

REDUCING TEACHER STRESS

7 Strategies School Leaders Can Implement Immediately

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achieve a great sense of satisfaction.

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Reducing teacher stress is not only of benefit to the teachers themselves. The reduction in stress also reduces absenteeism and therefore reduces school costs and increases classroom effectiveness. Fewer supply teacher days saves money and puts the regular class teacher in front of their students, more often.

Reducing Teacher Stress Improves Student Outcomes

Schools that work purposefully toward enhancing the mental, social, emotional and physical health of both their staff and students frequently report the results that principals want to hear:

- higher academic achievement from students
- increased staff satisfaction and decreased staff turnover
- greater efficiency
- development of a positive school and ultimately
- development of a school-community culture that promotes and enhances student growth

ASCD, 2010, *“Aligning Health and Education”*

Stressed and unhappy teachers don't put in the discretionary effort that we rely on in schools. Disgruntled, stressed teachers are at risk of disengaging and *‘going through the motions’*. Whilst they may physically turn up to school they either conserve their energy and do *‘just what is required’* or put their energies into whinging and complaining.

In difficult, challenging times, when significant changes are being implemented, accountability has increased and schools are expected to do more with less, teacher stress is rising and is EVEN more important.

One of the key indicators is the employee's discretionary effort. Where staff morale is good, teachers view their work as worthwhile, personally satisfying and appreciated. In schools with good staff morale they are more likely to put in optimal effort and *‘go the extra yard’*.

Where teachers are stressed and not feeling satisfied they disengage and do the minimum that is required of them. Disengaged teachers have a negative impact through both their limited contribution and the damaging impact they have on the morale of other staff in the school. Teacher stress can be contagious.

Full engagement represents an alignment of maximum job satisfaction (*“I like my work and do it well”*) with maximum job contribution (*“I help achieve my school's goals”*).



Engaged staff are both WILLING and ABLE to operate at a higher level, to give more at work, to give maximum contribution to achieving the school's goals. Engaged employees not only understand what needs to be done but also care enough to apply discretionary effort. Teachers who are fully engaged are committed to their work and achieve a great sense of satisfaction. But it's not something that you can mandate or delegate, it isn't easy!

Researchers identified the following as the essential factors that reduce teacher stress. This may be a useful checklist for leaders in schools to reflect on structures within the school and how they may be contributing to staff morale.

- Input into decision-making that directly affects curriculum, instruction and school climate
- Recognition and appreciation of teacher and student achievement
- A school climate that reflects a feeling of unity, pride, cooperation, acceptance of differences, and security
- Good communication
- Opportunities for meaningful professional growth
- Clear, shared goals
- Strong, supportive leadership
- Quality time for collegial interaction: planning, educational dialog, decision-making, problem solving
- Well-maintained physical environment
- Good human relations, both within school and between school and community
- Encouragement and reward for risk taking, innovation, and good teaching
- Attention to professional needs such as salary, benefits, etc
- Attention to personal needs such as stress management, good health, and social interaction

Wentworth (1990)



7 Strategies school leaders can implement to reduce teacher stress

Ask staff what annoys them and take action (or at least listen)

The fastest way to boost staff morale in schools is to find out what their concerns are, be seen to listen, empathise and address whatever can be fixed. The fastest way to improve school morale is to find out what annoys or frustrates staff and fix it. Being seen to be genuinely interested and concerned about staff morale is half the battle. Undertaking a staff survey is a great strategy for boosting staff morale but only if you genuinely listen and act on the input provided by staff. Seek input from staff that you can act on to make improvements and overcome barriers that are getting in their way.

This process doesn't need to be complex. You could set up your own survey or simply ask staff to complete an exit slip at the end of your staff meeting asking them to identify three issues that are having a negative affect on them achieving their potential. Collate their responses, prioritise and implement wherever you can.

At *SurveyMySchool* we have developed an interactive Staff survey specifically for this purpose. If staff express dissatisfaction they are prompted to provide further specific information about the issue that is frustrating them and having an impact on their morale. This information can then be addressed or at least acknowledged by school leaders. Contact us to set up your staff survey.

Taking the time to check-in with an employee to ensure that they are on the same page and that the leader is doing all that they can to support him or her demonstrate their your commitment to the employee's success. It strengthens the work relationship, which is a key engagement driver.





Fine Tune Communication

The bigger the school the more important that communication is. Email, meetings, visibility and timeliness are keys. Getting the balance right in our communication with staff is essential. If we don't provide enough information and aren't transparent enough with our staff they will fill the void. Conspiracy theories, suspicion and mistrust tend to prevail in these situations.

If we over-communicate and provide TOO much detail we waste valuable time and energy. This is seen as not valuing them by "wasting our time with pointless meetings".

Emails have their advantages but can also create unrealistic expectations and an avalanche of unnecessary emails too. The tone of an email can also be misinterpreted. Just because you pressed send doesn't mean they understand. Establish email protocols so staff aren't be swamped with an overflowing IN box or implied expectations of unrealistic response timelines.

It is essential that we communicate effectively, using the most appropriate format. Meetings are important opportunities but aren't ALWAYS the best way. Ensure a meeting is the best strategy for sharing the information – if the meeting is a one-way presentation there may be a better strategy for conveying that information. Always start and finish meetings on time and summarise outcomes at the conclusion of the meeting. No one has time to waste on meetings that don't achieve anything.

In making decisions be clear about whether you are consulting ("The decision hasn't been made and we are seeking input") or informing ("The decision has been made and this is why we have made this decision"). No one likes what they perceive to be *'pretend'* consultation.

It is essential that we monitor our communication strategies to ensure they are both effective and efficient.

[Reducing Teacher Stress – 7 Strategies school leaders can immediately implement](http://www.HappySchool.com.au)
www.HappySchool.com.au

Increase Visibility, Praise and Make decisions based on your Superstars

Look for opportunities to be seen as much as possible. “Management by walking around” enhances morale, especially if you cheerfully greet staff members and pause to chat with them as one human being to another.

Make a special effort to provide SPECIFIC praise to your great people throughout the school. This doesn't have to be a public awards ceremony on assembly. Look out for staff who are doing a great job and give them a ONE MINUTE PRAISING.

According to leadership guru Ken Blanchard, a ONE MINUTE PRAISING should be...

Immediate and Specific – tell them exactly what they did right as soon as possible AND **State Your Feelings** – tell them how it makes you feel when you see them doing that

Blanchard advises NOT to wait for perfect behaviour before praising. Just as we do with young children, we need to catch people doing things approximately right. Whilst we want things to be exactly right we need to acknowledge progress towards goals. What we need to do with staff (as we already know with students) is accentuate the positive and catch people doing something right, even if it's only approximately right.

One minute praisings are a great habit to get into – it not only boosts staff morale but helps move towards the way things should be done by providing encouraging feedback. Start today and see if you can make one minute praisings part of your repertoire.

Seek the input of your Superstars when making decisions about priorities and new initiatives. If they aren't keen then it's probably not a great idea and may need to be revisited. Many school leaders focus too much of their attention on disillusioned staff.

We believe that in most schools 20% of staff are keen and enthusiastic about change initiatives (often these are our early adopters), 20% of staff will complain about EVERY change initiative (these are our 'devil's advocates or whingers) and the other 60% of staff will either get on board with the change initiative or resist, depending on how well leaders communicate the compelling reason why the change is necessary.



Drip Feed Small Doses of Self-Help

Providing short articles of timely advice on a regular basis equips staff with skills and knowledge to cope with challenging situations, build a positive, growth mindset and increase the satisfaction they gain from working in schools. The *Happy School* articles were specifically designed for this purpose. Each of the weekly articles is designed as an easy to read, single page of professional development. This drip feed approach accumulates over the year and helps equip staff to cope with challenges. Become a Happy School member and share the weekly articles with your staff.

Provide flexible professional development options

Professional development should be a positive event that supports staff and helps them be more effective. However a one-size-fits all approach can result in some staff attending professional development that is not relevant to them. Making professional development 'compulsory' or 'obligatory' adds a negative connotation.

Review Timelines and Bureaucracy

It is worthwhile reviewing the processes for collecting of data and school administrative procedures to identify opportunities for streamlining or cutting red tape. A working party with this brief is usually over subscribed.

Small Things Matter

Reducing teacher stress is achieved one action at a time. It is the cumulative affect of many small actions that build staff morale and reduce teacher stress. Many leaders in schools try to boost staff morale through one off 'events'. Splashing out on a big event in an attempt to 'buy' staff morale is a waste of valuable resources.

Morale is built through small, thoughtful actions. The old story of building deposits in the emotional bank account is certainly true. Taking time for people, cutting them some slack when they need it and showing that you care about them as both staff members and as people are vital.

It is when times are tough that reputations are built. Staff don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

Look for opportunities to show appreciation to staff. Little things count!

A heart shaped chocolate or a rose on Valentines day, afternoon tea before a staff meeting, a hand written note of appreciation, asking after their welfare if they have been off sick...you don't need big flashy events.

Wherever possible cut them some slack – cancel the staff meeting on the week of parent interviews, cover a playground duty for someone who has *'gone above and beyond'*. Your actions show you care.

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