

Symptom as Metaphor

by Nancy Post, Ph.D.

In the last article, we addressed how organizational change can lead to stress. We also discussed that if organizations freely admit that dealing with change takes energy, then these organizations can learn to liberate the energy of employees during changing times. Finally, we closed by suggesting that if you feel stress at work, you are probably experiencing both emotional and physical symptoms.

Now, we'd like to offer you a perspective on symptoms which may help you to better mobilize your energy when you feel stress.

The most common response to feeling a symptom is to have a desire to eliminate it. Simply put, symptoms make you uncomfortable and you want to eradicate them as quickly as possible. If you catch a cold, for example, you will probably tolerate the symptoms until they become annoying and then you will most likely take medicine to eliminate the unpleasant sneezing, dripping nose or sore eyes. In the United States alone, sales of non-prescription medications alone exceed the gross national product of many foreign countries. We love to eliminate symptoms and we created and support an entire industry which wants to help us. In fact, one could say it is customary in our society to try to eliminate symptoms or pain as quickly as we can.

Medical practitioners, however, often seek a deeper level of understanding of illness. In addition to understanding all the details about how the symptom feels and the conditions under which it occurs, they also need to understand the basis for its occurrence. This is the case because the simple elimination of symptoms may mask an underlying cause. Then, unless the cause is addressed, the symptoms will return. Many people spend years chasing uncomfortable symptoms and suppressing them with medication before ever considering that they need to find what

underlies it. The pursuit of relief becomes a frustrating endeavor in such cases.

Take the common cold again, for example. Scientific evidence points to viruses as the causes of the common cold. Yet not all who are exposed to the same virus develop the symptoms. (My husband and I recently bore out this phenomenon by passing viruses back and forth to one another for weeks as our infant happily and healthily had a cold-free winter!)

The point here is that the virus cannot be considered the sole cause of the cold. Clearly, our immune systems were weaker such that our bodies succumbed to the virus. So another "cause" of the cold was a weaker immune system.

We can follow the puzzle further by asking, what is compromising my immune system? We know that prolonged illness and sleep deprivation depletes immunity, but recent research shows that stress directly effects immunity. In addition, we know that emotional changes which lead to prolonged experiences of fear, anger, worry, sadness or grief can lead to a loss of energy as well as compromises to immunity. So if your organization has undergone change that is stressful to you, your health may have been impaired as a result.

In short, you may be more susceptible to colds when your organization is undergoing changes. But you may have avoided the cold by building your energy.

Most people are not immune to organizational dynamics. At some point in your career you probably were deeply effected by an organizational change. Your boss may have changed, your department reorganized, your function altered, your job redefined, your skills considered inadequate or your company downsized, or worse, acquired. You may have been passed over for a raise or promotion, or your new and elevated position scared you. The

point here is that you had feelings about these changes and those feelings effected your energy and your immunity.

In general, if you can deal effectively with your feelings, you have a better chance of retaining your immunity. You can also preserve your energy so that you will be healthy as you deal with the change.

Once again, body and mind are linked in that physically active and fit people tend to be more able to avoid the pitfalls of depression than people who sit and stew with their thoughts and feelings. Proper diet also plays a huge role in sustaining (or depleting) energy, and thus can be an important variable in maintaining your health during stressful times.

So if you are feeling “stressed out” at work, take the time to notice how the stress is affecting you. What are the symptoms? Are they physical, emotional or both? How have they

effected your energy level? Then ask yourself, what is the cause of my stress and can I do anything about the cause before I address the symptoms? How can I mobilize my energy to deal with the cause of my stress? Is my current diet and exercise pattern helping me? Or should I alter what I eat and when I eat it to get maximum energy from my food? Am I exercising enough or in the right way to keep me limber, strong and flexible enough to deal with change? If not, what can I do to help myself build energy through exercise?

It’s smart business to build energy in times of change. Often times, symptoms can be messengers that give us guidance about how to conduct our lives so that we can more effectively cope. But this occurs only if we examine the causes of our symptoms and deal with them.

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