



More Employees Say Tension at Work is About Right

But for One in Three the Workplace is Just Too Laid Back

ARLINGTON, VA -- Workers seem to accept the need for some tension in their workplace, according to a nationwide telephone survey of nearly 500 employed Americans by Arlington, VA, management consultants Healthy Companies International. In fact, 41%, a plurality of the respondents, think there is "just the right amount" of tension in their place of work.

Not surprisingly, some complain of stress or anxiety with one-quarter reporting there is too much tension. One-third, however, indicated there was almost no tension where they work.

"Our study suggests most Americans understand that a productive workplace has to have a certain level of tension or energy," said Stephen Parker, Chief Commercial Officer of Healthy Companies. "Too much tension can certainly hurt employee performance just as too little motivation or engagement spells its own kind of trouble. We are heartened by the results as having just enough anxiety in the workplace could be the turning point for America to begin to regain its competitive edge."

It's hardly unusual for there to be tension in the workplace. How would you describe the tension in your workplace? (asked of those employed full or part-time)

There's almost no tension in my workplace.	33%
There's just the right amount of tension in my workplace.	41%
There's too much tension in my workplace	25%

Employee estimates of workplace tension is admittedly a subjective measure, said Parker. "But we see it as illuminating what's an otherwise elusive and key element of the productive workplace. And it seems our respondents agree."

According to Parker, a definable lack of tension does not necessarily denote a kind or calm work environment. "Any such office or factory where everyone is totally laid back tells me that leadership isn't doing its job properly and that workers are emotionally detached from the mission or strategy. Low tension can come from leaders avoiding difficult conversations, from leaders being overly idealistic or from being overly complacent about competitive realities. It may be that the management team is more interested in being loved than getting a job done well or in meeting objectives – favoring popularity over performance."

A too tense workplace, on the other hand, may mean the leadership does not respect the employees. "Even more likely, this may be a place where management just keeps demanding more and more of workers and offering less of themselves. People aren't stretched but taken to a breaking point. Or there may be a lack of clarity or confidence



around the overall goals for the organization, so that efforts look chaotic and frantic rather than intensive. The outcome is dysfunctional...distrust and unproductive.”

Parker said that leaders inevitably struggle with balancing competing values. “There’s got to be both realism and optimism as well as continual adjustments. According to two out of five respondents, a lot of managers have it about right. These would be places of work where employees do more than the minimum, where instead they exert themselves to deliver what is known as ‘discretionary effort.’ Getting it just right is what every leader ought to be striving for.”

Among the study’s other findings:

- Women were 28% more likely than men to believe there is too much tension in their workplace. Likewise, men were more likely than women, 37% to 29%, to think there is almost no tension.
- Employees earning between \$25,000 to \$50,000 were more likely than those in other salary groups to complain of tension in their workplace.
- Workers with high school education levels or less were more likely to say there is too much tension where they work.
- Older employees were somewhat more likely to report a lack of workplace tension.

The nationwide telephone survey of 492 employed Americans was conducted March 4-7, 2010 by International Communications Research, Media, PA, on behalf of Healthy Companies International, Arlington, VA. Healthy Companies conducted this research as part of its ongoing commitment to learn more about the role of leaders in producing healthy, high-performing teams, building on its earlier published work in *Just Enough Anxiety* (Published 2008 by Penguin Portfolio).

About Healthy Companies

Founded in 1988 by Bob Rosen and based in Arlington, VA, Healthy Companies International (www.healthycompanies.com) is a management consulting and research firm that helps chief executive officers and their teams build healthy, high-performance organizations. As a trusted client partner and thought leader, the firm has maintained a continuing dialogue with over 300 CEOs and developed extensive research contributing to numerous books and papers on leadership, growth, change management, communication strategy, executive coaching and performance improvement.

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