

**DIVERSITY NEW**  
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**Yvonne:** Do you think you'd be happier at work if all the difficult people were gone?

**Thomas:** Indubitably!

**Yvonne:** You are not alone.

According to a recent survey conducted by the ComPsych Corporation, 60 percent of employees report having HIGH levels of stress, experiencing extreme fatigue and feeling out of control.

Causes of that stress include people issues, heavy workloads, juggling work and personal life, and lack of job security.

**Thomas:** Wow. 60 percent.

A few years ago, several sites within the Department of Veterans Affairs participated in a multi-year project to reduce workplace stress and aggression.

An article in the September 2007 issue of the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science examines some of the lessons learned from that project.

**Yvonne:** In this edition of Diversity News, we'll take a look back at that project, and talk about some of the things that you can do to reduce the amount of stress and the types of aggression that you might be experiencing at work.

**Yvonne:** In 1998, a VA central office employee-relations-specialist realized that discrimination complaints, grievances, worker's compensation claims, and stress and workplace violence all seemed to be inter-connected.

He started talking to other people about problems related to negative workplace behavior.

These conversations led ultimately to the creation of a network of VA managers and university researchers.

That group of VA managers and academic researchers decided to put together a research project to examine stress and aggression in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In 1999, the group met several times in order to put together a research proposal.

In the following year, the group submitted their proposal to VA's three Administrations.

Eleven VA sites enrolled in the project.

From the Veterans Benefits Administration, the regional offices in Chicago, Des Moines, Milwaukee, Phoenix, and St. Paul.

From the Veterans Health Administration, the Black Hills Health Care System and the medical centers in Minneapolis and St. Cloud.

Also, the medical and regional office centers in Fargo and Sioux Falls.

From the National Cemetery Administration, the Houston National Cemetery.

The project team secured a 3-year grant from the National Science Foundation's Innovation and Change Division to fund some of their research activities and to help leverage greater VA resources.

**Thomas:** In the fall of 2000, action teams from the 11 sites met with the project team to discuss the design and administration of an aggression survey questionnaire.

The survey questionnaire had two parts:

One part of the questionnaire was derived from the 1997 One-VA employee survey.

The 96 items from That questionnaire covered such issues as employee involvement and influence, creativity and improvement, information and communication, workload and work structure, supervisory support, skill development, respect and fairness.

The other part of the aggression survey dealt specifically with workplace aggression. This part consisted of a list of 60 specific behaviors, such as "been glared at in a hostile manner" and "been given the silent treatment," with the same two questions asked about each one:

"How often have you been subjected to this behavior in the workplace over the past 12 months?"

And, "Who was most responsible for doing this to you?"

The survey also asked the degree to which the behaviors bothered the person,

if the person reported the behaviors to a supervisor or union official, and if he or she filed a formal complaint or grievance.

The action teams distributed the surveys in December 2000.

In the spring and early summer of 2001, results of the survey were shared with the facilities.

26 percent of the survey respondents indicated that they had experienced some form of aggression at work.

The top ten aggressive behaviors identified by the survey were:

Treated in a rude or disrespectful manner,

Not given the praise for which you felt entitled,

Glared at in a hostile manner,

Others delay action on matters that were important to you,

Given little or no feedback about your performance,

Given the "silent treatment,"

Others fail to give you information that you really needed,

Lied to,

Prevented from expressing yourself (for example, interrupted when speaking),  
and

Someone interfered with your work activities.

**Yvonne:** Based on the results of the aggression survey, the action teams began planning strategies to reduce aggression and stress and to improve organizational performance.

The teams conducted briefings to explain the survey's purpose and the project's objectives.

The teams also used a variety of communication methods to re-enforce their message.

These included newsletters, fliers, e-mails, and bulletin board displays.

The teams briefed employees about the results of the survey.

Not only about the overall results, but also about results specific to their individual sites.

During these presentations, team members often asked employees what THEY thought the data meant.

Several sites focused upon how the workforce lacked the opportunity to interact.

Several teams focused on ways to have employees raise problems and concerns early, or to have groups of employees from across a facility... that generally had little chance for interaction... meet informally.

Several sites focused on improving the workplace through having fun and developing a positive attitude.

The teams felt it would reduce stress in the workplace, improve interaction within groups, and encourage positive behaviors.

Because of a need to improve communications between selecting officials and employees, one action team helped implement a system for providing feedback to employees who were NOT selected for positions.

Fairness was an issue that came up at several sites. Some teams identified incentive awards programs as needing attention.

Several teams indicated that supervisors could benefit from learning more about stress and aggression, and about how to deal with workplace issues.

Several teams spent a great deal of time developing their business case for intervention and determining measures of success.

**Thomas:** The project team was able to identify four major outcomes of the workplace stress and aggression project.

First, in terms of contributions to general knowledge.

The survey questionnaire designed for the project represented the first, and a much needed, comprehensive instrument to measure all forms of aggression and their sources.

The patterns of aggressive behavior found in VA facilities were quite consistent with those reported in other contexts.

And the key work climate factors identified closely parallel core features of “high-performance work systems.”

Second, in terms of more powerful conversations.

A major project outcome involved how conversations changed and became more powerful at multiple levels in the organization.

The way that people discussed data also changed.

People who had previously relied solely on quantitative data as business measures began using qualitative data as well. And vice versa.

Third, in terms of measurable improvements to work life. Labor-management relations improved. Grievances and complaints were reduced or eliminated. And sick leave went down, as well.

And fourth, in terms of greater awareness, interest, and enthusiasm.

Prior to this project, stress and low-level aggression were not common conversational topics within VA.

The survey questionnaire items, the list of aggressive behaviors, made the project team members, the action team members, and the employees at the participating facilities aware of a wider range of aggressive actions that create workplace tensions.

Many employees who had not perceived “glaring” or “not returning phone calls” or “withholding information” as hostile acts that could escalate into formal complaints...

became involved in serious, intense, and thoughtful conversations about perceptions and intent.

**Yvonne:** More than 7,000 VA employees took part in the workplace stress and aggression project.

But that leaves more than 220 thousand of us who didn't.

So, what can we do to lower the amount of stress and aggression that we experience at work?

At least two books published in 2007 offer some insight.

One of those, a book by Robert Sutton, subtitled “Building a Civilized Workplace... and Surviving One That Isn’t” references VA’s workplace and aggression project.

As Dr. Sutton points out, every office has workers who are rude, selfish, uncivil, mean-spirited, and who really don’t seem to care who they step on.

Dr. Sutton sheds some light on how this ongoing problem ruins morale, lowers productivity, and can truly devastate an organization’s culture.

Dr. Sutton provides extensive strategies and insights into how to pinpoint and eliminate the problem... including a self-test to see if the REAL problem is YOU.

First, reframing.

That is, changing the way you see things.

Psychologists have found that if you can’t escape a source of stress, changing your mind-set about what is happening to you can help reduce the damage done.

Some useful reframing tricks include avoiding self-blame, hoping for the best but expecting the worst, and developing emotional detachment.

Look for small wins.

The ability to gain control over seemingly trivial things is a hallmark of people who survive horrible and uncontrollable events.

Research confirms that the feeling of control can have a huge impact on well-being.

Limit your exposure.

By limiting how often and how intensely you have to face dirty looks and demeaning words, you suffer less direct damage.

And anything that gains you even tiny bits of control can protect your sense of self, your spirit, and your physical health.

Build pockets of safety, support, and sanity.

Find decent people to hang out with and a safe place to hang out at.

Finally, fight and win the right small battles.

For example, respond to irate people with calmness, kindness, and respect.

That can be very disarming.

**Thomas:** Another book that came out in 2007 is by Lynne Eisaguirre, who also wrote “The Power of a Good Fight: Embracing Conflict to Drive Productivity, Creativity, and Innovation.”

Her new book is subtitled “What to do when the people you work with drive you crazy.”

As Eisaguirre points out, working with difficult people is an essential workplace skill.

A skill that can be learned, practiced, improved, and perfected.

Eisaguirre provides dozens of tricks and tips to assist in that process.

For example, analyzing who or what you find difficult.

If the person’s behavior has no impact on your individual or team performance, then you need to manage your own attitude.

Another tip... Make requests, not demands.

Eisaguirre describes what she calls the “1-2-3-Go!” process:

Step 1. Say something to the person that implies understanding or appreciation.

Step 2. Make a specific behavioral request.

Step 3. Add more appreciation and understanding.

Then, go away! Do not nag, hover, or whine.

And, most importantly, manage your own stress.

Keep your work life in balance, take care of your body and your mind, eat right, exercise, and get plenty of rest.

And set healthy limits at work.

**Thomas:** You can find more information on managing workplace conflict and confrontation on Lynne Eisaguirre’s Web site:

[www.workplacethatwork.com](http://www.workplacethatwork.com)

And more information on building a civilized workplace... and surviving one that isn't... on Bob Sutton's Web site:

[bobsutton.typepad.com](http://bobsutton.typepad.com)

**Yvonne:** And you can find more information on VA's "Stress and Aggression in the Workplace Project" on the VA Web site:

[www.va.gov/valu](http://www.va.gov/valu)

But that's all we have time for in this month's edition of Diversity News.

We certainly appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

**Thomas:** Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink.

Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

**Yvonne:** And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also on our Web site, you can find previous editions of Diversity News.

**Thomas:** If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at [dmeeo@va.gov](mailto:dmeeo@va.gov) with the words DIVERSITY NEWS in the subject line.

We'd be delighted to hear from you.

**Yvonne:** Until next time...

**Both:** Have a great month!

**Yvonne:** And take good care of yourself!