



# Stress and Performance

Athena Assessment Inc.

C. Stephen Byrum, PhD

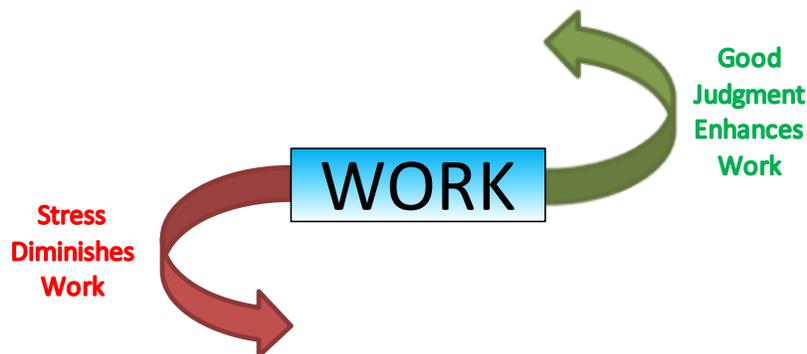
Barry W. Hull, CDR, USNR (Retired)

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## Introduction

Across more than four decades, the application of the Athena Quotient (AQ) in organizational settings has primarily been devoted to understanding what the AQ can *bring to* organizations. Following this intent, the AQ has been used in organizations to help recruit new individuals of stronger judgment and in addition, to help develop the judgment of the current workforce. Consciously adding good judgment to competent skill sets has been a way of helping to get the “right person in the right seat on the bus.” Such *additions to* organizations are of utmost importance and go directly and immediately to the bottom line. If better judgments are used, better decisions are made, which improves overall efficiency, productivity, and organization economies.

Especially since the events of 9/11, increasing attention has been given to the amount of stress that haunts and impedes individual and team performance, and interpersonal relationships within the workplace. The growing amount and intensity of stress, and its impact, is more than obvious. The fact that stress is a critical “de-railer” of good judgment is also obvious. The prospect of *removing—taking out—*stress has parallel importance to *adding in* good judgment. Therefore, recent applications of the AQ have placed more attention to better understanding stress, placing metrics around stress, and measuring its impact more accurately. Achieving organizational potential may be a combination of *adding* good judgment and *removing* stress.



## Types of Stress

The AQ provides information on four types of stress, and is able to differentiate between Work-side and Self-side stress. The vital relationship between work—*what* a person does—and self—*who* a person is—stands as one of the primary, overriding convictions of the AQ. At Athena Assessment Inc., we believe that *what we do* is always and forever, driven by *who we are*. *What* a person does is either enhanced or diminished by *who* a person is. The AQ places clear metrics around these concerns. There are two types

of Work-side stress and two types of Self-side stress. In addition to closely investigating and measuring these four types of stress, the AQ also measures and gives an indication of overall “work-life balance.” Recent studies have shown that the presence of “work-life balance” has a strong impact on how stress is handled, in addition to a person’s coping ability. Oftentimes the number and degree of stressors an individual experiences is less of a factor on performance than the ability to cope with those stressors, no matter what specific level of stress is being experienced.

- 1. Work-side “Anxiety” Stress**—the first stress measure is a work-side measure. “Anxiety” stress is produced when there are unclear, uncertain, vague issues requiring attention in the workplace. Clear, precise, and identifiable stressors are usually easier to contend with than vague stressors. A great deal of personal energy is devoted to contending with uncertainty. This energy could be used to solve problems if it were not being diminished by stress. This particular stressor has gained in intensity more than any other type of stress over the past decade, and it has a dramatically negative impact on innovation, creativity, “out-of-the-box” thinking, and overall problem solving. There is also a dramatically negative impact on a person’s general resourcefulness, the ability to deal with difficult situations and difficult people.
- 2. Work-side “Obvious” Stress**—the second stress measure is a work-side measure. Obvious stressors can be named. In a traditional SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), the stressors in this particular measure would be the *weaknesses* and *threats* found in organizations. In most instances, people are stronger in dealing with this type of stress than might be suspected.
- 3. Self-side “Self-imposed” Stress**—the third stress measure is a self-side measure. Self-imposed or self-induced stress is the type of stress that occurs when a person is too hard on himself/herself, too self-critical, too perfectionistic, and too driven. This stress is often the result of exposure to high levels of criticism.
- 4. Self-side “Obvious” Stress**—the fourth stress measure is a self-side measure. Similar to work-side obvious stress, the stress measured in this indicator is obvious, capable of being clearly identified and named. Typically, these are personal problems relating to money, mate and child and parent relationships, and personal health matters. People often deal with this stress better than might be expected.

## Repairing the Damage from Stress

Stress brings damage to our overall energy, our ability to cope with negative situations, and our ability to handle relationships in a positive manner, much in the same way that a physical injury might damage a muscle, or sickness might damage some bodily function. Stress can leave someone tired, then exhausted, then in a sense of personal chaos, and then—perhaps—on the edge of depression with a tendency to “give up.” Stress can challenge someone’s potential by causing a feeling of hopelessness. When stress is overcome, we feel empowered. When stress gets the best of us, we may feel victimized and may believe that circumstances are beyond our control. Stress is a major obstacle to good judgment, and when we feel *stress-exhaustion*, we tend to take a “path of least resistance”—do what is easiest—and that path seldom allows us to gain the kind of outcomes desired most. The goal is to understand our stress, create agendas for overcoming our stress, and—*ultimately*—like a strong tree that stands through the most difficult storm, to become *stress-hardy*.

The following ideas can serve to provide a start—a step in the right direction—for dealing with the specific types of stress outlined in this discussion. Never forget, that awareness, information, communication, and a raised consciousness about stress may be one of the most powerful catalysts for positive change and an overall reduction in stress.

### Work-side “Anxiety” Stress

This first type of stress is best responded to by focusing on improvement in communication. Improved communication can take place on a general, corporate level or on an individual, interpersonal level. The old country preachers used to say, “A devil that is named is a devil that loses its power.” In like manner, when stressors are vague and unclear, they grow in strength, but when they are named, they lose their power. This fact of stress should be almost self-evident, yet is often overlooked. In most employee surveys, the number one desire that employees articulate is a desire for better communication. When couples are in trouble and become involved in counseling, the gifted counselor knows that the first task is to reestablish communication. There is a line from the famous Paul Newman movie, “Cool Hand Luke,” that perfectly captures a powerful, causative factor for creating and increasing stress: “What we have here is a failure to communicate.”

To relieve and help repair the damage caused by this first type of stress, every effort should be made to examine, with total honesty and frankness, the quality, transparency, and openness that is taking place in corporate communications. Adults want to be—and expect to be—treated like adults, of course. Half-truths and veiled deceptions are not adult responses to real-life situations. People want to know what they are dealing with, and if communication is open, honest, transparent, and forthcoming, then they are more likely to deal with negative issues in a positive manner. Lower the stress of the workforce and

create a more efficient, effective, productive, and profitable workforce. Patronizing and condescending attitudes push what might be intelligent and resourceful employees to the far edges of engagement and commitment. This is, of course, completely self-evident, but often discounted and forgotten by even very sharp and engaged supervisors and managers when they are in the midst of overwhelming work-side stress.

Lee Iacocca, when he was in charge of the Ford Motor Company, used to complain about Henry Ford II. Ford's management theory, a theory that was evidently practiced very aggressively, was termed by Iacocca "mushroom management." Mushrooms are grown in very dark environments in a base fertilizer that is horse manure. Indeed, many organizations and leaders manage by keeping everyone in the dark and pouring on the horse manure. In such situations, when employees sense a punitive, disingenuous, and untrustworthy culture, crippling stress can be an immediate result.

### Work-side "Obvious" Stress

An "obvious" stressor is a stressor that can be absolutely and clearly identified and named, and usually can be named in an organizational setting by sizable numbers of employees. This is why the traditional SWOT analysis that gives open and honest articulation to *weaknesses* and *threats* is so important. To bring people together and have them actually list "obvious" stressors is a good starting point. At least, in this process, that which is unclear and only marginally articulated is lifted out of what might be called "the fog of work." Shine a light on *weakness* and *threats*, lift them out of the fog, acknowledge them, and the associated stress will oftentimes diminish very quickly.

Once the list of "obvious" *weaknesses* and *threats* is created, it is then possible to create a prioritized list relating to problems that are most pressing and critical as opposed to those problems that can wait resolution. Once there is a prioritized list, benchmarked plans to approach the most critical problems can be established. Not every problem can be solved at one time. A process designed to solve every problem at once often leads to the depletion of resources and energy, and may ultimately solve few problems, while creating additional problems and stress. However, a few problems solved or improved upon can become a snowballing catalyst to many problems being diminished in their intensity.

To date, every study conducted with the AQ using this stress indicator reveals that people are better at dealing with this type of stress than they typically give themselves credit. People have strong, and sometimes immensely strong, coping skills, not the least of which is a positive attitude and a richness of optimism. If people are given information—*the facts of the matter*—they will have the capacity to wrap these facts with hope and with concrete plans, both of which are true mechanisms for improvement and relief of stress.

### Self-side "Imposed" Stress

This first of the two, self-side stressors is more subtle, perhaps a bit harder to understand, but very, very real, and at times, very, very detrimental. “Self-imposed” or “self-induced” stress is the stress people bring on themselves when they are too self-critical or too hard on themselves. A large number of people easily expect levels of perfection from themselves that are unrealistic, unrelenting, and unforgiving, and that they may not expect of others. However, when the scores on this indicator become too intense, it is highly likely that they will be even harder on others than they need to be, or that others need them to be.

Some people believe that it is a necessity to score in an intense range in this indicator, in order for them to “stay on top of their game.” This tendency to be too hard translates, in their mind, to being *driven*, and they believe gives them the *edge* to perform at their best, in spite of various obstacles, not the least of which is being tired. However, across the years using the AQ, we have not seen any regression whatsoever in work-side, performance-related scores, or in actual work-side performance and success, simply because this score on “self-imposed” stress improves. However, we have also seen across the years that improvements in this kind of stress are difficult to achieve.

In many, possibly most instances, negative scores of this particular indicator seem to be caused by a prevalence of criticism, often starting from a very early age with well-meaning parents who do not balance criticism with compliments and positive reinforcement. This pattern is often reinforced by teachers, coaches, and peers. Even in the modern family, there can be excessive levels of criticism, psychological and verbal abuse, and even more.

An interesting question arises when it becomes clear that—on the one hand—this third stressor is “self-imposed,” but—on the other hand—its basic source is located in people of criticism, and environments of criticisms. How can the sources be *outside* of us, but the impact be *inside* of us? A kind of “trick” occurs—psychologists have called it “transference”—when someone *transfers* feelings from the outside, becomes convinced of their truth, buys into them, accepts them, and makes them into their own feelings about themselves. Just understanding this process can be helpful in diminishing its impact.

It is always important to examine closely the sources of criticism. Criticism may arise from well-meaning people who simply do not know better. At other times, criticism may arise from ignorant people, or from mean-spirited people who are consciously trying to hurt someone or put someone down with resentment as if that gives them some advantage. It is important to be honest, and weigh out what we do well compared to what we—in our own responsibilities and accountabilities—do not do as well. There is often a tendency to do ten things in a day, nine of them perfectly well, but focus attention on the one thing that was not perfect. Highly self-critical individuals should find ways to “lighten up” on themselves. In doing so, greater energy, self-appreciation, gratification, satisfaction, and meaning, all of which are powerful factors in a full human life, are gained.

## Self-side “Obvious” Stress

Just as with the work-side “obvious” stress, self-side “obvious” stress can be identified, and named. The same processes noted above relating to conscious identification and prioritizing on the work-side can help on the self-side. Be careful to take on only as many issues and steps at a time as will allow positive momentum to be gained. When someone tries to take on all of their self-side problems at once, they often set themselves up for disappointment and failure.

In the early to mid-nineties, self-side “obvious” stressors tended to be of a more interpersonal nature—relationships with mates, children, parents, etc. Of course, if there were issues of personal health, these matters would rise to the top. Today, overwhelmingly the major self-side stressor is financial, and many, many, people in today’s world find themselves in grave personal economic dismay and even disaster. If you should unfortunately find yourself part of this group, consider seeking advice and counsel in how to remedy your financial situation. In doing so, hopefully you will never, ever, find yourself in a disastrous financial situation again. An important point to remember in this regard, care should be taken to avoid the tendency of too much self-criticism. Many people have times in which they “live beyond their means”, or get trapped in financial situations because of factors beyond their control, and too much self-criticism further increases stress, lowers judgment, and simply does not help.

Above all, it is extremely important to fight the cultural tendencies—and they are very, very strong—to see ourselves in terms of what we have, and especially what we have as compared to others around us. Oftentimes it is not readily obvious of the financial holes that others have dug for themselves, and the stress they are under in their own lives. Quality of life is seldom the result of what someone has in terms of possessions.

## Work-Life Balance

A study was done using the AQ on a group of highly successful executives. Their aggregate score was at the 94<sup>th</sup> percentile on work-side judgment capacity, and at the 57<sup>th</sup> percentile on work-life balance. In further conversations, it was abundantly clear to the executive group that they should place much more emphasis not to get better at what they did on the job, but to get better at what they did away from the job. To every single executive who scored poorly, and there were many, there was the clear understanding that the lack of balance on the self-side of life was a detriment to, and placed in jeopardy, everything within the work-side of life. Unfortunately, the majority of people, similarly to these executives, score poorly to very poorly on this indicator.

When the work-life balance goes awry, people sense it, and often want to do something about it, but often do not know exactly where to start. The best place to start may be the communication issues noted above, where renewed conversation and contact surrounds discussions about how the self-side can be reclaimed and better sustained over

time. Many people have simply ceased to spend much time with each other in family dynamics, so they have lost true contact and forgotten how to communicate. There may not be alienation or estrangement yet, but there may be a gap—a distance—in which people do not really know each other as well anymore. A conscious process of becoming reacquainted is usually necessary.

Often a return to places and circumstances in which relationships and family dynamics were most alive will help. Healing breeches that have occurred when “distance” took over may be a necessity. When “distance” takes over, actions and choices can occur that would not have occurred when people were “close.” Forgiveness and a strenuous desire to reclaim something that may have been very, very good in its own time can begin. We should however, be aware, and remind ourselves, that such new beginnings again are difficult. Yet, the odds of being at our best in any area of our life outside of the self-side is not very great unless we approach being at our best within the self-side.

Relationships seldom are sustained over time by coincidence, serendipity, fate, or accident. Of course, relationships—even very good relationships—may begin in these ways, and life can be full of wonderful surprises that knock us off our feet in the most positive sense. However, even if a couple marries/establishes a mate relationship for all the *right* reasons—they fall in love, enjoy each other’s company, and want to be together forever in the kind of blissfulness that drew them together in the beginning, if the work-life balance goes awry it can all come crashing down. The problem with work-life balance, of course, is that the work-side of life begins to get in the way, and someone might believe that his or her relationship that has been so strong for so long can take care of itself, when in fact, it cannot.

Very often, the biggest issue is the loss of time. Relationships require time, and there is no substitute. “Quality time” measures are important, but less time—even if it is “quality time”—is seldom a sufficient substitute for “quantity time,” just being with each other. Work-life balance is achieved through conscious and strategic plans about how time is prioritized. It seldom just happens. Then, these conscious and strategic plans should be turned into tactics and decisions that are executed. At first, this process may seem too “planned,” but it can become “natural” again.

There is usually a very strong, direct link between a healthy work-life balance and high work-side performance. There is also a clear link between a healthy work-life balance and the ability to deal well with stress. This link obviously has a great impact on organizations and all that they want to achieve. Organizations that are pro-active in helping employees in this arena see the results go straight to the bottom line in terms of a more passionate, productive, and economical workforce. Surely, there are times in any career when personal issues will temporarily hold second priority to work issues. However, if an individual does not establish a sense of “who they are” which is at least marginally on par with “what they do” then without equivocation, stress will increase, and

the pleasure of living and the overall quality of life, will diminish. Eventually, performance at work will be undermined if personal choices always take a back seat to work choices.

As such, conflicts with work demands that erode work-life balance should be weighed out very carefully. Both permission and concrete strategies must be put in place that will give work-life balance a chance. If this does not occur, and work-life balance of employees deteriorates, the organization will lose as well. Standards of excellence, the basics of performance, and workplace relationships that are vitally necessary to success and sustainability over time, will suffer. Work-life balance is essential for a vibrant, healthy, sustainable, and passionate, employee workforce and of course, the long-term viability of the organization.