

## **Stressful situation**

### **UT-Arlington professor helps firms deal with recession's human toll**

**BY O.K. CARTER**

October 05, 2009

For someone who's constantly being dropped in the middle of extremely stressful situations – and asked to fix them – James Quick seems extraordinarily calm.

Maybe that's because stress, particularly organizational stress, really is his world. Quick, currently the Goolsby Distinguished Professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, has focused on the world of stress during the past three decades, with emphasis on its presence in corporations and the military.

He's written, or co-written, books such as *Organizational Behavior: Science, The Real World and You*; *Stress and Strain*; and, most recently, *Managing Executive Health* – the latter a review of personal and corporate strategies for sustained success despite the presence of highly stressful and difficult situations. *Stress and Strain*, an overview of the psychophysiology of stress, has become a multiple language quick-study reference that shows up not only in classrooms but in the hands of virtually every high-level human resources director in the country.

"I think [*Stress and Strain*] became a sort of Reader's Digest quick read for the world of stress," Quick says jokingly from his UT-Arlington office.

But books like *Stress and Strain*, and more than 100 other published papers on organizational behavior – plus a knack for putting conditions in understandable terms – have given Quick an international reputation. The consequence has been that the UT-Arlington professor shows up regularly for commentary on national TV shows like *Today* or as a quote source in publications like *Fortune* or *Business Week*.

And it hasn't hurt his consulting efforts either.

Last week found him busily preparing for a pair of speaking gigs, one in Wyoming and another in England. Quick was to be the headliner for those sessions, his talk subjects raising some eyebrows:

\*There was "The Dark Side of Management."

\*And there was “Is It Worth Dying For?”

Just to satisfy curiosity, “Dark Side” focuses on the isolation and expectations that CEOs often face, a potential psychological dark pit that in some instances can result in extreme emotional stress and resultant strange behavior, often to the detriment of both the CEO and their company’s employees.

The “Is It Worth Dying For” message is simple enough. It isn’t.

“Today’s recessionary environment creates a real challenge because ultimately the leader’s responsibility is for the whole organization – its well being and survival,” Quick said. “The realities of that process in a downsizing world often means companies and corporations can’t keep everybody they’ve got. That does create real tension but there are better and worse ways to terminate people.”

Quick also recognizes that stress in the competitive world of business is inevitable, and – to a degree – necessary. Every organization requires a certain level of what might be termed creative tension. The trick is in knowing how much.

“The issue is complicated because the reality is that a certain amount of stress – a sort of emotional challenge – is both healthy and essential for task accomplishment,” Quick said. “The artistic question is what is the right amount of stress in the work environment necessary if we want to challenge people enough to bring out the best in them, but which if overdone can be harmful. Providing both challenge and support for people is a critical issue of balancing the stress equation.”

And there’s another complication, Quick said, people don’t react to stress in the same way. Tolerance for stress varies wildly.

Quick and his brother, a physician, many years ago developed a now well-known preventive management model for dealing with stress, which, though simplistic, is now widely used by many corporations and the military. It basically calls for developing techniques to determine which employees are being stressed to dangerous levels, and for progressive intervention to help those individuals.

“Not all the problems in a highly stressful situation – say a corporate downsizing – are psychological,” Quick said. “There can also be financial problems or other issues, or a combination of problems. Those needed to be identified and worked through on an individual basis.”

Though this “We care” message seems simple, Quick said, it sends a “huge message” about how important every individual in an organization is.

“The thing I’ve seen the most in the 33 years I’ve been studying this topic has been an explosion of awareness of how stress plays an important role in our sickness, disabilities and even premature death,” Quick said. “How we react to stress is a major component of our health and vitality.”

Quick’s ideas also have caught the eye of the military. He was recently appointed by the secretary of defense to a Psychological Health Subcommittee that will focus on treatment of problems soldiers returning from combat experience, the most common being post-traumatic stress disorder, among others.

He’ll also be conducting a study of almost 1,000 military members to carefully determine which personality qualities – including the ability to cope with stress – contribute most directly to leadership capabilities.

okcarter@bizpress.net

---

Online at: <http://www.fwbusinesspress.com/display.php?id=11130>

---

*Questions & Comments [FortWorthBusinessPress.com](http://www.fwbusinesspress.com). Last updated on 03-May-2007.  
Copyright © 2009 by Fort Worth Business Press.*