



STRESS RESPONSE & COMPLIANCE IN THE ORGANIZATION

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Did you notice that after we have well defined goals, a good strategy, policy documents and procedures and seemingly the road is paved, that is when we actually get stuck? Why is that?.

One possible reason is, that we - as humans - are not a sophisticated computer. And, contrary to the notion that has prevailed for years, we do not make rational decisions based on logic and effectiveness. In fact we are more driven by emotion, fear and a **survival oriented nervous system**, programmed to fight or flight or freeze whenever something new is presented to us.

Basically, for our nervous system, innovation equals risk, and it will do everything to protect us from threats. Even if the risk factor, is just a conversation with the manager or organizational efficiency program. When you work in compliance or other branches that facilitate constant demands to comply with changes you, among other things, are constantly stressing the workers nervous system, in different severity according to their personal 'programming'.

In our already stressful reality, when one stress triggering event follows the other, creating and maintaining drive & motivation are necessary in order to move forward and not get stuck.

After working in compliance and researching the subject (as a lawyer as well as regulation manager) for more than 16 years, It is my understanding, that stress management is a very big player in facilitating an effective compliance program in the organization, and that is why in this article I am briefly reviewing the linkage between the stress effect - 'fight and flight', and the tendency to compliance.

For more information, lectures or personal training - please contact me.



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Daily life is accompanied by demands, incidences and a continuous need to decide and maneuver stressful situations. Stress factors can be as simple as: what to wear to an important job interview, standing in a traffic jam or waiting in line for a blood test or more significant as: receiving feedback from your boss, meeting a stressful deadline, or waiting for the results of a significant test.

Dr. Hans Selye, the father of stress theory, defined stress as a nonspecific response of the body to any demand made on it. [1] The demand can pose a threat, a challenge or any kind of change (positive and negative) that requires the body to adapt, and the response is automatic and immediate. While positive stress can be an effective motive for getting better results, when it comes to negative stress it leads to an automatic "fight or flight response", which provides the body with strength and energy to fight or escape danger.

The stress response – FIGHT- FLIGHT-FREZZE

The "stress response" is the classic fight-or-flight response. When we experience stress from internal or external circumstances, an automatic survival response originating in our nervous system is triggered. Originally, this response was programmed to keep us safe from real threats of life or death, similar to an early warning system or a genetically programmed internal alarm. Today, in modern life, one stressful **thought** is sufficient for our entire system to enter into a state of war, with all that this implies.

Physiologically the "fight-flight" process, which was discovered in 1915 by Walter Cannon, a Harvard physiologist, is an incredibly complex reaction, programmed in our brains in an ingenious coding that includes interactions between many organs and systems in the body.

It originates in the hypothalamus, which sits above the brainstem and is part of the autonomic nervous system, responsible for involuntary body functions such as breathing, blood pressure, heartbeat, vasodilation, etc. Involved in the stress response are: 1. The sympathetic nervous system (a subsystem in the autonomic nervous system) that stimulates the body to respond to what it perceives as a threat or danger and acts to generate a chain of immediate reactions. 2. The parasympathetic nervous system, whose function is to calm the body after the stressful trigger is no longer.

When we experience continuous stress, the sympathetic nervous system inhibits the actions of the parasympathetic nervous system, which as a result does not produce the desired relaxation in the body. This means - a never-ending stress situation with all the physical and cognitive consequences derived from it.

[1] HANS SELYE, Stress and the General Adaptation Syndrome Br Med J. 1950 Jun 17; 1(4667): 1383–1392. doi: 10.1136/bmj.1.4667.1383



Consequences of a stress response

When we are in a stressful situation, stress hormones move rapidly in the bloodstream in different parts of the body, sending us a signal to fight or flight. The body takes more oxygen, the breathing accelerates and the heart beats two to three times faster than the normal speed. Sugars and fats which produce energy are released from storage into the bloodstream. Our senses, sight and hearing, are strengthened to help us become more alert in detecting threat factors. The blood flow is directed to activities and organs necessary for survival.

The documented effects of stress are among other things: heart disease, heart attacks, eating disorders, strokes, insomnia, ulcers, accident propensity, cancer, decreased immunity, chronic headaches, diabetes, depression, drug use, chronic pain, irritable bowel syndrome and chronic fatigue, hypertension, asthma, back pain, various skin disorders, and a significant impact on our cognitive abilities and aptitude to make decisions in diverse situations.

At work, too much stress will lead us to experience: overwhelmed, frightened. We will experience decrease in concentration and memory, indecision, circular or empty thoughts, confusion, loss of sense of humor; Emotional sensations like anxiety, irritability, depression, anger, frustration, worry, impatience, or anger. We may resent our manager, be upset about the management, the organizational culture, everything.

In constant stress, we are also more inclined to look for threats everywhere, and be less willing to cooperate with others. We do not share our opinions or needs with others and new challenges, procedures and changes are seen as threats. We experience difficulty completing tasks on time; Difficulty in analyzing complicated situations and arranging information; We have reduced interpersonal communication skills and our cognitive performance and decision making are negatively affected.[2]

And when we return to our homes, after a long day at work, we experience frustration & disappointment from our performance. Complete loss of energy. We will not have the mental or physical strength to do anything energetic. We will feel physical pain, sadness & have no self-compassion. Worst of all we will refrain from telling others that we feel, because 'what good can it do'. So we will be impatient with our family and friends and we will sabotage our relationships.

The "fight or flight" response when we are not fighting lions

The fight or flight response has one goal – to keep us alive in the face of an immediate and imminent threat. It is a survival mechanism at the most basic level, when we see a lion about to attack us then it is its role to set in motion a system aimed to protect us, from pain and death. And its programming works like a Swiss clock. As soon as we see, experience or even think about danger, our internal switch activates a sequence of physiological occurrences, which makes us faster and stronger physically—to run away quickly or fight.

[2] Margaret Lynch Ranieri's "Beyond Stress Management Workshop"



What happens when this switch is activated when there are no lions and tigers and bears, OH MY?

When the switch activates the "fight or flight" response because of a stressful work schedule, a conversation that we need to have, a meeting that we are preparing for, a false alarm is created in the body that triggers a chain reaction and the physiological changes range from unpleasant, disturbing to paralyzing. When any task in the modern world (saturated with stressful situations) triggers the fight or flight response, it means that we are on a constant roller coaster of physiological horrors that leaves us less emotionally stable and less efficient. The longer we are on the train, the more serious the physiological horror is, and we are constantly looking after and preparing for threats and dangers. Logical thinking is replaced, by a stressed and afraid brain & nervous system.

Compliance and stress

Stanley Milgram, a psychologist at Yale University, carried out one of the most recognized experiments in the world in the context of obedience, in order to understand why people obeyed the instructions of the Nazi regime. Milgram's experiment, was carried out in 1962 and published in 1974. Volunteers were recruited, to perform memory tests on respondents, not knowing that they were questioning players and they were not part of the experiment, they were the experiment.

They were guided to give electric shocks for any mistake on an increasing degree, between 150 and 450 volts. The electric shocks were not real, but the questioners did not know it. The purpose of the study was to examine whether and how many electric shocks they would give the respondents.

The findings of the study were: 65% of the participants gave the players the highest electric shock – 450 volts. Despite the fact that the respondents (the actors), begged, asked and urged not to electrocute them and to stop the experiment after an electric shock of 150 volts. The study also found that none of the participants stopped electrocuting the respondents before giving them a 300-volt electric shock. [3]

It was argued that before the experiment, Milgram and psychiatrists in the field believed that, apart from a few subjects with sadistic tendencies, no one would agree to give such a strong electric shock. Therefore, the results of the experiment surprised the scientific world. The conclusion of the study was that people tend to obey instructions from authority figures and will perform negative actions, even if this is completely contrary to their moral judgment. In addition, it has been argued that those with a high level of obedience, are aware of their difficulty in dealing with pressure in the presence of authority. This experiment served as the opening shot for other experiments in the field, which showed the same findings.

[3] THOMAS SLAS The Milgram Paradigm After 35 Years, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 1999, 29, 5, pp. 955-978, Copyright © 1999 by V. H. Winston & Son, Inc. All rights reserved.



Gudjonsson, a researcher in the field of compliance in the behavioral aspect, conducted his research many years after Milgram. He argued that there are two main components to compliance: 1. The desire to please and 2. The need to defend the self-esteem in the presence of others and avoid conflict, stress and confrontations, especially with those who are perceived as having authority.

As part of the study, Gudjonsson built a test to check the inclination toward compliance. The test focused on police interviews following an assumption, that respondents have a growing tendency to comply to the demands of an authoritative interviewer and to act in accordance with instructions. The study examines the claim that there are people with compliant personalities tendency, who can be easily persuaded under pressure to commit an offense. One result of the study was: **The Gudjonsson Compliance Scale**, a psychological measure of compliance, which measures persuasion for the use of legal proceedings in examining witnesses and juries.

The conclusions corresponded to the conclusions of the Milgram experiment - compliance is related to the human need to evade, reject and repress stressful situations, it is a means of pretending that the situation is okay, while avoiding achieving personal goals and objectives or doing what one really wants to do.

In a later study, which was carried out on 212 men and 212 women, they combined Gudjonsson's compliance test with Rosenberg's self-esteem test and a test on coping abilities in stressful situations, with the aim of examining which personality traits would predict compliance.[1] The findings revealed two main indicators of a high level of compliance- low self-esteem and coping with stressful situations through denial.

People with low self-esteem, will tend to comply more, due to their strong desire to get along and please their environment, and their need to avoid friction. In addition, fundamental differences arose between the sexes and it was found that women are more compliant, and use different coping mechanisms to cope with stressful situations. Later studies referred to the tendency to BEFRIEND, which is a behavioral response to stress (as opposed to a response of the nervous system), which is expressed by pleasing and comforting the risky factors (aggressors) as a means to ensure survival. This response which is adaptive and more relevant to women, is explained in the tribal context and will be discussed in future papers.

The findings of these studies provide interesting information in the context of compliance: most people will tend to comply to authority figures, even in when it is an action that goes against their moral values; Compliance is associated with the traits of low self-esteem and coping with stressful situations by repression; The need to avoid friction with authority officials is a significant motive that encourages compliance; People with pleasing personalities and low self-esteem, are stressed by demands from those in authority and therefore they will tend to be compliant in order not to handle the stress; Women tend to be more compliant than men, given their personality structure.



How can you use this information in the organization, as well as in life?

We all experience situations of stress on a day-to-day basis. Whether it is at work or in personal life, we are constantly bombarded with threats to our nervous system whose function is to keep us alive and protect us from danger. These pressures put us in complex and sometimes destructive situations, in personal life and in the workplace, and lead us to poor performance in every aspect of our lives.

When stressed, our cognitive ability decreases, as well as our ability to make effective decisions while we tend to look for swift solutions (under the light of the lamp). And this happens inside a stressed and anxious mind constantly searches for threats, responds inefficiently and sabotages personal and organizational goals.

Examining the patterns of behavior in situations of stress vis-à-vis authority figures, led me to divide the patterns of behavior in this context into four : the pleaser, the rebel, the procrastinator and the CEO. All but the CEO, respond ineffectively to the pressures around them. They are not necessarily aware of the reason why they are people-pleasers or self-sabotage, or experience a never-ending stagnation and, as a result, they endure frustrating situations, over and over again.

In the working environment, the need for autonomy (which is defined as one of the basic human needs for intrinsic motivation) is in opposite sides of the need to conform and act in compliance with the organization and its guidelines. The understanding that the tendency to comply in the absence of autonomy increases in stressful situations, should raise a red flag to organizations that are interested in engaged employees whose goal is not only to comply with the guidelines, but also to experience satisfaction and belonging and to safeguard the interests of the organization over time.

If we want efficient, satisfied employees who act in accordance with the guidelines over time and make decisions from a place of power and not from a place of fear and anxiety, reducing stress by understanding and neutralizing the "stress response" and encouraging a "relaxation response" has been shown to have considerable benefits, both for individuals and organizations.

These benefits include:

- Improved mood and performance. Constant stress management and relaxation improve mood, sleep, sexual performance, memory, and work performance. When the overall mood improves, so does performance at work.
- Improved health. Stress management is invaluable in both the prevention and treatment of diseases. Continuous stress is harmful to health and prevents healing. Relaxation can speed up recovery time and even prevent heart attacks and other cardiac events.



- Creating a strong immune system. Regular management of stress reduces the stress hormones in the bloodstream and strengthens the body's ability to fight diseases.
- Reduce costs and productivity. Managing stress in organizations reduces absences, reduces health care costs, increases job satisfaction, improves productivity, and increases company loyalty. Employees see stress management training as something that will benefit them 24 hours a day, not just while working.

Today it is no longer possible to ignore the mind-body connection between our thoughts (that generate stress and fear) and the results we get. Whether it is in personal life or in the workplace, the stress response can arise from only one thought, which triggers a chain of physiological events that impairs cognitive, physical, personal and interpersonal abilities and skills.

As a lawyer in the field of regulation and compliance for about 20 years, I am of the opinion that compliance with regulation is much more than understanding regulation procedures and policy documents. It is by better understanding of human behaviour, and raising awareness to what motivates us to do what we do, or to stay stuck, that we can facilitate working by the roles and liking it.

You can have the motivation to comply with your own roles (and reach your personal goals) and in the workplace, when you strive to understand who you are, how to manage stress in life and in the organizational culture.

To better understand the 4 types, and how we can all become the CEO in our lives, contact me at: zoharmor.comfly@gmail.com

ABOUT THE WRITER - ZOHAR MOR ADV

Academic, lawyer, lecturer and writer. Has a B.A, in Statistics (performance research) and Political Science, a LL.B in Law and a master's in Law LL.M with honors. Worked in compliance, regulation and risk management for the last 16 years. These days focus on behavioral compliance - the understanding of compliant decision making, and increasing motivation using the mind-body connection of stress response in organizations and life.

For information about lectures and personal training in an integrated method (NLP, EFT, CBT) you can contact me.