

***STRESS  
AND  
THE PENTAGRAM  
Action Strategies***

## Our observation

Today companies can gain a competitive advantage from the ability of their leaders to deal with instability, complexity, and unpredictability without creating additional stress. By doing so, they have a direct impact on the performance of their teams.

In any organization, an optimum level of stress exists, which promotes an optimum level of performance. To diagnose and correct counter-productive stress situations, we<sup>1</sup> have developed a model: the **PENTAGRAM**<sup>2</sup>

This model is for executives and managers who wish to reduce the level of stress in their organization, and who also wish to understand their role as *instigators* or *transmitters* of stress.

Using the pentagram after a systemic review of the situation is completed, it becomes possible and realistic to determine necessary actions, prioritize them, and delegate them to others. Ultimately the pentagram will aid in anticipating situations that may be potential sources of stress and initiating new and appropriate actions.

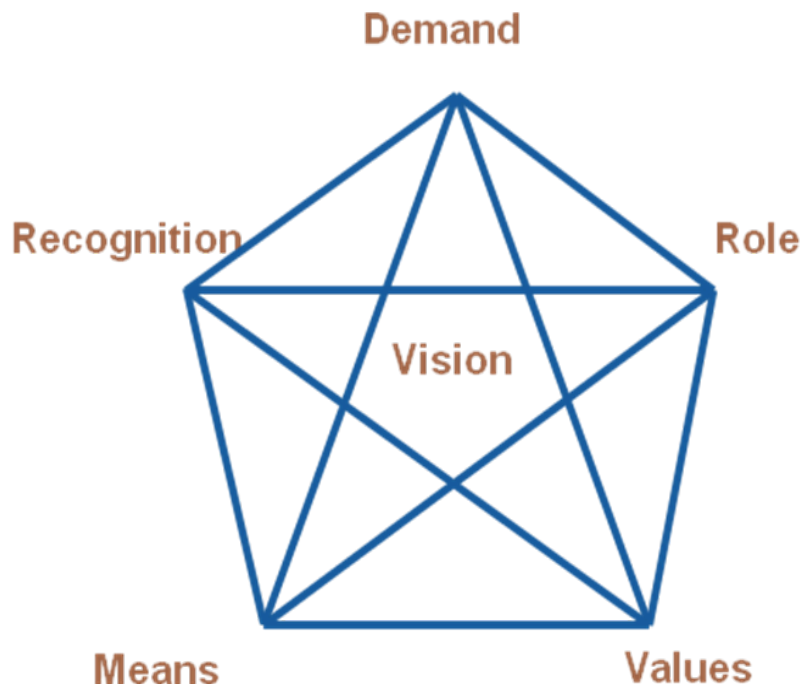
## The Pentagram

**The five endpoints of the pentagram** *indicate relationships* among the various events coming from the environment that can be identified as stress factors. These endpoints are:

1. **Demand**: "psychological demand," i.e. the relationship established between the perceived workload and the resources available to meet it; the overall work capacity together with the associated productivity,
2. **Role**: the perceived position, participation in decision-making, the organization, the procedures, the management of all internal flows, inputs and outputs,
3. **Values**: culture, the work-life balance, ethics, ambition,
4. **Means**: the tools, the job, logistical resources, information technology,
5. **Recognition**: the workplace environment, communication, rewards, performance evaluation and metrics, the climate of relations between individuals.

**At the heart** of the pentagram is the vision, i.e. the strategy, the project, the direction that motivates us. **Surrounding** the pentagram there is **the environment** with which organizations are in constant interaction, whether intentionally or not.

The Pentagram: a compass for understanding stress factors and acting on them



**The definition** of stress that we have adopted is as follows, "[Stress is] the body's reaction in response to changes, requirements, constraints or threats from its environment in order to adapt to them."

Dealing with stress is therefore finding an optimal balance among these five endpoints to take advantage of changes in the environment.

However the complexity that organizations experience stems from the fact that acting on only one of these levers, regardless of which one, rarely leads to the desired results. . There are two reasons for this:

1. Each of the endpoints is connected to all the others and is not independent of any of them. Consequently, acting on one of the endpoints will necessarily have an impact on the equilibrium of the whole. The dynamic that will create the change necessary to counter or reduce stress lies within the links that connect the endpoints.

- And here is one key principle for driving change in a complex system—It is not always necessary or appropriate to act on the endpoint where failure is occurring in order to regain balance or performance levels.

Although the five endpoints of the pentagram can be combined in a large number of sub-systems, only *seven combinations* of certain endpoints make sense because they allow for stress reduction in organizations via the Human Resources process as well as by way of actions and managerial skills.

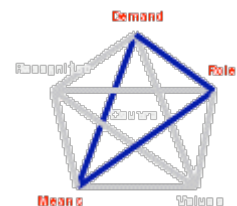
### The Seven Fields of Intervention

Each of these seven fields of intervention corresponds to a specific combination of certain endpoints of the pentagram. Each field creates a space, a source of tension between two extreme behaviors. Within the context of human performance, each of these extremes is *both* a source of positive stress *and* of negative stress. This ambivalence represents the tension of the sub-system and thus a *potential lever of action to take in order to reach an optimum stress level*.

Each of these seven fields of intervention is represented by a geometric shape formed by joining the endpoints related to it (usually, it is a triangle inside the pentagram [see the following pages]); to identify them more easily, each bears a specific name. There is no hierarchical order among any of them.

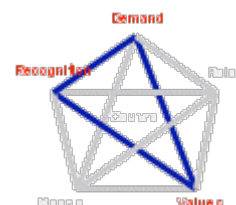
#### 1. Adjustment

To adjust and therefore to exhibit agility: knowing how to adopt an appropriate attitude between **reacting to events** and the unforeseen as they occur, accepting to be surprised; and/ or **over-adapting** in order to never be caught off guard. Leaning too far towards one or the other endpoints (waiting to react without anticipating or trying to anticipate everything) is a stress factor.



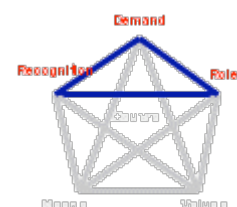
#### 2. Belonging

A sense of belonging which falls between two extremes: **dependence** on the group which reassures and comforts, at the risk of inhibiting the expression of any individuality, and **independence** which frees and liberates, but may lead to isolation and an absence of social connections.



#### 3. Development

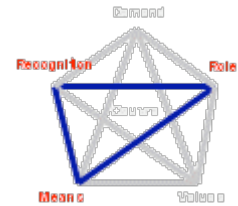
The right level of development between the following two attitudes: **specialization** which reinforces an identified expertise with its limits that have a tendency to "confine" people, or **the feeling of being all-powerful** associated with feelings of freedom, but requires the ability to address the unknown or the



“never enough”.

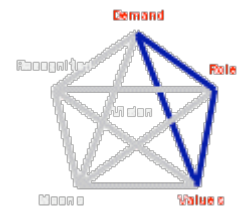
#### 4. Efficiency

A level of efficiency optimized between two environments: **valuing uniqueness and special abilities, which leads to** initiative-taking, but which can be difficult to integrate, and **emphasizing rules and procedures**, which offers a reassuring framework but can also be restrictive.



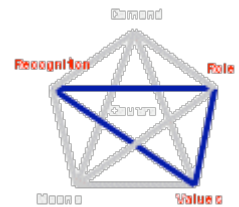
#### 5. Commitment

A level of commitment optimized between two opposing behaviors: **disengagement**, which allows one to disengage in order to welcome the new, but can also be perceived as withdrawal, and **engaged** or even "militant" **involvement**, risking that the commitment becomes a “crusade”.



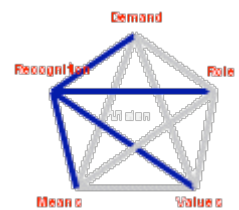
#### 6. Motivation

Appropriate motivation, alternating between two extremes: **influencing** or being influenced, which may lead to manipulation or to feeling manipulated; and on the other hand, systematically **challenging**, which is certainly stimulating, however it is associated with the danger of exhaustion or loss of direction.



#### 7. Leadership

Leadership style that is appropriate and integrates both: **“everything depends on me”**, from cradle to grave, which may be a source of excitement or anxiety and **“everything is interdependent”**, which seeks the opinion of others at the risk of diluting the leader’s authority.



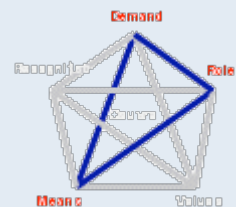
**For each of these systemic fields of intervention, we will specify its meaning and then successively identify:**

1. The impact on stress management
2. The challenges and risks of polarization
3. The managerial levers
4. The managerial style to adopt

## ADJUSTMENT

An optimal level of adjustment between two behaviors, both of which are potential sources of stress:

- ❖ a reaction compelled by lack of anticipation, and
- ❖ over-adapting in order to never be caught off guard



### The impact on stress management

Ensure that the ability to be productive and the necessary support means are set up for the short term as well as for the long term, in a way that prevents the stress associated with change.

Controlled stress will allow the management of major changes as well as ongoing adjustment to change.

### The stakes and the tension among the endpoints

It's about allowing each individual:

- to be in harmony with managing priorities, distributing and rolling out tasks, and delegating.

It's about imparting the organization with a certain dynamic in order to:

- develop abilities, anticipate risks associated with the business conditions regarding production needs.
- That is to say have the correct skill at the correct time and in the correct place.

What is at play:

- Creating conditions that encourage each individual's agility in a dynamic environment
- Accepting the instability and the imperfection in our environment and in what we create
- Identifying sources of stability and focusing on what will not change (paradoxical approach)

## ADJUSTMENT

### The managerial levers

#### ð **Correctly design/describe jobs**

A well-designed job is stimulating without being too demanding. It allows the individual to achieve his/her potential. On the contrary, a job that is poorly designed will be a source of stress. Ultimately an evaluation of stress risks using the pentagram can provide insight into new needs and allow reconfiguration of jobs, or the creation of new ones.

#### ð **Defining work hours**

Working long consecutive hours can lead to health problems that are linked to stress. The same goes for stationary work. One way to reduce risks is to guarantee reasonable work hours and to properly manage team rotations.

#### ð **Take into account the staff's quality and quantity**

In project management or when building new teams, it is particularly important to ensure that the proper number and the adequate people are selected in order to maximize team performance and the well-being of its members.

#### ð **Driving the development of the organization and managing change**

Carefully setting up good communication, and giving material support and opportunities to participate, will help reduce the level of stress during times of change. Inversely, implementing change in a way that makes the staff feel threatened, unsure and unsafe can be highly distressing.

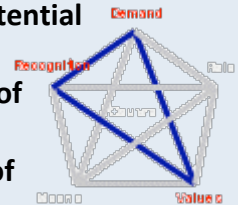
### The managerial style to adopt

- ð Communicate by generating enthusiasm
- ð Know how to be decisive in uncertain times and make sure the decisions made are the correct ones by consulting team members
- ð Support team members in their work
- ð Be present and available for team members in order to listen and communicate

## BELONGING

A sense of belonging poised between two extremes, both of which are potential sources of stress:

- ❖ Dependence on the group, which inhibits any expression of individuality, and
- ❖ Independence, which can lead to isolation and absence of social relationships.



### The impact on stress management

Create a supportive work atmosphere where all abilities are utilized to achieve better performance.

Controlled stress will help each individual to be self motivated. This is key for the organization to succeed without any additional external motivation.

### The stakes and the tension among the endpoints

It's about ensuring:

- that the organization has values that inspire team cohesion and social support, and that these values are expressed in a tangible way.
- that each individual feels supported by the team, overcoming the fear of the group and interpersonal conflicts.

What is at play:

- Collaborating with a team mindset, where a strong and recognized sense of belonging is more important than "my" position
- Encouraging individuals to achieve their personal best
- Committing to a team with common values while allowing true expression of individuality



## BELONGING

### The managerial levers

#### • Create a connection

Establish a two-way communication path between management and workers to maintain interest in being a member of the organization or the team. Implement transversal inter- and intra-team communication.

#### • Handle conflicts

Make sure that interpersonal conflicts are adequately handled. When required, use a mediator to manage interpersonal conflicts in an adequate fashion.

#### • Manage team dynamics

Use group dynamic activities, team coaching and peer groups to foster creativity and to develop new behaviors.

#### • Inform and consult professional groups

Communicate with internal consulting bodies (professional organizations, staff representatives, etc.); have these groups participate in decisions that affect them. They will benefit from having more room to maneuver. Feeling that one has or does not have a certain amount of room to maneuver is a determining factor in the level of stress.

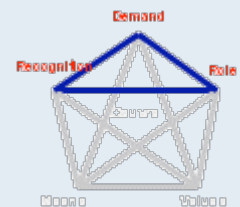
### The managerial style to adopt

- Use one's relational skills to support and revitalize.
- Analyze and manage difficult situations.
- Step back to gain perspective when analyzing interactions

## DEVELOPMENT

The right level of development between two attitudes, both of which are potential sources of stress:

- ❖ Specialization with its limits that have a tendency to "confine",
- ❖ Reaching one's growth potential which can be full of unknown.



### The impact on stress management

Create conditions where the skills required to reach the expected performance match one's growth potential

Controlling stress will allow the development of a wealth of individual skills.

### The stakes and the tension among the endpoints

It's about ensuring that:

- the organization encourages developing one's potential and that it is able to recognize and use newly acquired skills.
- each person can assume his/her role and meet the demand according to his/her potential.

What is at play:

- Looking at the performance of individuals within their specializations while identifying the need for and limits of new learning experiences
- Achieving one's full potential to improve one's quality of life at work
- Encouraging creativity, particularly in situations where resources are limited

## DEVELOPMENT

### The managerial levers

ð **Conduct development interviews**

Have team members express their wishes in terms of their skills development, and be in a position to determine the expected results in order to define clear objectives.

ð **Manage a set of talents**

Ensure that staff development remains stimulating without adding too much to the workload or aiming too high. The impression of not advancing can be particularly stressful for people who are very invested in their work. It can have negative consequences on self-esteem and cause feelings of frustration.

ð **Foresee changes in jobs and skills**

Build a forecasting management approach for jobs and skills. Identify and meet training and recruitment needs. Skills deficit is a key risk in stress management.

ð **Use coaching and mentoring** to nurture individual and team potential when difficulties arise

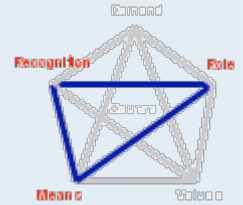
### The managerial style to adopt

- ⇒ Observe, look for potential and implement a feedback communication method,
- ⇒ Be able to support team members,
- ⇒ Use innovative processes to search for solutions.

## EFFICIENCY

A level of efficiency optimized between two environments, both of which are potential sources of stress:

- ❖ valuing uniqueness in order to encourage initiative-taking, and
- ❖ emphasizing rules and procedures which may be too restrictive.



### The impact on stress management

Creating conditions where the team's and individual productivity efforts support the goal of efficiency.

When stress is controlled, uniqueness is properly recognized while the pooling of resources is encouraged.

### The stakes and the tension among the endpoints

It's about allowing:

- ō the organization to create a framework that "provides support"; the support can be social or tangible.
- ō each individual to ensure that the newly deployed means have an impact on the organization's efficiency.
- ō the support, in terms of means and recognition, to be appropriate in the face of a changing environment.

What is at play:

- Encouraging, "being more daring" with procedures that reassure and processes that free up people (safety / rituals / automation / community rules)
- Avoiding performance killers such as: no room for error, too little risk-taking, low levels of creativity, and a sense of powerlessness against the "system"
- Getting back to essentials out of a concern for productivity, rationalization, and savings with respect to human and material resources.
- Reinforcing the team cohesion through a better distribution of jobs and a better allocation of resources.

## EFFICIENCY

### Managerial levers

#### ð **Support during reduction in means**

In the case of layoffs, if the process is handled in an open manner while offering support, the amount of stress will be reduced for those who are leaving, as well as for those who will remain.

#### ð **Managing time off**

Ensure that staff has the opportunity to take breaks, to relax and unwind. Leave for personal reasons allows team members to manage personal crises (mourning, sickness of a family member) and to better handle their stress.

#### ð **Being "attentive" to absences**

"Listen" to the soft signals stemming from absences, use statistics to evaluate risks due to stress. Implement interviews for when employees return to work to identify if any issues within the company caused the absence.

Finally, handle abusive absences. They cause additional workload and frustration for the team members who must accommodate the absence of their colleague.

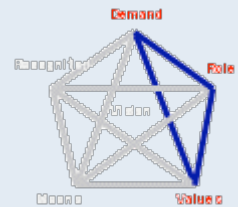
### The managerial style to adopt

- ð Confront and provide feedback in a constructive and empathic manner
- ð Define and enforce a policy, reminding employees, including managers, of the "standard"
- ð Be decisive while remaining accessible
- ð Be able to authorize breaks allowing staff to fully recharge

## COMMITMENT

An optimized level of commitment between two opposite behaviors, both of which are potential sources of stress:

- ❖ withdrawal and disengagement
- ❖ excessive dedication



### The impact on stress management

Create conditions that foster optimal engagement for each individual and thus promote self-sufficiency:

- Increase awareness and understanding of motivational factors
- Allow flexibility and choice, to either withdraw or participate

### The stakes and the tension among the endpoints

It's about allowing:

- ð each individual to take his/her proper position, and take on all aspects of his/her task or role
- ð each individual to be in harmony with the organization knowing that s/he can rely on his/her abilities and skills and those of others. This prevents attempts to take over other people's positions
- ð the values of the organization to be congruent with those of the employees and those embodied by the roles

What is at play:

- Making each individual responsible for his/her level of commitment
- Accepting that one's decisions have to be made alone
- Harmonizing one's values with those of the company, and showing it by managing one's emotions/decisions
- Aligning one's words and actions ("walk the talk")

## COMMITMENT

### The managerial levers

ð **Align job descriptions with skills and values**

Make sure when writing job descriptions to align them with skills, motivating factors and the candidate's potential

ð **Encourage diversity and equal treatment**

Ensure that diverse backgrounds, experiences and talents are recognized, valued, and treated with respect and equality. This contributes to good working relationships and a positive working environment.

ð **Manage company transitions, departures and arrivals, ends of cycles.**

Review the alignment of values with new roles or demands.

Implement processes that are fair and respectful for people

Listen for soft signals regarding sources of discontent. For example: gathering information during exit interviews. This can identify potential risk factors for stress and provide insight for treating them.

### The managerial style to adopt

ð Be able to create a job description and to conduct a recruitment interview to evaluate the skills, potential, and motivation of the candidates

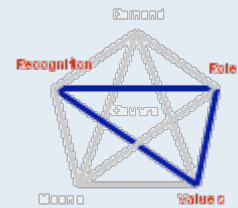
ð Support fellow employees in their work and in the development of their potential

ð Be inclusive, make first contact, take the pulse of the organization and gather each individual's point of view

## MOTIVATION

A level of motivation optimally balanced between two behaviors, both of which are potential sources of stress:

- ❖ Overbearing influence can develop into a feeling of being controlled
- ❖ Continuous challenge can lead to exhaustion or a loss of direction



### The impact on stress management

Ensure that values and roles contribute to the development of each individual's best performance.

Stress, properly managed, can help motivate all individuals to work towards a common goal or a group project.

### The stakes and the tension among the endpoints

It's about ensuring:

- ⇒ that the effort demanded of each individual be recognized in a way that is relevant for his/her values
- ⇒ the creation of a framework which fosters autonomy
- ⇒ that the recognition provided has value for each individual

What is at play:

- Encouraging clarification of the organization's goals and the role of each individual (avoid assigning blame, secrets, leaving things unsaid, working in silos)
- Maintaining motivation levels through feedback on actions taken, so there is effective follow up
- Making the means of recognition consistent and aligned with goals and values



## MOTIVATION

### Managerial levers

#### ð **Design incentive programs**

Rewarding individuals in this context is not limited to financial compensation; it also includes recognition and positive factual feedback.

It is important that every individual makes the connection between recognition, actions and values.

#### ð **Support the adoption of the organization's values**

Actions aiming at the adoption of the vision, culture, values of the company have the potential to reduce stress, even if done for other reasons.

An organization will significantly reduce the probability of stressful situations for its personnel if it promotes a culture of openness, support, strong values of respect, freedom, initiative, and delegation and if its vision is clearly identified and communicated

#### ð **Promote a culture of performance**

Implement performance reviews: regular evaluation interviews so that each individual has clear objectives and feedback about his/her actions. Identify the gaps between the expected and delivered contributions. Implement corrective actions.

Motivate all individuals to perform at a higher level by allowing them to participate in decisions, to increase their decision-making authority, to participate in the choice of work methods and coworkers, etc.

Avoid organizational measures designed to reduce individual independence.

#### ð **Manage HR policies geared to optimize the work/life balance**

Flexible work, adjustable work hours, part time work, concierge service, telecommuting...

Policies that support employees when they face stressful issues outside the workplace directly contribute to managing stress in a positive way.

Ensure that each individual maintains a balanced life to prevent illness linked to stress.

Provide resources for managing stressful situations.

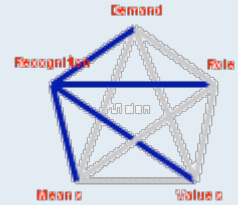
### The managerial style to adopt

- ⇒ Know how to evaluate and provide feedback
- ⇒ Create the best conditions for exchange: face to face and in peer groups
- ⇒ Know and reward: roles, missions and objectives
- ⇒ Communicate: dare to be direct – say things in a straightforward manner
- ⇒ Listen to others, be able to question one's own set beliefs, be open to others

## LEADERSHIP

**An optimal level of leadership lies between:**

- ❖ Everything depends on me, from cradle to grave, which can be a source of enjoyment and also of stress
- ❖ Everything depends on others, causing loss of initiative, which can be a source of stress



### The impact on stress management

Create an environment where co-creation and interdependence are present: individual contributors are in control *and* are working with others.

In other words, ensure that for each individual the larger group has meaning and is being utilized.

### The stakes and the tension among the endpoints

It's about allowing:

- ø Each individual to take on his/her own responsibilities, and be independent by overcoming issues of missing information and poor communication
- ø Managers to develop efficiency and a sense of responsibility in their employees
- ø The organization to increase productivity by using all available means of production, resources, values, and existing functions.

What is at play:

- Interdependence: putting people at the heart of the system
- Dare to be direct: each individual should be aware that s/he can make a significant difference.
- Be open to others while encouraging transversal exchanges
- Encourage communication to avoid frustration and loss of motivation among staff

**LEADERSHIP**

**Managerial levers**

**ð Implement a communication policy:**

Communication is one of the pillars of this intervention whether it is between the management and staff (vertical communication), or among teams (horizontal communication).

**ð Design programs that facilitate independence:**

- Clarify roles, objectives and tasks. Provide specific support via coaching and mentoring.  
Ensure that the highest performing individuals do not carry the workload for lower performing individual. This is a source of frustration.
- Reward the highest performers for their excellence, so they feel valued and thus gain self-esteem from such recognition.

**ð Implement managerial development training:**

**- Develop leadership programs**

In an organization, the leaders communicate a tone, a culture and values to all staff members. They "model" behavior in how to manage, and provide examples of healthy behavior: seeking support, maintaining good physical condition, knowing when to take a brake.

**- Stress management training**

Certain stress management programs include targeted programs for managers. Neither HR, nor health services, nor the safety division can observe or measure in real time the problems linked to stress. This task ultimately belongs to managers who have regular contact with their teams. They are ideally situated to detect warning signs, and to deal with them before more serious problems develop.

**- Prevent harassment and intimidation**

Much research has established the link between stress and harassment. Policies and training programs that reduce such behaviors can therefore help reduce stress.

**- Establish focus groups**

These groups, such as peer groups and co-development groups, help anticipate the organization's development and the needed change in order to ensure the long-term stability of the company.

## LEADERSHIP

### The managerial style to adopt

- ǒ Leadership is having a clear vision of the organization, its objectives and its mission, whatever the size and scope of "organization".
- ǒ Know how to provide meaning
- ǒ Promote change, learn how to operate differently, find new solutions
- ǒ Be alert and courageous, be exemplary in terms of attitudes and behaviors
- ǒ Create cohesiveness and motivate: know how to build relationships and alliances
- ǒ Follow through with staff to obtain results: support the growth of each individual's potential. Know how to be both open and direct. Know how to monitor the 5 endpoints of the pentagram in order to hear soft signals.