



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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# Pride-Based Leadership Series – Part IV Why Your Employees Aren't Producing More

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## COPING IN TODAY'S CHALLENGING ECONOMY

In this series, we've been exploring how to be more influential by learning how to monitor and manage productive tension. Simply put, "tension management" can be defined as *the process of affecting a person's level of urgency in a way that results in optimal performance.*

As we build upon the previous parts of this series<sup>1</sup>, let's turn our attention to a critical question in today's environment: How do I get my employees to be even more productive?

In today's tough economy, we're all trying to do more with less. Your team may have gone through downsizing, but the workload you're carrying has not been reduced—in fact it has probably increased!

With the challenges growing at a rapid pace, we need our employees to be as productive as possible. If your employees aren't producing as much as you'd like, it comes down to one of two reasons: **either their tension is too high or too low.**

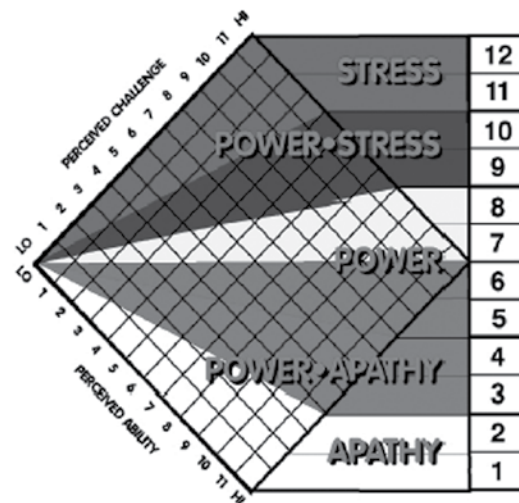
## A QUICK REFRESHER

To assess where optimal productivity occurs, we need to look at two things: 1) Our employee's *level of tension* around a specific activity and 2) their *Threshold of Activation* around that activity.

When examining tension it helps to reference T. Falcon Napier's ChangeGrid—an assessment tool that measures a person's productive tension. The ChangeGrid shows five levels of productive tension from high to low: STRESS, POWER-STRESS, POWER, POWER-APATHY and APATHY.

At any moment in time when it comes to performing a specific activity, we all experience one of these five levels of tension.

## THE CHANGEGRID



Every location on the Grid represents a level of tension, some that tend to be more productive than others.

We also need to know where their Threshold of Activation (TOA) is. The TOA is the *level of tension where someone takes immediate, definitive action.* The TOA is dynamic and can vary by individual, activity and moment in time.

The rest of this article will look at the two problem scenarios causing suboptimal productivity: 1) Tension is too high (STRESS), and 2) Tension is too low (APATHY).

<sup>1</sup> Parts 1 through 3 of the Pride-Based Leadership Series were published in the April, July and October 2009 issues of *The Stepping Stone*, available on the SOA Web site.

## SCENARIO #1: YOUR EMPLOYEE'S TENSION IS TOO HIGH

One reason employees aren't taking enough action is because tension is too high. If our tension level is above our TOA, productivity plummets. STRESS occurs when a person sees the challenge of completing a task as greatly exceeding their ability. It sounds like this: *"I know I need to do something, I don't know what to do, just tell me what to do and I'll do it!"*

In STRESS we are experiencing unresourceful emotions that cause us to magnify the problems. Thus, our decision-making is very reactive, resulting in false starts or lack of action because we're paralyzed.

One version of STRESS is called OVERWHELM. STRESS is all about an activity being too difficult for us to handle. In OVERWHELM, we may have plenty of ability to handle a specific activity, we just have too many of them to handle all at once!

OVERWHELM can feel exactly the same as STRESS because our whole list feels like one big task—thus, *"I don't know how to get this whole list accomplished!"* This is very common in today's environment where we have fewer employees to lift a heavier load. Additionally, managers tend to distribute the work in an uneven fashion, doling out most of the tasks to the more able employees, throwing them into overwhelm.

Whether your employees are in STRESS or OVERWHELM, they are in a very counter-productive place.

### WHEN TENSION IS TOO HIGH: UTILIZE DOWNGRID MANEUVERS

We need to lower tension in this scenario so that people get out of overwhelm into a more creative, resourceful place to tackle the challenges. In gen-



eral, there are four ways to lower tension:

#### 1) Normalize the situation.

For example, letting people know that the whole industry is experiencing these challenges, can have the subtle effect of lowering tension.

#### 2) Simplify the tasks.

Your employees may be overwhelmed because they're trying to take on many big challenges all at once. If we can help them break the challenges down to manageable parts, and give them a track to run on, we will reduce their tension.

#### 3) Add resources.

Tension goes up when resources are perceived to be limited or nonexistent. Although we may actually have less in the way of resources, we need to provide additional support to lower tension. As a leader you must think out-of-the box and be creative to provide

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these resources to your employees. These resources could consist of time, money, technology, people, training, coaching and mentoring—just to name a few.

#### 4) Restore resources.

When we're in STRESS, we forget the resources that are already available to us. To lower tension, you need to remind your team about the resources they already possess. This could be the resources listed above as well as internal resources like their skills, talents, knowledge and expertise.

## SCENARIO # 2: YOUR EMPLOYEE'S TENSION IS TOO LOW

When tension is too low and far below our TOA, productivity is suboptimal. This scenario is much more insidious and, ironically, much more common than tension being too high. In my work with leadership teams, I find that more employees are in APATHY around their mission-critical activities than in STRESS.

In fact, I would go as far as to say that APATHY causes more productivity problems in an organization than STRESS. What's interesting is that companies provide plenty of stress-management programs, but where are the apathy management programs?

How could so many be in APATHY in the midst of a bad economy and job market? It seems like people would be on pins-and-needles to keep their jobs and thus be working harder. The main reason we see many people in APATHY around their mission-critical activities is not because they are not feeling stress—they are just not in Stress about their mission-critical activities!

Let's be clear, the level of tension called APATHY doesn't mean someone is "apathetic". It simply means "without concern." APATHY occurs when

someone perceives their ability to greatly exceed the challenge of accomplishing a task. It's the natural byproduct of mastery. So it would seem we would want all of our employees to achieve mastery and be at this level. But let's look at the downsides of APATHY.

APATHY sounds like this: *"Do something? I don't need to do anything. Things are fine just the way they are."* APATHY represents a place of **untapped potential and unrealized profits**.

What happens in APATHY is that a person stops adapting to the changing world, they get bored and disengaged, thus the great abilities this person possesses never get fully utilized.

Case in point, I was debriefing a woman's ChangeGrid who had most of her job responsibilities in APATHY and POWER-APATHY. You could tell that she was really good at what she did. But she told me she was interviewing at two different companies because she was "yawning at her desk"—bored out of her skull by her current job. I wonder if her boss has any clue that she's interviewing and will be gone in short order!

So many employees are in APATHY because organizations tend to be great at providing training, but are lacking at giving their employees appropriate challenges. So people drift DOWNGRID. Ironically, the talents of these employees are the very assets an organization needs to leverage in order to handle the challenges of today's environment.

## WHEN TENSION IS TOO LOW: UTILIZE UPGRID MANEUVERS

So how do we take advantage of all this untapped potential and unrealized profits when our employees are in APATHY? We need to move them UpGrid, which requires much more in terms of management skills to accomplish. There are four ways to raise tension:

**1) Raise the standards.**

Your employees perceive that they are lacking challenge. If they feel they have the ability of a “10” and the challenge is only a “2”, it’s time to give them more and raise the bar.

Now you may not feel they are knocking the ball out of the park, but they do. My question is, “Where’s the proof?” Have you clearly defined performance standards and expectations? Are you and your employees referencing the same scorecard? If you’re not sure, the first step is to clarify the expectations.

If that doesn’t raise tension enough, then raise the bar some more.

**2) Change the Task.**

Another way to raise tension is to change the task. How do we put all that mastery to work? Let’s change or vary the task. For example, if you have an employee who is great at dealing with IT projects, rather than relegating all such projects his way and making him feel pigeon-holed, why not let him train the rest of your team on how to be a masterful project manager?

You can change the task by adding a challenge or reward; making it more lively or fun; including an element of fun competition.

**3) Awaken Emotions.**

Emotions found downgrid are complacency, boredom and depression. If we want to move someone to POWER, we need to awaken emotions of pride and confidence. They have the mastery; inspire them to apply that mastery to handle the huge challenges your organization faces. Elicit the pride that’s in them.

**4) Boost Accountability.**

A research study conducted by Patrick Lencioni, author of *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, revealed that leaders struggle most with holding their peers and employees accountable. In our work we find

that accountability is near the top of the list of skills lacking among today’s leaders.

There are many reasons why this is, but a primary one is that holding employees accountable takes a lot of effort and managers are overwhelmed and time-deprived. For many, it’s easier to do it themselves than to get their direct report to accomplish a task at a proficient level.

It’s a high calling but if you’re willing to answer this call, you will set yourself far apart as a great and effective leader.

Remember, an effective accountability system has four elements:

- Clearly defined performance standards,
- Meaningful rewards,
- Meaningful consequences, and
- An enforcer.

Do you know where your team’s tension is around the activities critical to the mission of your organization? If you would like to know where it is, contact us (215-968-2483) and we can arrange a group profile using our proprietary instrument, the ChangeGrid. Once you know where their tension is, you will be able to implement a program to offer the support they need to achieve optimal performance. ●

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