

Bracing for the Fall

By Vivian Tang

September is here and with calendars filling up with meetings, business trips, and a number of ambitious plans and objectives to advance, September just may be the most stressful month of the year for employees in Canada.

"Many of our clients express that September is a month of stress both professionally and personally. The sudden change in pace from summer vacation back to a catch up and rush period before deadlines can quickly drain one's energy," notes Steve Crane of the Human Performance Institute Canada.

However, stress may not be completely bad. In fact, a recent study by a team of psychologists examining survey results of 3,000 people in the UK about their attitude to stress found that nearly half of those interviewed felt they worked more effectively when under pressure. Forty seven percent reported that they focused better when they were under stress.

"As a leader, skillfully managing one's energy by pushing oneself to systematically increase capacity through stress and learning how to quickly recover is the key."

Crane cites a report from the Leadership Pulse research project which has been tracking trends in workplace performance, energy management, and leadership since 2003. "The research has found that there is a strong link between leader energy levels and employee energy levels. However, across a sample of over 900 executives, almost all reported their current energy levels as being below their zone of optimal productivity."

"To avoid this, employers need to be attentive to their own energy levels as well as monitor the energy level at the workplace. By acknowledging the affects of one's own energy level on others and encouraging conversations around the team on energy challenges, leaders can help the team adjust to the increased stress sooner."

Crane provides the following tips to help leaders manage their energy and overcome the "back to work" stress:

- **Balance is an especially critical area for modeling behavior.** If you never take time off for yourself, you can't expect your team to do any different -and you won't have the energy for full engagement yourself.
- **Encourage physical fitness.** On-site fitness centres may be a great way to demonstrate a devotion to physical fitness, but simple measures such as subsidies for health club memberships, or simply allowing longer lunch hours for regular exercise will facilitate the nurturing of healthy employees.
- **Favor energy enhancing foods.** Make sure the food and drink available at the workplace include nutritious, energy-sparking choices. For example, include whole grains, high protein, and fresh fruit among snack choices-they help sustain energy.
- **Support work-life balance.** Engagement isn't confined to the workplace. An employee who isn't fully involved in family life won't be optimally involved at work. Find a way to allow your employees to get to their kids' soccer games and recitals. A formal policy for flexible working hours can be a good way to accomplish this, but that's not always possible. You may sometimes need to do some creative scheduling to get your people to their important events.