

# PRO ATTITUDE

## The Neuro-Competitive Advantage

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By Don Joseph Goewey and Jonathan L. Colton

*"You cannot hope to build a better world without improving the individuals."*

Madame Marie Curie

"I wanted my people stressed," a former president of a Fortune-500 company recently told me. "If I thought someone was losing their focus, feeling overwhelmed, or complaining about being overloaded I turned up the heat. I pushed the deadline up or added more to their plate. It usually snapped them out of it." At the same time, he admitted, he was plagued by interpersonal dysfunction with his senior management team.

The atmosphere at meetings was tense and competitive, generating an emotionally negative energy in the room. People seemed to have little regard for one another and showed little interest in helping each other succeed. Eventually this leader brought in an organizational psychologist to try to shift the attitudinal climate. The consultant helped people understand their emotional reactivity, restrictive thinking, and limited self-interest as a mind locked into survival mode. A mind chronically under stress is prone to imagine threats and enemies around every corner. It represents a brain habituated to *fight or flight*, which can produce a reactive human being. Fortunately, with effort, we can train the brain to change modes. It takes a fundamental shift in attitude,



which is what the consultant facilitated for members of the team. He helped them to see the world and each other differently in ways that afforded them greater calm and clarity for a wider perspective. As people on the management team made the shift, personally and interpersonally, the old negativity and dysfunction subsided and an attitudinal climate took hold that was more open and positive. In short, there was less stress in the room and, as a result, more was accomplished. They went on to grow one of America's great companies.

### **Stress and Fear Are Poor Motivational Strategies**

Using stress to motivate people is a poor, but common management strategy. *Even leaders who do not subscribe to this approach may not always realize how often they use fear and stress to push for results.* Neurologically, stress as a motivator literally pushes people in the opposite direction: towards dysfunction. A brain under stress, when confronted with yet another problem, can start to shut down and individuals actually begin to work less, not harder. The emotional brain hijacks the neocortex, the seat of everything we regard as intelligence. In plain English, this means frustration, anxiety, and pessimism overwhelm logic, memory, and reward-based motivation, and people give up prematurely.

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Stress and fear as a motivational strategy actually attacks the best in people and taxes their greatest strength, which is a brain functioning at optimum. There is nothing more debilitating to the higher brain than stress. The point that we only use a portion of our brain refers, in part, to a brain toxic with stress hormones. It is called *neurotoxicity*.

Neurologically, chronic stress thwarts performance because it debilitates higher brain function, while strengthening the brain's fear center, called the amygdala, which activates fight or flight.<sup>1</sup> A brain chronically under stress is incapable of sustained peak performance, constructive teamwork, leadership that generates resonance and coherence,

or genuinely positive customer service that builds loyalty. As you will see, stress is the trouble underlying most of the problems that frustrate companies. It is why many change efforts falter and values fail to take root. By definition fight or flight is a defensive posture. Psychologically, it generates resistance, anxiety, and emotional negativity, all of which blocks the open-mindedness and values that are necessary in coping with change. At the intellectual level, chronic stress dampens memory, attention span, and decision-making. The greater the stress the greater the likelihood people will choose risky alternatives or make premature decisions. Immediate survival goals will replace long-range considerations. People will be less tolerant of ambiguity and creative thinking will decline. There will be a tendency toward aggression and escape behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

Stress impairs the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter involved in the regulation of mood.<sup>3</sup> Changes in the serotonin levels in the brain can make us feel depressed or anxious. A decrease in serotonin activity also significantly decreases our capacity for cooperation. Chronic stress also activates the right prefrontal cortex, which makes us emotionally negative, thwarting our capacity to forge constructive relationships. These problems, when translated into business concerns, signal dysfunctional teamwork. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that facilitates pleasure. When dopamine levels are out of balance because of chronic stress, activities we formerly enjoyed cease to give us pleasure. Work becomes lackluster and morale plummets. Repeated stress reactions drain the body of energy, leaving people listless and fatigued. By mid day, we can feel physically and emotionally spent. A build up of stress hormones, combined with falling serotonin levels, keep people from achieving deeper levels of restful sleep. Instead of returning to work replenished, people have less to give than the day before.

### **The Problem Is Pervasive**

This neurological profile is hardly the picture of an agile, innovative, peak-performing employee. How pervasive is this profile? It is alarmingly widespread.

- 4 out of 10 experience high stress chronically;
- Another 4 experience it periodically. <sup>4</sup>
- Only 47 percent of Americans say they are satisfied with their jobs, a sizable drop from the 61 percent who expressed satisfaction in a similar survey twenty years ago. <sup>5</sup>

This means that typically four of ten people on a given team are neurologically impaired because of stress, and periodically, the number climbs to as high as eight. Stress-related absenteeism and turnover is likely to add to the team's problems. This leaves two people who are relatively stress-free and functional. Might it be possible that the attitudinal climate of this team will eventually wear them down as well?

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## The Biology of Stress

Most of us think of stress as an external factor exerting unwanted pressure. When we feel extremely stressed, the world can appear to close in on us and it can seem we are helpless in the face of it. The fact is, for modern human beings, stress is largely internal. It is psychologically induced, meaning stress is happening *in us* far more than happening *to us*. Biologically, stress is fear. Some form of fear is present when the brain launches a stress reaction. There are two kinds of fear that activate a stress reaction in human beings. The first is called *primal fear*. Primal fear was our constant ally when we shared the untamed world with wild animals or rival tribes. Primal fear is an involuntary stress reaction to something that is actually out there, such as a dangerous enemy. It is pure emotional reactivity that generates a powerful, albeit brief, physiological response to



meet a real and present danger. It is one of evolution's neurological wonders. It is the force that gives a mouse a chance against a cat and a cat a chance against a dog. It is the physiological surge that sustains a warrior under siege, even when wounded.

However, a stress reaction for modern human beings is rarely the result of primal fear working for our survival in the face of real danger. Stress reactions, for most of us, are predominantly an emotional reaction to a *perceived threat* to our sense of safety. Richard Lazarus of UC Berkeley, a pioneer in stress research, breaks it into two parts: the stressor and the stress. Lazarus defines a stressor simply as any kind of demand or change that emerges that we determine must be met. At the same time, there is uncertainty about whether we have the internal or external resources to deal with the demand. Stress is when the demand or change overwhelms us. It is the edgy interplay of fearful thinking and emotions that engulfs the mind with the perception of threat. Robert Sapolsky of Stanford University states: "We human beings are smart enough to generate all sorts of stressful events purely in our heads. We can experience wildly strong emotions, provoking our bodies into an accompanying uproar, all linked to mere thoughts."

When we are stressed, the amygdala, which is the brain's fear center, kicks into threat mode. This can cause us to misperceive people and events in unfortunate ways. A friend recently faced a difficult meeting with her board of directors, where she was scheduled to present a progress report. The outcomes were not as promising as she had hoped. She was especially concerned about one member of the board whom she described as "mean-spirited." It was a strong label to put on the person, but when we are under stress we tend to assume the worse and make harsh judgments. During her presentation, her "adversary" made a critical remark in what she perceived as an insulting tone of voice. Her fear level immediately escalated, exciting the amygdala to full alert. Stress hormones flooded her bloodstream and her heart rate accelerated. To the

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amygdala, her “adversary” was akin to a wild animal. A few moments later, the “adversary” leaned over and whispered into the ear of the person next to him, who nodded her head in agreement. My friend’s amygdala went into *attentional bias for threat*, meaning fight or flight was widening its wary eye to keep track of this second person. Two days later my friend took this second person off of her “terrorist list”, when she learned that what had been shared was simply the score of that day’s baseball game.

When I tell this story, people say, “It happens all the time.” It does because we operate in a climate of fear that our minds have made. The brain simply cannot tell the difference between real and present dangers and mind-made emergencies that fear fabricates. It cannot distinguish primal fear from psychological fear. When either is present, the brain sets off a stress reaction, expending physical and mental resources, taking the brain in the opposite direction of peak performance. We are thrown into “survival mode.” Chronic stress is a fearful attitude that, neurologically, represents a brain wired for survival.

Given that stress and fear are inextricably linked, it follows that a stressed workforce represents an attitudinal climate of fear in an organization. It also follows that this stressed workforce is not functioning at its highest potential because it is neurologically impaired. It is not as decisive, as enthusiastic, as agile, and as creative as it could be if the work environment was relatively stress-free. To some, the idea that we could actually create a stress-free climate at work may seem preposterous. It is well within reach. The rewards of working toward an attitudinal climate of calm are substantial — for the bottom-line as well as tapping unrealized human potential. The cost of not making this shift is also substantial.

## **The Cost of Stress**

The American Stress Institute reports that stress accounts for 40% of turnover in companies today. People become lackluster about a job they once enjoyed and even fought to get. Organizational Psychology can now isolate a phenomenon called *presenteeism*, defined as employees who show up for work but are not productively engaged. The cause, in 69% of

cases, is burnout. In one study, the price tag for presenteeism in an organization of 15,000 employees was estimated at \$88 million, or 9% of that year's payroll. This amounted to nearly \$6,000 per employee.<sup>6</sup> Prolonged bouts of stress also make people ill and cause them to miss work. Stress as a reason for unscheduled absenteeism now accounts for 19 percent of all unscheduled absences.<sup>7</sup> It has more than tripled since 1995.

The persistent and expensive issue of absenteeism costs small companies, on average, \$60,000 per year and larger companies approximately \$3,600,000 per year.<sup>8</sup> On the health care front, 22 percent of group health insurance costs are stress related, for a cost of nearly \$400 billion a year.<sup>9</sup> One out of every three dollars spent in Workers Compensation claims are attributable to stress.<sup>10</sup> Over the long haul, stress can become life threatening. As things stand at present, the medical odds are that most of us will live long enough to succumb to a serious stress-related disease.

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On the upside, the return for solving work stress can be substantial. Fewer people out sick, reduced presenteeism, and a decline in turnover cannot help but improve the bottom-line. There is a 2% increase in profits for every 1% reduction in turnover.<sup>11</sup> Heart patients, who attend stress management programs, have 42% lower health care costs<sup>12</sup> and companies that offer effective stress management programs experience a 50% reduction in health plan utilization.<sup>13</sup> The potential upside is substantial enough to be taken seriously.

Given the pervasiveness of stress in the workplace, it follows that the prevailing attitudinal climate in the average company is one of fear. For two decades we have had the data on the negative impact of stress on people and the bottom-line. In the last decade this data

has been juxtaposed to the mounting evidence, routinely published in business and science journals, that a positive attitudinal climate improves individual and organizational performance in every way that counts. It is now well established through research that the conscious attitude most commonly referred to as “emotional intelligence” predicts a successful leader more than IQ. It is also true at the macro level. In studies, a positive attitudinal climate in a company accounts for 20% - 30% of business and predicts high profits and growth, 75% of the time.<sup>14</sup> For every one percent improvement in the service climate there is a two percent increase in revenue. At the level of top management, the more positive the overall mood, the more managers cooperate and the better the company performs.<sup>15</sup> The data is unmistakably clear that sustained growth and profits now depend on organizations shifting an attitudinal climate of fear and stress. An organization’s creative intelligence, strategic resolve, tactical agility, and resilience depend on cultivating and strengthening a climate of fearless self-confidence.

### **Why Have Companies Failed To Get The Message?**

Some leaders still believe that stress motivates people. It is a common mistake to equate a sense of urgency with people being stressed. Couple with this the fact that stress is so commonplace, it is largely outside of people’s awareness. Thus, no one is actively pursuing a solution for stress once and for all. Rather, we simply give into the blur it produces.



We allow stress to rob us of the brainpower that creates the strategy that attains excellence. We let it dampen the optimism that makes the impossible probable. We permit it to erode the sense of fulfillment that makes work joyful. We live with the disharmony and dysfunction it makes of teamwork. We try to manage around the impact of stress on the bottom-line, as opposed to focusing on growth.

In short, we take stress for granted. It is cloudy weather we hardly notice until it grows into a storm. For most people stress is in the background, chronically present. It is what Rollo May calls "a nameless and formless uneasiness." Stress has come to mean fear for one's safety, health, and livelihood. It represents the loss of the assumption that the world is a safe place. It produces a low level of fatigue, irritability, waves of pessimism, background malaise, emotional upsets, memory lapses, declining mental acuity that incrementally drain off ambition, vision, joy in the work we do, and our zest for life. We don't often realize that even low levels of stress occurring chronically taxes major systems in the body and creates a chemical state of toxicity in our brains. It can make having our best day, everyday seem impossible.

Another reason we have failed to get the message is people chronically under stress see the problem of stress as unsolvable. Their hopelessness is actually a side effect of chronic stress reactions. Many of the companies that have tried to address stress have had disappointing results with stress management. Until recently, the only remedies were coping mechanisms but no real solutions.

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Breakthroughs in neuroscience have changed all that. We now have a new way of framing the problem that, for the first time, illuminates a practical solution that appears to be easy for people to grasp, simple for them to apply, quickly assimilate, and easily incorporate into a company's value system to sustain the shift in climate.

### **What Is The Solution?**

The solution is neurological. As strange as it may sound, it involves a process that rewires the brain. This is accomplished through a fundamental shift in attitude. The technical term for this is *neuroplasticity*. Neuroplasticity refers to a change of mind that changes our

experience and, when practiced consistently, changes brain structure. Literally, it is how the brain restructures to free the mind from an autopilot wired for survival.

Stress, fear, and survival mode all speak to an absence of peace. Thus, logically the shift we need to make psychologically is from fear to peace. The reports on gains in neurological capacity achieved by cultivating a dynamically peaceful attitude could not be better. In the last eight years, studies on classic mindful approaches to sustaining inner peace achieved higher brain function than had ever been reported in the research literature. It appears that there is no greater gain in brain function than the psychological shift from fear to peace, from stress to calm. The inner experience of peace is, of course, the polar opposite of stress and fear. Peace as an attitude is fundamentally fearless. It represents the psychological strength to function calmly, which is to say *fearlessly*, in a world that is complex, changing, and often difficult to navigate. An attitude of calm allows us to move through adversity, losses, and even failure, without being depleted, feeling defeated, or losing perspective. Peace is the psychological resilience that transcends circumstances. It makes us larger than circumstances by virtue of the fact that we are not afraid of the situation. Our state of calm allows us to be open to all the available information, as we correct our course. Think of a leader, teacher or mentor in your life that demonstrated a dynamically peaceful attitude. Weren't they calm and dignified in their dealings, and composed even in trying situations? Their quality of presence, though not overbearing, was nonetheless powerful. They seemed to possess the very essence of intelligence and wisdom. They were circumspect and open as they considered a problem and always seemed to be decisive at the right time in the right way. Their quiet mind made them good listeners and when they communicated they were clear, direct, and to the point, and always respectful. They could see people's strengths and create opportunities for people to use them. Who wouldn't want to work for/with someone fitting this profile?

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## How Powerful Does A *Dynamically Peaceful Attitude* Make Our Brains?

A dynamically peaceful attitude establishes the conditions for optimal brain function. Peace of mind represents the brain's healthiest ecosystem, allowing us to tap an exponential intelligence with the mental focus to direct it toward creative ends. The research on individuals who are adept at sustaining dynamically peaceful states of mind reports that gamma wave activity, signaling higher mental acuity, steadily increases. This means we make better decisions, detect errors more easily, think more strategically, and solve problems better. <sup>16</sup>

There is greater activity in the left prefrontal cortex, the seat of positive emotion, neutralizing the emotional negativity stress generates in the right prefrontal cortex. <sup>17</sup>

Equally, there are stronger connections from the frontal regions to the brain's emotional center, which is the pathway by



which higher thought can control destructive emotions. <sup>18</sup> GABA fibers, which are inhibitory neurotransmitters, project down to the amygdala and enable fearful responses to be calmed. All this translates into greater composure and clarity, a more optimistic outlook, and the interpersonal strength to create positive relationships. The lower limbic regions become stimulated enough so life has meaning, but not too stimulated that we become flooded. This translates into higher morale, greater enthusiasm, and higher motivation.

There is greater activation in two brain networks, called the right insula and caudate, that underlies empathy and caring. We are able to consider and sense the mental perspective of another person. We achieve what is called "attuned communication," which enables us to accurately read and respond to others' states of mind. The stronger these neural systems become the better we are at sales, customer service, and teamwork. We attain greater "response flexibility," which is the opposite of a knee-jerk reaction. Response flexibility

enables us to pause before acting and inhibits rash impulses, giving us enough time to reflect on our various options in choosing our response. There is greater intuitive capacity. Neural networks surrounding the intestines and heart send information of what we are sensing in a situation to generate what we commonly refer to as “gut feeling” and “heart.” This means we can think on our feet and cut through problems when thinking becomes circular. We also read people’s expressions and intonations accurately and sense the atmosphere in a room. Finally, the capacity to think of the larger good is enhanced, enabling us to act on pro-social ideas. People create companies that are not only built to last but are also built to serve.

All these neurological characteristics converge to create personal power. Such a person is poised for peak performance and excellence. If you were to assemble ten such people into a project team, would this not bode well for synergy? In a company full of such people, would this not translate into a competitive advantage? We think the answer to these questions is an emphatic “yes.”

In a 2003 study, a mindful practice promoting an attitude of peace was introduced in the workplace; similar changes occurred in a group of employees who were anything but peak performers. The study focused on stressed workers in a high-pressure biotech business. Over the course of two months, these people practiced elements of a peaceful attitude for three hours a week.<sup>19</sup> Prior to the study, the job performance of the subjects was considered lackluster. The subjects were dissatisfied with their jobs, unhappy with the company, and reported high levels of stress. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* and *Primal Leadership*, reported in the New York Times that partway through the eight-week process things began to improve dramatically. “Simultaneously, (employees’) moods improved; they reported feeling engaged again in their work, more energized and less anxious.”<sup>20</sup> As individuals changed, the attitudinal climate of the group changed, until at some point they all shared a similar mindset. They had developed a new value system that was basically positive and peaceful, resulting in improved performance. The change in attitude was also documented neurologically, with f-MRI scans, indicating a

concomitant change in brain structure. Their brains had rewired to sustain the improved attitude.

## **The Neuro-Competitive Advantage**

The neurological basis of success and failure in business, so far, is very compelling. We believe that business leaders around the world will be well versed in neuroscience by the end of the decade. They will be applying it to generate the organizational climate conducive to higher brain function in order to gain a “neuro-competitive advantage” in their market.

## **A Model For Attaining The Neuro-Competitive Advantage**

The process of transcending stress and shifting an attitudinal climate of fear to tap brainpower is simpler than we think; it is also achievable in a relatively short period of time. It involves three steps.

### 1. Awareness

The first step is awareness. Transcending stress involves bringing our patterns of distress into greater awareness. We cannot change a condition we do not understand. Often people are not aware of the degree to which they are stressed. We get worked up over a traffic jam that threatens to make us late for an appointment. Two hours later, we quake with frustration when our computer freezes. Driving home, we badger ourselves with negative self-talk over a mistake we made. We tend to dismiss these reactions as everyday stress, as just another irritating day in the modern world. But as we have seen, when these reactions become a chronic feature, we pay a price cognitively, emotionally, and physically that cuts into the bottom-line.

Awareness relaxes stressful patterns. As mentioned, stress represents the way our brain has been wired. It is a kind of auto-pilot and simply being aware of the anxious thoughts and

stressful emotions it produces keeps the reactive pattern from escalating further. We can use some of the approaches athletes use to mentally prepare for competition. We can learn to connect stress to fear, dismantle that fear, and to make different choices. We can learn to identify our own particular pattern of stress -- or "stress-fingerprint" -- in terms of its mental, emotional, physical, and attitudinal valence. We can sense changes in our body that signal an emerging stress reaction. We can recognize emerging emotional reactions that can grow into dark moods or that tend to escalate into emotional attacks or defensiveness. We can learn to hear ourselves when we are thinking fearful, negative, stressful thoughts. In short, we can get to know our "stressful selves" better. Simply awareness, exercised over the course of a couple weeks, we can locate the auto-pilot for stress and turn it off.

As stress reactions subside, we become aware, more and more, of the flip side of stress, which is the feeling of being *at the top of your game*.. This is the experience of flow or what some call being in the "Zone". It is making things happen and achieving optimal results. It is stretching ourselves, pushing the limits, effortlessly connecting the dots, making progress, and surprising ourselves with the results we achieve. The very fact that we can identify this experience is proof that we are capable of this rewarding experience and translating it into higher achievement. We can deconstruct this experience, as we did with stress, to understand the attitude that produced it. Invariably, what we will find as we investigate the "zone" is a dynamically peaceful state of mind.

## 2. Practice

The question becomes, how can we sustain this optimal experience, so it becomes our everyday experience? How can we achieve our best day every day? This involves the second step in this model, which is practice. Once we have identified the mindset that gives us what we want, we then need to practice it. This requires a formal practice that consistently generates the shift from fear to peace. Specific processes in humanistic psychology, cognitive behavioral therapy, and positive psychology can be integrated to

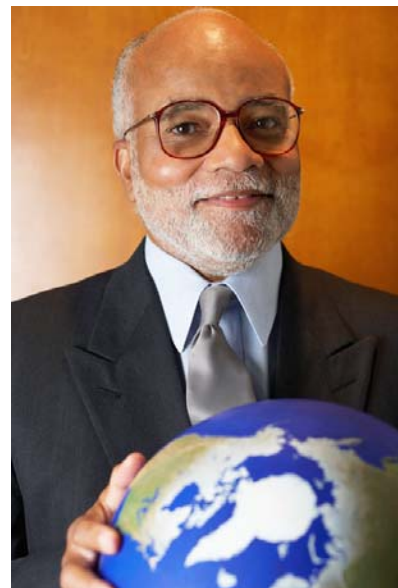
create a set of tools that people can use on the spot to make this positive shift in consciousness. These tools, or defined set of choices, gradually strengthen neural connections and intact brain structures until eventually an attitude of peace becomes second nature. Instead of practicing peace, *we are at peace*. It is not an anomaly that happens rarely. It is our attitude toward life and life's problems, and the place to which we return in order to correct a bad choice. It is the capacity to let go of a fearful thought before it proliferates, or the courage to ride a strong wave of fear on receiving bad news without acting on it or exacerbating it with worry.

### 3. Extension

Once we have made the internal shift in outlook, it naturally follows to extend it interpersonally to achieve greater coherence and resonance in our relationships. This involves a kind of fearlessness to be authentic. We are more open about our feelings, beliefs, and agendas. We are not afraid to admit our mistakes or our flaws and weaknesses. We are more forgiving. We work for clear, honest and respectful communication. We are assertive when we need to be without becoming aggressive. It is a fundamental shift toward a positive regard for one another and an attitude of strength finding. It is an attitudinal climate of openness that builds interpersonal strength and trust.

#### **The Goal**

The goal is a fully functioning human being, who can contribute the full measure of his or her talents, knowledge, and experience. The science is clear: a person who cultivates a dynamically peaceful attitude functions more fully. They have greater access to their innate intelligence and the capacity to increase it. They are interpersonally resonant, able to be more authentic, and capable of living what Aristotle defined as "the good life." For Aristotle, the good life is a state of flourishing.



It is living well and doing well. Aristotle defined it as a happy life but he was also clear to point out that the good life is not merely feeling happy or amused. Rather, the good life is the active life of functioning well in ways that are essential and unique to humans. It means being fulfilled in our work, positive and growing in our relationships, healthy in our bodies, and at peace with ourselves. By now, it should be clear that the polar opposite of the good life is a stressed life.

There are six attributes attained when a dynamically peaceful attitude is a person's way of being:

### Fearless Self-Confidence

This is the capacity to shift our mental state from anxious or depressed to a fearless engagement with whatever challenge we face. Problems, losses, and adversity do not worry, frighten, or defeat us. We rise to the occasion and, if we get knocked down, we bounce back quickly, which is another quality of this change of mind. It makes us *resilient*.

### Optimistic

We are optimistic. Our outlook is positive. We approach challenges or even difficulty with a sense of adventure. We expect things to go well. We expect everyone to win and if there are losses, we expect to learn something that will help us in the future. Optimism reflects the understanding that a positive attitude has the strength to make life work for us instead of against us.

### Aware

We are aware of the key elements that undermine a healthy attitude, which are negative thinking, critical self-talk, and reactive emotions, and harsh or unkind judgments we make about ourselves and others. We are able to interrupt these patterns of thought before they proliferate into some form of self-defeat. The more awareness we cultivate the quicker we

break the pattern, until eventually we are able to disrupt it at the point of inception, when fear raises its ugly head.

### Positive Regard for Others

Since we are not fearful, are less emotionally negative, less critical and more optimistic; it follows that this positive inner state will naturally translate into a positive regard for others. What we see in ourselves, we see in others. It is a twist on the old adage; *it takes one to see one*. Relationships will grow in a constructive direction.

### Energetic

We are energetic. Repeated stress reactions are not driving us into fatigue. There is a flow to the way we work. When we focus on a project, there is a sense of being in a creative zone, especially when it stretches our ability. At the end of the day, we have energy to give to our loved ones.

### Attuned to Peace; Attuned to Happiness

We value our peace of mind and our happiness, as much as being successful at our career. A peaceful day that engenders positive encounters with people is, in large part, how we define a successful day. We value our peace of mind and happiness enough to put it at the top of our to-do list under the heading "things-to-be today."

### **The Call to Action**

We are not suggesting in this paper that an organization cultivate a passive, ineffectual style of leadership. Quite the opposite; we are suggesting a way of being powerful – as powerful as nature intended a human being to be. We are suggesting a way of recovering the cerebral strength that routinely dissolves in a flood of stress hormones. Fear and stress are emotional and cognitive overhead, an internal *resource hog* that thwarts, slows and paralyzes the very system upon which personal power rests: the brain. We are suggesting that companies focus on accessing more of this innate power by establishing the fearless

environment in which a brain thrives. We can learn to be fearless in attitude. We can learn to be fearlessly self-confident. It is the essence of stress-free. It is achieved by learning to let go of fear. We can practice not valuing the thoughts and perceptions that fear produces in our mind. By and large, fear tells lies. When you look at the facts, they are often the polar opposite of what fear tells you. Things look possible through fearless eyes. What seemed hopeless or impossible, suddenly transforms into something that is, at the very least, do-able. As our attitude shifts, exciting possibilities emerge spontaneously.

Soldiers, through training, learn to overcome fear and self-limiting behavior to achieve a higher state of personal and team performance. It is the proverbial calm under siege. A fearless state of self-confidence is the threshold to what Dr. Al Siebert has identified in his studies on survivor personality. Dr. Siebert studied people who survived some of the most difficult situations imaginable, from shark attacks to avalanches to war.<sup>21</sup> He found that an attitude of calm is the chief factor in determining who survives a life-threatening crisis. A calming attitude allows us to pay close attention to what is happening, assess what needs to be done, and to act decisively when the time comes. About ten percent of the population possesses this trait. However, Dr. Siebert asserts that it is a trait anyone can learn. Why then are we not training our corporate athletes and organizational leadership bench in becoming fearless leaders?

The challenge for leaders is to move beyond their fear and empower their teams to do the same. This requires giving up a powerful form of personal and interpersonal motivation, specifically dissonant motivation. The point is, that as a form of personal and interpersonal motivation, fear is unsustainable. This is a call to action for leaders. Stress and fear as a management style will not bring long-term positive results. The real challenge for leadership is recognizing that, while the old style may have contributed to success in the past, success through a positive attitudinal climate could have been far greater and stress-



related costs much lower. The growing evidence is too substantial to ignore. With the requisite desire, the proper tools and resolution, we can move beyond fearful motivation to succeed and grow.

## Challenge of Change

It is ironic but inevitable, that making the change in attitudinal climate must pass through a confrontation with fear. Transformational efforts disturb the economy of thought we enjoy in our normal business state. At risk are the old habits that produced the outcomes we were accustomed to seeing and the identity we formed around a management style.

Additionally, there is the momentum in a normalized business state that keeps going despite the logic of a better way. This is a perfect scenario for our psychological fear to become active. In short, some leaders will be resistant to the change. Resistance is another form of *survival mode*. Steven Pressfield, author of *The War of Art*, states, “Resistance is fear.”<sup>22</sup> Often, as we seek to instill positive change within a problem that has been habitual, resistance from within confronts us. It is no secret that “humans are creatures of habit who intensely fear the unknown.”<sup>23</sup> Fear causes us to resist change, despite the emergent evidence that a change is necessary. Such an aversion is unfortunate, however, because without change, there can be no progress.<sup>24</sup> As John Kotter and Holger Rathgeber state in their book, *Our Iceberg Is Melting*, “Handle the challenge of change well, and you prosper greatly. Handle it poorly, and you put yourself at risk”.

We cannot avoid that people habitually resist change due to a fear of ambiguity and uncertainty. Obviously, the most direct solution to this problem is helping people learn to shift the way they react to fear. When we move beyond fearful thinking, we are freed to make better, faster, safer

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take action.**

decisions, and to take action. We enter a state of high achievement, in full possession of our talents, skills and abilities. This is the zone in which individual and organizational agility transcend concept and become practice. As we have seen from the information presented in this paper, the possible return on investment is substantial. But even these gains may be just the tip of the iceberg.

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<sup>5</sup> Report of the Conference Board, February, 2007. This report is based on a representative sample of 5,000 U.S. households. The Conference Board is a non-profit, market information company and has conducted this survey since 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Information Technology, Inc. PRESENTEEISM REPORT, Stress Directions, 11/17/03. Pg 4

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