enhances Performance

Stress normally occurs when you encounter an event or activity that requires you to meet demands which place you under pressure. Everybody has a different tolerance level to stress and the positive or negative effects that it has on you physically and mentally.

There is negative stress which can occur from under stimulation as well as over stimulation and these types of stress will bring down your level of performance. Under stimulation is created from a lack of purpose or productivity. Extreme over stimulation will lead to what is known as the fight or flight response. You feel the upsurge in energy which enhances your performance for a limited period. This is due to various parts of the mind and body being stimulated to handle the demands being placed on you.

The physical effects of over stimulation are a faster heart rate, blood diverted to muscles, muscles tense ready for action, liver releases sugar for energy, digestion slows down and your air passages open wider to assist deeper breathing. Your mind will also function clearer and faster. This all occurs automatically and is designed to be of benefit to you.

In between the under and extreme over stimulation stages is the stress comfort zone. This zone provides you with a heightened sense of awareness and physical ability without it being detrimental to your health and wellbeing. It enables elite athletes and business leaders to perform at their peak when required.

This can work for you too if you take some time to think about those moments in your life when you performed beyond your expectations. How did you feel? Alert, energized, excited and ready to accomplish anything? This is where you need to be. This is positive stress at work in the stress comfort zone.

Learn to use positive stress and perform at a higher level.

Proactive or Reactive?

Are you proactive or reactive?

Here is a very simple explanation: proactive is being, doing and taking responsibility while reactive is following and relieving yourself of responsibility. The world needs people to fill both categories of behaviour, however it is worth taking a closer look at which camp you would prefer to be in.

Being proactive is to be very positive with your words and actions and to visualise productive outcomes. It is seeing and creating more than what is directly in front of you. An example would be your response to being asked for a report on a sales project.

A proactive person would construct the report as requested and then add additional information or alternatives based on additional research on the project. These alternatives may not be used but your initiative to take that extra step will be recognised.

To be reactive is to wait until somebody else has made the decision and then follow or take action accordingly. There is no ownership of decisions and therefore no responsibility is attributed to you. It becomes easy for you to be critical or to blame others for decisions you do not like even though you did not engage in the decision making process.

When a reactive person is asked to do a report on a sales project they will only do what has been asked of them. To do more would involve taking responsibility for something they were not asked to do. Being a follower also means handing over your direction in life to others as you will allow them to make decisions for you.

So where are you now and where would you like to be? You can change your thoughts and actions if you choose. That would be a proactive approach to life.

Snack for Energy

Most of us tend to run out of energy during the late morning and afternoon and start thinking about something to eat. Our performance and productivity may also suffer during this time.

It is easy to think about the biscuit tin, a muffin, a piece of chocolate or something similar because it offers a sugar fix and tastes reasonably good. Apart from these kinds of foods being of poor nutritional value and contributing to excess body weight, the energy lift from the sugar content is short-lived and then you feel even less energetic than before you ate.

Snacks need to be full of nutrients to give you the energy you need to keep going. They do not need to be large portions, as it is the quality of nutrients that you are after.

Fruit, high-fibre whole grains or low-fat dairy items are a great choice. It is also a good idea to consider how large your snack portion is and whether or not you should adjust your main-meal size to balance out your overall daily food intake.

There are some simple and healthy items you can prepare that provide great nutritional value and give a sustained lift of energy. These items include fruit such as apples or bananas, a small tub of reduced or low-fat yoghurt, a small portion of unsalted nuts, a cup of reduced-salt vegetable soup, wholegrain toast or fruit bread with low-fat margarine, vegetables such as carrot or celery with hummus or avocado or even canned fruit in natural juice.

A growing number of companies now provide only fresh and healthy options for their employees as snacks during the day. They recognise the benefits to the employee.

In return, the benefit to the company is employee health and improved productivity.

Stop and Think

How often do we get so caught up in what we are doing that we forget to stop and think about how we feel, what it is we are doing, why we are doing it and what thoughts are in our head? Most of us just keep on ploughing through our work and hope to get as much done as possible by the end of the day and then take the journey home. This same way of doing things then continues on at home for some of us. It can be a never ending cycle that is detrimental to our health.

I will be the first to admit how easy it is to get locked in to this cycle of life. There are deadlines, KPIs, customers, families and so many other demands that are out of our personal control that tend to pile up and create pressure. The stress from this pressure continues to mount and we cannot help but be affected by it all.

Although these demands may be out of our control as they are mainly external, we can still try and control the way we react to them. Stop and think about how you are reacting internally to these demands. Is your stomach in a knot, does your brain suddenly slow down, are your shoulders tense and raised, are you short tempered or anxious? These are some of the normal reactions to working under pressure.

Stop and think about what you need to do to build your resistance to stress. Could it be a more positive approach to your responsibilities, regular slow deep breathing, a muscle tense and release exercise, simple stretches, regular exercise, healthy eating, creative visualisation? There are many simple and effective methods you can implement to help reduce the stress generated from the pressure you are constantly under.

Stop, think and implement a process that works for you.

Take the First Step

Are you thinking about a new position, career change or just wondering what is out there?

Taking the first step in a new direction is always the most difficult to take because of all the feelings that get stirred up inside you. They can range from insecurity, apprehension and a lack of confidence to being focused with purpose and direction.

Your imagination can run wild and create all sorts of reasons why you should not start looking for another position. It is almost like little seeds of negativity are being placed inside your brain telling you all the reasons why you should not make a move. Some of these will be real and some will be just your imagination hard at work.

It is often easier to let your imagination run your life at this point in time rather than make the tough decisions.

Whichever way you think or feel it still comes back to the same thing and that is having the courage to take the first step. The funny thing is when you do build up the courage to look elsewhere it is actually not as difficult as you may have built it up to be.

Your first step maybe just a simple phone call to enquire about a position to see if it suits you. You can then decide on whether or not you wish to formally apply for the position and go through the interview process. This can also be a great learning experience.

It can be flattering to be offered a position, but at the end of the day you are in control and you do not have to take the position if it does not suit you.

Pluck up the courage, take the first step and let the natural course of events unfold for you.

The Holiday Feeling

How did you feel after your most recent holiday?

Taking a holiday is one of those times we normally look forward to with great anticipation and excitement, whether it is a relaxing stay at home or an overseas journey.

The excitement starts right at the beginning. How much leave do I have? How much time should I take? Where should I go? How will I get there? When is the best time to go? How does it fit in with my work schedule and my colleagues?

The decisions have been made and you build up a picture in your mind of all the things you are going to do and see. You feel absolutely positive you are going to have a great time. Your expectations are raised as you get closer and closer to taking your holiday.

The time has come and you are on your holiday slowly becoming more relaxed and calmer and feeling like you have more energy and enjoying yourself as only you know how.

Before you know it you are back at work and desperately holding on to wonderful holiday memories and that peaceful, calm, tolerant feeling.

The longer you take on your vacation, the longer the inner peace remains. Telling friends, family and work colleagues about your break also help you to hold on to these feelings for a slightly longer period as it rekindles all the fond memories.

One week is normally not enough as you barely allow yourself enough time to unwind and let go of any pent up stress or tension. To take 3-4 weeks is ideal as it really gives you time to rejuvenate and revitalise yourself mentally, physically and emotionally.

Vacation is like a healing process. Use it wisely and the benefits will last.

The Symptoms of Stress

Do you live with the symptoms of stress?

Stress can become a major factor in our lives as a result of what occurs in our work place or at home in our private lives.

Some of the work events that occur in our lives that rate highly as stress creators are being retrenched or let go, moving office, aggressive and intimidating managers or colleagues and dealing with the public. They all have the potential to severely disrupt our lives in the short or long term.

Too much stress in our lives can create illness which may vary from very slight to hospitalisation. Symptoms to be aware of may include a reduction in productivity; a reduced ability to focus on given tasks; a reduced ability to make decisions; poor immunity; overly concerned with minor issues; high blood pressure; aggression; confusion; headaches; muscle tension; an increased consumption of alcohol or drugs; and insomnia. You can also ask yourself some key questions: do I look for excuses to be alone rather than around family or friends or am I short tempered around my family?

If you feel you are suffering from stress then one of the first things you could do is find out what is causing it. Once you have located the cause you can try and take positive action to minimize or eliminate it altogether. Some minor issues can be easily resolved in this manner while others may be completely out of your control. If the cause is out of your control, and it is creating a lot of stress, you may need to think seriously about what you are doing and why you are doing it.

Your health and wellbeing should rate as high on your priority list as your income and position when deciding how you want to live.

Trust is a Must

When was the last time someone spoke to you about trust?

Whenever someone speaks to you about the company strategies, policies, management or team members they are asking you to believe what they are saying and for you to place your trust in their words and actions.

Trust is something we all do on a regular basis, whether we realise it or not.

You must trust the company's strategy and ability to succeed, grow and provide continued safe employment. This trust is built over a period of time when you can see the action taken proves to be correct.

You must trust the company will monitor and deliver its policies in a fair and consistent manner and knowing this is true will instill confidence and assurance that you are all treated equally.

You must trust your manager to be fair and to look after your interests. A good manager will know how to walk the fine line between the company's interests and making sure all the team members' needs are being fairly considered.

The company must trust you to consistently and honestly complete your duties and responsibilities within the guidelines of your employment. You are employed to perform your role as agreed and trust is placed in you to do so.

The foundation of all this trust is in the degree of credibility and reliability between all parties while constructive engagement, encouragement and feedback add support.

Trust very quickly disappears when there is poor communication, unchecked misbehaviour or situations left unresolved. These activities breed poor morale and lead to an uncomfortable work environment and an unhealthy business.

Mutual trust on all levels may be difficult to achieve, however if you choose to place more trust in your colleagues, managers and the company you may be pleasantly surprised by the outcomes.

What Are You Worth?

We can look at this from two different angles. One is our worth in a work environment and the other is our self-worth. These are closely linked and can be evaluated on a reasonably regular basis by your employer, colleague, friend or even ourselves.

Our worth to our employer can be considered in a number of different ways, however our behaviour is probably one of the most outstanding issues employers can face. This may be attributed to insufficient guidelines or training from an employer or an employee who is continually has a disruptive influence in their work environment.

The employer can easily put guidelines or appropriate training in place, but what about the employee. A large percentage of disruptive employees do not actually recognise how disruptive they really are. A private conversation with the employee about their behaviour and ongoing positive worth to the business from a manager or colleague can often be enough to ignite an improvement.

Personal self-worth may need time and careful consideration. We can take an honest look at our contribution to our family, friends, relationships, personal attitude and thoughts and how we treat ourselves on a daily basis.

While you are considering all of this try to recognise your thoughts as positive or negative and how you actually feel. Do you feel happy, positive and comfortable with yourself? Then think about what you may need to do today to strengthen and improve the way you feel. Make a list of the items you wish to achieve that will support your self-worth and the date by which you will achieve them.

Positive and constructive self-worth is a valuable personal trait that is reflected in your work environment and personal life.

What is Aerobic Exercise?

The word aerobic is a combination of two words meaning air and life. Aerobic exercise, which encourages deep breathing, hit the gymnasiums in a big way during the late 80s. The people I knew at the time who went along to these sessions always talked about the circuit training and how they ran around in circles or jumped up and down for a while. That was the total sum of my knowledge of aerobic training at the time. Fortunately, I now know better.

There are many different types of aerobic exercise. Depending on your personal preference you may wish to go for a brisk walk, jog, swim, bicycle ride, paddle a canoe or row a boat, skipping or play a sport like tennis or squash. Gymnasiums can normally write a specific program to suit your needs or you may wish to join one of their fitness classes. You can just as easily exercise on an oval or on the footpath.

There are many health benefits to regular aerobic exercise which include: reduced risk of stroke or coronary heart disease, stronger heart muscles, weight management, promotion of a good night sleep, allowing time for creativity, improved blood fats, reduced elevated blood pressure and many more. I recommend you consult your doctor before you start exercising if you are unsure of your current health.

If you do decide to take up some form of aerobic exercise there are a couple of points to consider. Always ensure you maintain fluid intake, do not train if you are ill, warm up and warm down with light stretching, and ensure you have the correct footwear and clothing. It is very easy to over train as you improve and want to do more. Try and keep it to 3-5 days a week at an intensity that suits you for between 15-60 minutes.

Getting started is the hardest part. Feeling the benefits is the best part.

What is Calm Alertness?

Calm alertness is one of my favorite terms as it describes the wonderful feeling of being physically calm and mentally alert. It is a feeling and a knowing that nothing can interfere or distract you. It is being in control and able to accomplish tasks with a positive focus and complete concentration.

There are some people who are fortunate enough to maintain calm alertness through most of their lives. They tend to exude an air of self-confidence and self-awareness that allows them to ride the ups and downs of life with little concern. They glide along looking calm and relaxed but always aware of what is going on around them. They accomplish tasks efficiently and with little or no fuss.

While these people feel very comfortable within themselves it can at times be difficult for them to fit in. It is not normally because of who they are but more the way they may be perceived by others. Quiet efficiency is positive and should be supported and nurtured.

You can bring calm alertness into your life with consistent effort and use of some very simple techniques or exercises. The majority of these can be easily performed by you at home or work. The most important one is creative visualisation, as it allows your mind the freedom to roam and drift wherever it pleases while inducing complete physical relaxation. Others include constructive visualisation, exercise, healthy eating, stretching and many more.

You can be a person with calm alertness and enhance your ability to concentrate and focus while building your energy and vitality. You do need to work at it but the personal benefits and sense of wellbeing are well worth the effort.

What is Wellbeing?

This is the way I like to explain wellbeing:

'We experience a sense of wellbeing when everything we think, feel and do is in balance and functioning as a single force. Wellbeing provides a sense of calm alertness, energy and vitality that should be a part of the normal daily functions of your mental, physical and emotional state. Wellbeing is enhanced by the use of stress resilient techniques, regular exercise and healthy eating habits while ensuring the balance between your work and personal lives is continually maintained.'

Corporate wellbeing and personal wellbeing are separate, however they do have a very strong impact on each other when they are linked by two willing parties, i.e. the employer and employee.

There needs to be a willingness by the employer to take the step of providing options that stimulate wellbeing for their employees while employees need to recognise the benefits being provided and willingly participate. It has great health benefits for both as well as it being enjoyable and sometimes social.

The participation rate is a very important factor in the success of any wellbeing programme.

There are some great companies that offer all manner of interesting options to their employees to engage in and they are readily acted upon. There are also companies that try to stimulate interest with next to nil response. It can occasionally be a hard road to get people motivated but they normally respond more positively when it is of personal interest.

When you have employers and employees working together for the greater good of each other you have a truly remarkable working environment that promotes staff retention and attraction, productivity and profit. It is a happier and more pleasant place to be.

My company has developed into much more than just a new name.

What is Work/Life Balance?

People have always strived to find a balance between their time and effort at work with their time at home but it seems the term work/life balance has gained a mind of its own over the last few years. The term work/life balance is very broad and tends to mean something slightly different to each person, even to the point of some people suggesting it is a whole lot of make believe.

The make believe version tends to revolve around the need to work long hours to achieve predetermined goals and let nothing stand in the way. Not even family or friends. This attitude suits some people and they are very comfortable with their choice. For others this is a road to ruin as it leaves no time in their personal life which is their main area of importance.

There is another form of work/life balance and that is having a life at work.

The main focus of our daily activities at work is to complete our duties and responsibilities efficiently and productively as determined by our employer. Being efficient and productive can be influenced by the way we feel and think, e.g. negative thoughts produce diminished results. There is therefore a need to constantly produce positive feelings and thoughts in the work environment. This can be very difficult if all our attention is placed on work. All we have to look forward to is more work.

What could you do for 30 seconds to a minute every 1 or 2 hours to break up your duties and ease the tension? What could you do during your lunch time to alter your work routine?

Starting new habits or routines takes time but the extra balance between work and life is worth it.

When Are You Satisfied?

Satisfaction is one of those things that are pretty hard to nail down because each person has their own interpretation of this feeling. There are also varying degrees of satisfaction and what is relevant to one person is irrelevant to another. Some people are satisfied just to wake up and get out of bed each morning while another will not be satisfied until they have an Olympic gold medal.

So how does this apply to you and your work environment?

We all have duties to perform and tasks to accomplish on a regular basis and it is how we relate to those tasks that are most important.

If you do not care or have pride in the task you are performing then do not expect to be satisfied with the outcome. If this is you then you will probably have a robotic attitude with little care and attention to your duties and the most important part of your day will be going home.

People who care about their role and have pride in their results will feel a sense of achievement and satisfaction when their tasks are complete. The best way to describe this feeling is an inner happiness or elation from knowing you have done your best. Nobody can ask for more of someone who has done their best.

If you try to extend yourself, maintain your standard and take pride in your results you will be a more contented individual knowing there was nothing else you could have done. The alternative is to continually question yourself about what else could have been done when it is too late.

The feeling of satisfaction can be a driving force that ultimately creates happiness and pride in your daily activities and yourself.

Who Sets Your Priorities?

Priorities within the workplace can be constantly changing or very consistent but there is no denying they can be a constant source of distraction and frustration. The changes can be driven by external or internal factors. How they affect you and their magnitude is based on your attitude.

External factors may come from government, council, contractors, sales demands, time limits, negotiations and more. Internal factors may arise from interdepartmental issues, development of products and services, company policies and procedures, personnel agreements and so on. All of these factors can affect any size business, organisation or government department.

The one constant factor with priorities is their effect on each individual is not necessarily directly related to their position. It is related to the way you handle the priority and the level of frustration it can cause. I have seen people in relatively undemanding positions spit the dummy and become enormously frustrated because they were asked to perform a duty of urgency that interrupted what they were currently working on.

The other end of the spectrum is a senior manager who has to suddenly work through the weekend to ensure the final success of securing a contract and they just got on with it.

Priorities will always be changing because that is the nature of business. For a business to be successful it has to act on opportunities as they arise whether that is product development or securing a new contract. Businesses also evolve over time and that in itself creates change which also creates a shift in priorities.

Adapting to changing priorities may not always be easy to accomplish however it will lower your levels of frustration and stress leaving you feeling positive, knowing you have accomplished more than you anticipated.

Win or Whine?

Winning is all that matters to some people. They will throw away the rule book of ethics and win at any cost to their opponent. Their driving force is to make the deal and make it as beneficial to themselves as possible.

Their aim is to beat their opponent into submission and then kick them while they are down to extract the maximum they possibly can. When the deal is done you can often listen to them whine about how they could have got more if they waited longer or pushed harder. That is until the next target arrives.

Know what I mean? Some people do not know when to stop and when to be satisfied with an outcome.

Thankfully we are not all like that.

The word win does not automatically mean 'at all cost'. It means there is more than one person in a particular negotiation and you have walked away satisfied with the outcome. It also means the other party or parties have walked away satisfied with their outcome. Each party may have come away with more or less than they intended but if everyone comes away happy then everyone is a winner and no-one whines.

People are generally social creatures and they want to trust other people. They want to feel secure in their business dealings and in their personal life and they want to build relationships. They want to extend themselves to support others but will only do so if they feel the bond of trust.

Your business and personal ethics is what will define you when dealing with others and will to a large degree determine your longevity and success in business as well as your personal life.

Work Station Chaos

Do you suffer from work station chaos?

Work stations or desks are usually fairly small and compact with very little space to keep items that are not in regular use. So why do many of us tend to have so much unnecessary clutter around us? It can be very frustrating when you need to find something quickly and you have to go digging for it. Up go the stress levels.

It is very easy to allow this to occur if you are very busy or need to continually access different folders or sources of information or store multiple files close by. It can also be easier to leave something where it lies rather than taking the time to place it where it is meant to be stored.

There are a couple of steps you can employ but, they will need to be in constant use for them to be effective. Firstly, place all items you never use and will never need in the bin, in the bottom drawer or a filing cabinet. If you file it and realise one day that you do need it then at least you will be able to locate it. The regularly used items can go in the top drawer and only those items that are in constant use should remain on your desk.

Once you have decided how your items should be stored you should give your whole work station, desk, phone, computer etc. a good new year clean. This will lighten and brighten your space so it looks and feels more comfortable and welcoming.

Now you can enhance the appeal of your space even further with a small indoor plant, a beautiful scenic picture, photos of loved ones or your recent holiday or something else that helps to make you feel good when you look at it.

Brighten up your work area and brighten up your life for the year ahead.

Further reading

The books I have listed here are about personal growth for everyday life and life at work. They provide great insight by experts in their field who are globally recognized for their work.

7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey

Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment by William C Byham

Conscious Business by Fred Kofman

Getting Things Done by David Allen

Employee's Survival Guide to Change by Jeffrey M. Hiatt

The One Thing by Gary Keller

Working with Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman

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