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# How to create a less-stressful workplace

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Michele Benedetto Neitz, Golden Gate University

Imagine leading a staff meeting at your company. A deadline is looming and your staff is behind schedule.

But instead of feeling stressed, your fellow employees feel relaxed. Instead of exhibiting a sense of being overwhelmed, your colleagues are showing signs of being energized. As a result, everyone in the room is focused and attentive, and the work is ultimately completed well.

Is this fantasyland or could your company actually create this scenario?

In our competitive environment, businesses are constantly seeking ways to become more efficient, more productive, and more profitable. Ironically, the stress associated with our fast-paced economy may be causing employees to lose their abilities to work productively.

Neuroscience conclusively proves that stress negatively affects the brain's cognitive functions. There is an evolutionary survival-based purpose to this "flight-or-fight" phenomenon. When a saber-toothed tiger is running toward you, your brain's response is to run first and think second.

In today's world, in which the "tiger" is more likely to attack in the form of a scathing email from your boss about your recent project, our bodies don't know the difference. Once that flight-or-fight response kicks in, your brain will limit nonessential skills, including judgment, learning and memory. Your brain will raise your heart rate, slow your digestion, and pump adrenaline through your body to enable you to "run away."

Unfortunately, it is impractical to literally run away from our computers. As an alternative, many stressed workers try to carry on their tasks with their cognitive function suffering and their bodies in a highly reactive mode. Even low-level stress, if ongoing, can negatively impact our immune systems and our cognitive abilities.

So how stressed are your employees? In the case of lawyers, the answer is usually "very highly stressed." The profession of law is notoriously demanding, and attorney rates of substance abuse, depression and suicide are traditionally higher than the general population.

Acknowledging this problem, law schools and legal professionals are turning to meditation training and relaxation responses to reduce anxiety.

[Judi Cohen](#), an attorney who founded the mindfulness training company Warrior One in the Bay Area, began teaching mindfulness to law students who “were looking for ways to lower the stress, not to change law school culture but to engage with it in smarter, saner ways.” Cohen explained that she “knew from personal experience and from the science that mindfulness lowers stress and helps us learn to engage in difficult situations and with difficult people with grace and wisdom.”

[Jeena Cho](#), a bankruptcy attorney who also teaches mindfulness in San Francisco, created a national “Mindful Lawyers” listserv to “to create a space where lawyers can share what we're never allowed to discuss — the difficulties of being a lawyer.” Cho is the author of the upcoming ABA book, “The Anxious Lawyer,” and stated that lawyers on the listserv “talk about a different paradigm of practicing” in order to “cultivate a practice that's joyful and aligned with their highest purpose.”

Even corporate law firms are teaching their employees to work in less-stressed conditions. In late June, I attended a workshop at law firm Reed Smith in downtown San Francisco. Led by psychologist Christina Pascarzi of the San Francisco Stress and Anxiety Center, the firm’s associates learned various tools, including mindfulness meditation, to reduce feelings of stress.

Reed Smith Associate Tyler Layton explained that mindfulness is a useful stress management tool for law firm associates: “As we become aware of the biological basis for stress and its impacts, especially the fact that it can prevent someone from thinking clearly and problem solving, implementing these techniques is not only good personally but also for the firm.”

Layton noted that the firm and its clients benefit when stressed or anxious associates can “get back to a productive state of mind sooner, rather than wasting time in an unproductive state of mind.”

In a perfect (and relaxing) world, all workplaces could afford to subsidize stress reduction programs for their employees. In reality, however, most businesses are seeking to cut employee-related costs. Hence, below are several cost-effective ways business leaders can encourage employees to perform work tasks in a more restful — and therefore cognitively efficient — manner:

1. **One minute pause:** Start each meeting with one minute of silence. Employees can take that moment to clear their heads of the many tasks waiting for them outside of the room and turn their attention to the purpose of the immediate meeting.
2. **Increase civility in your workplace:** Since stress decreases employee productivity, company management has an interest in reducing stressful exchanges between employees. Creating a culture of civility and professionalism in your office will lower the likelihood of your employees working in a flight-or-fight mode. Ask your human resources staff to intervene when needed to ensure employee civility.
3. **Train employees to be in-house stress-reduction experts:** Google trained its employees interested in yoga to be yoga teachers. Is there an employee or two in your office who practices yoga, meditation, or other forms of stress reduction? If so, consider subsidizing the training of that individual to become an instructor — with the understanding that the instructor will then provide free stress reduction classes to your employees.

You can try it now: Take a minute to pause before moving on to your next task.