

Navigating the complexity of the agency environment and performance

 By [Janine Lloyd](#)

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Those of us working today all have some type of stress in our jobs and those in PR, marketing and communications know all too well the toll it can take on productivity if left unmanaged. As a business owner managing stress levels in employees has to be a number one priority today. As a professional myself I know that managing and dealing with your own internal stress is something that can be mastered to the extent that you can embrace challenges and stress with ease.

So, what are the typical stress situations we find ourselves facing in the industry and how can we survive these?

Balancing agency complexity with delivery

In the agency environment employees are juggling multiple clients and multiple tasks every minute or second of the day. Besides doing the tasks they need to, to get the job done, they are faced with a constant stream of emails, WhatsApps, social media messages, meetings and reporting that is essential to the job. On top of this are the relationships they have with colleagues and bosses, which may be positive, but can also place further stress on their individual performance. This fast-paced and complex environment places enormous pressure on individuals who are the engine room of the agency, as they struggle to multitask effectively and balance getting results with the communication they receive and need to provide to those who need it (clients and management). At the top, agency directors are faced with even further business pressures such as increased competition, managing client service and expectations, cost management, revenue generation and resource issues.



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The stress on people

The biggest mistake agencies can make is to treat employees as machines. There is a further complexity here and that is the environment we live in. The South African landscape which we know is rife with economic uncertainty, high crime, racial issues, political instability and negativity does have an impact on every person today. This means that we are all on stress alert - high stress alert - every single day. As the people steering agencies, we have to know how to navigate this complexity and lead our employees positively to get the results we want in our businesses.

What do employees really need?

All employees today, including Millennials, want these simple things:

- To have work-life balance.
- To do meaningful work that they can do well in.
- To be acknowledged.
- To be treated fairly.

Essentially my own belief is that we have taken the caring out of business, due to the enormous pressures placed on us as leaders. This is purely driven by one thing only: clients today expect better results, quicker and faster than ever before. So we expect this from all our employees! And so we should. Even I have found myself slide into negativity about employees who take too much time to get things done. This is because the speed we are expected to deliver has increased exponentially over the years.

However we seem to be stuck in a management style, from clients and our leaders that is focused on negative reinforcement and extreme micromanagement. This style drives a spirit of fear in employees which has a compounding effect. Already faced with their own internal stress, they are constantly bombarded with negative feedback, which increases their stress to the point that eventually they will make mistakes. The ultimate result is low self-esteem and even less productivity.

But there is good news!

There is one effective leadership strategy that every agency can implement that will make all the difference.

It's in the culture

Whether you have an established agency or a relatively new one, the culture of your agency is what will keep your employees happy and loyal to the business. Your culture is tied into the values of your business – that is what you believe to be most important in your business which translates to your people, clients and suppliers. Often you may not know what your culture is if you have not documented it, but if you look around and examine the business closely you will find that the culture has developed by the way you do business, how you and your managers lead and how your employees go about their jobs.

Your culture makes your company a great place to work. Even in times of great pressure and stress, employees will rally together to do their best, because they love the culture and where they work.

Remember I said, people want work-life balance, to do meaningful work that they can do well in, to be acknowledged and to be treated fairly. And at its core this means they want to be happy. Happy people mean increased productivity, creativity and innovation – the essence of every business.

Sharing our experience

I would like to share the culture of my business which achieved incredible results at my previous agency which I ran for 17 years and now in my new venture at PR Expert where I had the opportunity to share this with a team of 26 UJ students on a recent project.

Our culture: To be exceptional, proactive, responsible, quality, leaders.

Exceptional

Our vision is to work towards exceptional work for our clients and the business. Each person brings something different, something exceptional to the table. Yet we are all equal in one way: each of us has the courage to reach for our dreams, to succeed in our careers, to be the best that we can be! At our company every person goes through a strengths process so that we know what they are really good at and where they need help. We will do what we can together to strengthen certain skills, but as time progresses, we will fit the right person with the right role, so they can excel and succeed.

We ask all our employees to be willing to stretch themselves, and will give them all the support they need to grow as people and in their jobs. Our culture is to build up confidence in every person who works with us, including employees at our clients that we work with daily.

We encourage openness and sharing of fears, stumbling blocks, challenges and work together to overcome these. Managers are given coaching and mentoring on how to get the best out of each individual – because, after all, everyone has their own unique beliefs and attitudes.

We ask all employees to be honest with themselves and us. If they need help, they just need to ask; if they have made a mistake, they are to be open with us – we will never judge or crap on someone who has made an honest mistake. We expect people to keep their commitments, strive towards being exceptional and follow through on all tasks. And we have firm processes for dealing with people who just don't make it, but may be better suited elsewhere. We will coach and counsel them into finding another opportunity best suited to their talents.

Proactive

We give people the tools to plan ahead, prioritise and be smart with their time, all with the end goal of doing things ahead of deadline. Our culture is to exceed expectations at every turn and delight our customers – clients, media, partners. We encourage people to use their initiative even if it is not exactly how we would have done it, sometimes new people have taught us different ways of doing things and we are open to changing processes if they produce better results.

We show our employees how to learn from their mistakes and adjust their approach in a positive way, so they can learn to become more proactive. We instill a culture of seizing opportunities as they arise, so that they are not wasted and to never give up.

Responsible

We encourage every person to take responsibility for their own life. We see their responsibility in their career with us as a responsibility to themselves. We show them that being responsible is a way of life not just an expectation from us as a business. We teach this simple principle:

- If you care about your work, you will be proud of your work and achievements and this will drive your happiness levels! The same way if you care about your family, friends and community you will be proud of what you do for them and this will drive your happiness.

We encourage people and teams to be accountable for the quality and timeliness of their work; to own the obligation to deliver results even though they may have delegated a task; and most of all to be willing to take ownership of their failures. We find that those who are able to stand up and say “I messed up” are more willing to change what they did, because they are motivated internally to change their approach. They are also supported and not ridiculed when they do so. None of us are perfect and we will never get others to change if we tell them to change, they have to learn through their own AHA moments.

Our one rule we tell all employees is never to play the blame game! We show them how blame delays taking corrective action and stops learning, and how fault is backward-looking, but responsibility is forward looking. This simple culture rule has changed employees lives, not only at work, but in their personal lives too.

Quality

We encourage people to view quality as a habit not an act. We instill, at all levels, a culture of approaching work with the attitude of producing a high quality result. We stress that this is a process they will get better at the more they practice. From creative concepts, writing, reporting, verbal communications, presentations, planning, pitches and so on, we strive for a high quality of standard.

For junior staff we implement a quality check process, always giving constructive feedback and giving them the opportunity to correct their own work. We provide templates, training and sharing of high quality work to give them a yardstick to strive for and measure their own success on.

Leader

We teach others to manage from the inside out. Every person is a manager of themselves. Every manager is a manager of themselves first, then they are able to better manage others to success. They are given tools to lead ranging from how to delegate, listening skills, conflict management, how to banish procrastination, stress management and so on.

Our culture is collaborative and feedback oriented. We learn and share our work. We acknowledge great work as soon as we see it. Even juniors are encouraged to give positive feedback to anyone in the company when they see something great or have been treated with kindness or respect.

We celebrate successes often and regularly. We acknowledge each other at every team meeting, even for something as simple as thanking a person for getting a significant task in on time, or for caring to ask about their child who was ill. I believe that we don't acknowledge enough, even in our personal lives and by making this a habit in the workplace, people will take this into their personal lives which can transform families.

In my next article I will look at other key leadership strategies that can be implemented beyond culture through effective mentoring; training and resource management.

ABOUT JANINE LLOYD

Janine Lloyd is the CEO of PR Expert, an entrepreneur and motivational speaker. With 27 years in leadership and entrepreneurship in the communications, marketing and branding fields, Janine is known for being an inspiring leader, razor-sharp strategist and successful entrepreneur. She has led her business to achieve the highest accolades in the industry winning multiple awards and recently PR Expert won the PRISM Campaign of the Year for 2016.

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