

Dear Friends:

We always know when spring has arrived in Atlanta, with beautiful warm days and pink and white dogwood blossoms all over the city. Another sign of spring at Szabo is our busy calendar of conference events.

We'll attend the Broadcast Cable Financial Management Association conference in San Diego, California on May 17th through the 20th. We travel to Denver, Colorado for the Cable Advertising Bureau convention on June 3rd through the 6th. Macon, Georgia will host the Georgia Association of Broadcasters convention on June 23rd through the 25th. And finally, plans are underway for our annual Szabo employees' picnic, to be held sometime in June.

We attended the Broadcast Cable Credit Association conference in Seattle last month, and we're happy to report that the event attracted the second highest turnout in the 25-yr.-old organization's history. A highlight of the conference was a luncheon during which our great friend Marvin Schragger was presented with the organization's Lifetime Achievement Award. Marvin has been involved in the industry for 35 years, contributing thousands of hours to the organization, helping its conferences and membership grow, and helping many people along the way. Congratulations, Marvin, for this well-deserved honor!

Best wishes for a glorious spring,



Pete Szabo, President
Szabo Associates, Inc.

Manage Stress for Greater Success!

Stress is an inevitable part of life and always has been. Prehistoric man had his fair share, if you count worrying about where his next meal will come from or wondering during a face-off with a saber-toothed tiger if he's suddenly the wrong link on the food chain. If we consider that stress is simply the body's response to any demand made upon it, our situation really isn't so different from our primitive ancestors'. With corporate mergers and downsizing, an increasingly competitive marketplace, and information coming at us faster than we can humanly process it, many of us in the media industry feel we face the modern-day equivalent of the saber-tooth every working day.

Unfortunately, the natural biological "flight or fight" responses to stress that served our primitive ancestors well are not as appropriate in today's high-tech workplace. Running out of the office when things get to be too much or punching out someone who refuses to cooperate with you will inevitably bring on even greater levels of stress. So how does a credit manager manage his or her own job stress and mitigate stress throughout the credit department?

First, recognize that stress isn't necessarily all bad. In fact, some authorities on the subject believe that some stress can lead to greater productivity and effectiveness when used wisely. The key is to find your optimum level of stress—just enough to

avoid complacency, extend your personal limits, and reach your goals—and to manage and mitigate the excess, which can cause the negative physical and emotional symptoms that lead to health problems and burnout. It is also useful to recognize, when managing other people, that each of us has our own unique way of internalizing "stressors" (the causes of stress) and managing stress, based on the attitudes, beliefs, and values that we learn at an early age. With these points in mind, here are some tips that can help turn your "stress factory" into a more pleasant, positive, and effective organization:

Prepare for change. Most businesses today must continually make changes to remain competitive. Since change is inevitable, prepare yourself mentally by imagining how you might deal with sudden, substantial change in your organization. Consider likely scenarios and then brainstorm, by yourself and with others, about how you might best react. When change occurs, acknowledge negative feelings in yourself and your staff, then focus on the positive aspects of the change. Talk to others who have had similar experiences and learn from them. Research books and articles that address organizational change and how to rise to the challenges such change imposes.

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Communicate. The more chaotic your work situation becomes, the more you need good lines of communication. Try to give clear directions and set reachable goals for your staff. Get together informally as well as formally in regularly scheduled meetings to identify problems and exchange solutions and strategies.

Encourage your staff to ask questions and communicate information about their workloads. Make sure everyone has a chance to “speak up,” and don’t allow meetings to be dominated by the more outspoken members of your staff.

The best communicators also listen well, and effective listening is an excellent stress-reducing technique for all parties involved. First, people who listen well are respected, sought after, and rare. When you are around a good listener, it feels good and it makes you feel special. Since listeners are liked by the people they work with, they avoid many of the most common stressful aspects of work, such as resentment and ill feelings, and inspire loyalty. Maybe most importantly, effective listening helps you understand what people are saying the first time they say it, allowing you to avoid misinterpretations and time-consuming mistakes.

Appreciate. Make it a point to verbally praise staff for their value to the department and the company. Such expressions of appreciation help reduce their stress and increase their commitment to the job. Additionally, feeling appreciated makes people more forgiving of their coworkers’ (and managers’)

shortcomings and mistakes.

Try to identify, understand, and appreciate what motivates each member of your staff. Is it money? Creative exchange? Social experience? If you can meet these various needs successfully, each employee’s productivity will increase.

While you’re at it, take time to appreciate yourself. Give yourself credit for your own hard work and for your contributions to others and to the company.

Recognize patterns of behavior. Most of us engage in habitual reactions tend to be bothered by the same things, irritated by the same circumstances, and act defensively toward certain behaviors. Take an honest look at your own patterns of behavior, those of your staff, and those of your superiors. Such recognition mitigates stress by allowing you to better anticipate behavior in situations and to better choose what to say or do. For example, if someone tends to become defensive or argumentative when challenged, you might determine that some interactions are simply not worth it. If, on the other hand, they are worth it, then at least you will be prepared for the outcome.

Use “reflective coping” to manage anger. Many ways of managing anger—anger-in (suppression), anger-out (expression), and reflective coping (waiting until tempers have cooled to address the conflict), the latter promotes not only better problem solving but also better health, according to recent research conducted over a 15-year period at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. Acknowledging your anger but waiting to discuss the conflict with others or to sort things out on your own often results in a more creative solution to the problem.

Look for the humor. Take your work seriously, but don’t take yourself too seriously. Try to find the humor in a difficult situation. Researchers have shown that laughter may actually reduce levels of hormones that trigger the stress response and suppress immunity. It also serves to “de-fuse” potentially volatile situations.

Don’t make promises you can’t keep. “I’ll call you later today” or “I promise I’ll get that to you at the end of the week” may seem like little items, but cumulatively they can add up. Perhaps many promises you make really don’t have to be made in the first place. Often, people expect your best effort, not a commitment to a specific deadline. Besides the time savings, another advantage to making fewer promises is that the promises you do make will mean more to you and to the people you are promising, because you will be more likely to keep them.

Make the most of your time. Louis C. Feuer, author of *White-Collar Stress*, maintains that stress is often created by knowledge of what tasks you must complete during the day and the value these tasks will have once completed. He suggests preparing a realistic and workable to-do list as the first step in a productive and valuable workday. Feuer also advises against succumbing to the temptation to do the less stressful things first. Leaving important items undone until late in the day causes stress; with planning, they can be quickly moved off the list, leaving less important items for last. In order to ensure that projects are completed, Feuer also suggests developing a schedule that allows you to plan effectively days and weeks ahead and that allows

for flexibility to take advantage of unexpected change and opportunities.

Make your workspace pleasant. Many cubicles and offices are downright depressing—unorganized, with piles of papers, files and books covering every inch of desk space, and with nothing whatsoever to brighten and personalize it. Such disarray is not only demotivating but also disruptive. “Most people waste the better part of an hour a day looking for things on their desk,” says Jeffrey Mayer, author of *Winning the Fight Between You and Your Desk*.

File papers you need to keep and get rid of the rest. Keep an area of your desk free of anything, so you will always have room to work and to put your coffee cup. Photographs of friends and loved ones, your child’s drawings, and other “mood lifters” appropriate to your office environment can help make your workplace—and workday—much more pleasant.

Stay focused on the present. This one takes a lot of practice and discipline, but training your attention to be more focused in the present moment can reap remarkable benefits in the workplace, according to Richard Carlson, author of *Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff at Work*. “Being in the moment” has far more to do with what’s going on in your mind than on what’s going on in your office. Turning your attention to the past, such as yesterday’s mistake or an argument this morning, or to the future, such as deadlines or things that may go wrong, rarely accomplishes anything positive. By focusing on the present, you’ll be less stressed, more efficient, and easier to be with. You’ll also enjoy work more, become a better listener, and sharpen your learning curve.

Develop outside interests. Key to avoiding burnout is to have a life outside work. Family, pets, hobbies, church work, club membership, athletics, volunteer activities—anything that

enriches your life can help you to deal with stress and avoid burnout. You might even consider involving your staff in a pleasant non-work-related activity, such as forming a softball team.

Suggest company “stress-busters.” Many companies have implemented popular stress-relievers, such as casual Fridays, employee work-out rooms, and flexible hours. If none exists in your organization, perhaps it’s because no one has suggested it! Many employers recognize that happy, appreciated employees are more productive and loyal, and they may thank you for helping them create a more enjoyable and more productive work environment.

Few would argue that chronic or excessive work stress can take an unacceptable toll on every aspect of our lives—our job performance, our personal relationships, and even our health. And however tough we may think we are, the reality is that none of us is exempt or immune to the stress of doing business. All we can do is manage it to the best of our abilities, and that means facing the problem with courage, innovativeness, resilience, compassion, and a healthy dose of humor.

We hope you’ll find our suggestions helpful. And here’s just one more ... However overloaded you feel you are, allow yourself to take and enjoy some well-earned periods of separation from work. Such breaks from the intensity of work allow you to return to your task with renewed energy and possibly a new and more productive perspective. Good luck and happy stress-busting!



“I HEARD THAT PETS CAN REDUCE A PERSON’S STRESS. BESIDES, THIS PLACE WAS ALREADY A ZOO!”

The Szabo Difference: Someone You Can Rely On

Keeping up with the rapidly changing laws and customs of credit and collections is enough to fill anyone with anxiety. What if you've overlooked something important? What if a law changes quietly, without your knowledge? Worry about things like this long enough, and you'll know why there's such a demand for stress management.

What most of us dread are the things we can't anticipate—the problems that sneak up and ambush us when we least expect it. Those are the unpleasant surprises that Szabo is dedicated to taking out of your life. Our clients find a source of comfort in the fact that they can rely on their Szabo representatives and the impressive support network behind them.

Because our people are dedicated to just one business, we talk and think about the world of credit collections every hour of the day. When new customs or techniques get started in credit management, accounts receivable, or electronic transfers, we're among the first to hear about it. So we can help you avoid unpleasant surprises.

The same goes for new laws and court decisions. One of our on-staff paralegals will get the word early. If they don't, we'll find out from one of the 400 or so attorneys in our national and international legal network. Very little happens in the world of collections law that we don't hear about. So you're less apt to be blind-sided.

Still, experts tell us that people need more than reassurance to

avoid stress. Often you just need someone to pitch in and help out when the mountain of work gets a bit too high.

But delegating work can be difficult when you're used to keeping firm control over every aspect of what you do. In collections, Szabo offers you the best of both worlds—delegating work and retaining control. When you assign a collections job to Szabo, we keep you informed with regular reports. If you get too impatient to wait for the regularly scheduled report, call your Szabo representative and get a report on the spot.

We can't take all the stress out of your life. But we can certainly help you rest easier about your credit collections. ♦



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