

Working Wisdom:

Sanity-saving strategies for stressed-out times

Sandra Strauss

Your stress level is on overload. The office is buzzing with high-frequency stress. Yet, you're so swamped, it's hard to even take the time to define what's at the root of it. By probing into the heart of the matter, you glean nuggets of wisdom and valuable insights for potential solutions:

- Who's involved?
- What's going on?
- Where does it happen?
- When does it happen?
- How do things go wrong?
- How frequently does it happen?
- How do you feel about it?
- Why do you feel the way you do about it?



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The answers to these questions reveal vital information for pinpointing the exact nature of the situation. Solutions become much more accessible when the specifics of what's going on are clarified.

Once defined, the next step is defining the reactions it's causing you.

Are you angry? Frustrated? Disappointed? Confused? Overwhelmed? By gaining clarity on how the situation is directly affecting you helps in seeking resolution.

The next step is asking others connected with the situation for feedback to explore the scope of its impact as well as discover solutions. Giving and gaining feedback is a critical link in the problem-solving loop and the restoration of your sanity!

For example, Samantha realized that one of her colleagues, Tricia, has lately been impatient and critical. They usually work well together and this new behavior is quite disturbing and affecting Samantha's focus and ability to work effectively. Giving Tricia feedback about her perspectives and the resulting impact on her job performance is vital for reducing stress levels, as well as improving productivity and working relationships in their organization.

When giving feedback, state the situation, your reactions and the impact it is having on you. In the case of Samantha's hot-tempered colleague:

"Tricia, we've always been able to talk openly. Lately, I've noticed you've become rather edgy. This is very unlike you. Unfortunately, your stress is creating extra stress on me and affecting my ability to stay focused on my responsibilities. What seems to be the problem?"

Addressing the situation brings it out in the open and sets the stage for resolution, rather than to siphon off productivity.

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The next step is working toward a solution by suggesting ideas, asking for theirs or brainstorming solutions together. For instance Samantha could inquire, “What do you suggest?” or “What would you do if you were in my place?” Focus on what’s needed while exploring options together to create win-win solutions. Perfect solutions often percolate out of silence, so allow time for this sanity-saving magic to happen.

When your sanity is at stake, take actions with these steps:

Get clarity. Define the problem or situation.

Describe the reactions it is causing and their impact.

Brainstorm options, suggest solutions and ask the person(s) involved for ideas.

By discussing your concerns, you create a shared understanding to enhance harmony and achieve desirable goals. Others involved will know how you view their actions and the impact they’re having on total work performance. Likewise, you also will gain information about how others view your actions.

This frame of reference guides your interactions with integrity, establishes and maintains healthy working relationships and enhances both current and future actions for desirable outcomes.

Guidelines for Feedback

- Use “I” statements. State your views from your perspective.
- Pick a good time and place when the feedback is most likely to be heard and received.
- If possible, discuss a situation as close to the event as possible. Details are fresher in the minds of the parties involved.
- Respect dignity. Avoid giving feedback in front of others not involved.
- Be specific. Give quotes or examples from the incident or about the situation.
- Report just the facts, rather than why you think things happened the way they did or what the person may have meant by them.
- Focus on what can be changed.
- Request cooperation in the changes you would like to see or brainstorm solutions.
- Encourage feedback in return. This gives the receiver a chance to express his/her own perspectives.

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