The Signs of Stress

You have one consolation if you think you’re under stress as a wall and ceiling contractor.

That is: you’re not alone.

Construction is one of the industries which tends to bring the most pressures—and stress—for its people, male and female.

This is according to Gerard Fisher, president of the Center for Organization Development in Rochester, N.Y., and one of the featured seminar leaders at the iaWCC/GDCI convention in Atlanta this past February.

Construction is right up there with other fast-changing fields such as electronics, plastics and communications when it comes to stressing out its top executives.

“In these fields,” Fisher explains, “top executives find that what worked yesterday does not work today, and it’s difficult for them to have a complete grasp of all that is going on.

There is greater need for them to acknowledge their dependence on others for new ideas,” he continued, “and do far more talking than listening. In that environment, you can have heavy kinds of distress.”

As a contrast, Fisher pointed out that slower-paced industries—especially those which are very rule-oriented and where the chain of command is still very powerful—produce less stress.

“It’s possible,” he said, “because the pace is easier, for an executive to have and yield a total grasp of the industry and rely less on others.”

The signs of stress aren’t all that easy to detect. Signals tend to be different for each person. One contractor might withdraw. Another might become angry and yell a lot. Others suffer from headaches, backaches, nervous tension or hyperactivity—jumping from one task to another without really getting much of anything done.

Upset stomachs are another symptom. For example, famous Washington Redskin football linebacker, Mike Curtis, a M-year veteran of the professional football wars, came to football training camp this year knowing that he was the oldest veteran on the squad which was in the rebuilding process.

Less than two weeks into training Curtis was admitted to a hospital for treatment following three consecutive days of unbearable stomach cramps. A week later, what Curtis feared happened: he was cut from the squad to make room for younger linebackers—and the stomach cramps disappeared.

Stress Prompts Different Behaviors

Speaking of stress signals, Fisher said, “For some, it’s a Jekyll-Hyde situation in which stress prompts behavior entirely different from the norm. In other cases, the change is a matter of degree, such as a naturally loud person becoming even louder under strain.

“The point is, people really should get to know their own work styles so that they can spot how their bodies react under stress. That way, they can say to themselves: ‘Hey, you’re under stress and you’re not coping properly.’ Then they can begin coping with stress by solving the problems that are causing it.”

And how is this done? And more important, is stress necessarily always bad?

To these questions, Fisher has ready answers. Some stress, he emphasizes, is essential for good productivity. As a matter of truth, most wall and ceiling contractors secretly enjoy stressful situations and aren’t truly happy unless they do have problems to solve.

The critical element, though, is how do they handle the stress they have—and knowing that too much of even a good thing isn’t all that good.

“A good idea, after identifying the tasks that cause too much stress, is to arrange your schedule whenever possible so that you are at your freshest when those situations pop up,” Fisher advises.

“If the morning is your high-energy time, tackle the jobs that cause you the most strain then. The more physically and mentally tired you are, the more likely you are to react badly under pressures.”

Pressures Building in Construction

Wall and ceiling contractors can look forward to an increase in pressures during the next 6-12 months, too. During an economic downturn or double-digit inflation, the stress can be most uncomfortable . . . and this is almost axiomatic among construction firm owners—who have grown accustomed to depending too much on himself to solve problems.

“If a contractor has never had to deal before with double-digit infla-
Coping with stress is not all that difficult and is largely a matter of training. One of the quickest and easiest ways to learn to cope with stress is to use a technique called biofeedback.

For many executives and contractors biofeedback may seem like a technique better left to cultists. But these small devices have become very popular with many professional and executive types because they do, indeed, help to control stress levels.

"With one of these little machines on his desk—say, one that measures pulse rate—a manager can test his stress level right after various activities," Fisher says, "such as bid opening, a hassle with estimators or purchasing, or after 'enjoying' an accounts receivable call with a recalcitrant customer."

If the pulse rate goes up, Fisher explains, the contractor has learned something about the kind of things that "get to him." He can then figure out a way to calm himself, such as lying back in a chair for a moment and closing his eyes, getting up and walking around, drinking a glass of water.

"The important thing," Fisher emphasizes, "is that a contractor should start to design ways to reduce that kind of stress in the future." The need to reduce stress is borne out by statistics from the American Heart Association survey which showed that heart attacks—many of which are related to job stress—cost more than 26 billion dollars a year in disability payments and medical bills.

And this total doesn’t come anywhere near including the costs of poor decisions that might have been made before those attacks, nor the loss a company suffers when the contractor-owner is absent for a long period. And if he’s the one that all the customers have dealt personally with, the loss is even greater because these customers will go elsewhere—some never to return and others to return only with the return of their contact.

One of the bonus advantages of a machine for, say, biofeedback is that a contractor can see how the pulse rate drops when he stops so-called "awfulizing"—that is, complaining to himself just how miserable things are—and begins to start thinking about solving the problems that are making him feel awful in the first place.

A wall and ceiling contractor should also realize that on-the-job stress is not the only form of tension in an executive’s life. Fisher compares the situation to a diamond, realizing that the job is responsible for some 80% of a contractor’s total stress load. The other sources of stress help form the "life diamond" as Fisher calls it.

"One part of the diamond is the job, another the family," he explains. "Then there’s society and its institutions, and finally the person’s own sense of self. Changes occur in all four parts of this diamond, and together they can cause considerable stress. "As for an individual’s sense of self, there’s the discovery that old definitions often do not apply; It used to be that the father was the one who had the answers. Now he is just someone who has an opinion.

"As a result, when we talk in terms of relieving stress, we’ve got to look beyond a contractor’s job—and at the other things in life that are important to him," Fisher concluded.

(Edited Note: This is the first part of a two-part series on stress, using the ideas and concepts of Gerard Fisher. The next installment will provide clues on detecting the level of stress and a procedure for a contractor to control his problems, his symptoms—and his stress load.)