



**KETS DE VRIES
INSTITUTE**

KDVI Learning Lab

Generating Healthy Performance

Thomas Hellwig & Caroline Rook

In this Learning Lab we looked at how organisations can generate healthy performance. We explored the impact of stress on ourselves, our teams and people we work with and exchanged on what can be done to promote wellbeing at work.

Covid-19 as the new black swan

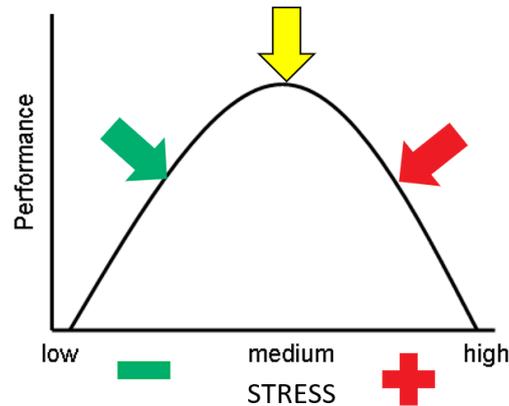
The Covid-19 pandemic has been a disruptive and emotional journey for many of us. The harsh reality is that this is not a sprint, but a marathon. While the initial “reaction” phase to crisis may be short, the “reconstruction” phase takes much longer, sometimes spanning years. Hence, we must **invest now in order to create a healthy working culture**.



Impact of stress on performance

In general, we see an overall increase in stress levels due to disruptions in both our personal and professional lives, but some employees report also reduction of their stress (due to less travel and commuting time). In any case, the topic of stress, mental health and well-being have been become more prominent in many organisations due to the disruption the pandemic and various lockdowns have created in how organisations and people work.

Stress and performance are correlated. As the [Yerkes-Dodson stress-performance curve](#) (figure below) shows, stress, at different intensities, is around all the time; it is our reaction to stress which determines if we are using that stress to thrive and to drive performance, or heading towards burnout.



The healthy performance zone is just up to the midpoint, where medium levels of stress drive high levels of performance. Unhealthy performance is the result of people experiencing high levels of stress without the capability and energy to cope with it. The danger zone starts already, once we have passed the “tipping point” (just beyond the midpoint) but is often noticed much later.

Hence, one critical challenge for managers and their teams **is to detect where they are on the curve**, to recognise the triggers leading up to the tipping point and not wait until approaching the tail end of the curve (burnout).

Diagnostic Toolset: From Emotional Triaging to Stress-APGAR

We discussed in this workshop specific frameworks and tools that can enable managers, who are not particularly trained, to understand when individuals need help and consider certain actions. One approach derived from the field of medicine and crisis management is called Emotional Triaging. It contains three parts:

- **Check-in with teams:** How is the energy level? Stress level? Follow up with questions such as what is one key challenge in the last week that pushed your energy levels down or up?
- **Deep drive and explore:** Individual conversation and search for warning signs and how to support that person in a certain area (see Stress-APGAR).
- **Consider actions:** After determining where the person is in terms of their stress experience, a number of actions can be proposed such as leveraging existing support networks, providing coaching for challenge and support and, in severe stress cases, referrals to professionals.

The [Stress-APGAR](#) (2017) is a simple yet robust protocol that helps managers and HR professionals to identify cases of high stress. Rather than being a test, survey, or assessment tool, the Stress-APGAR provides a set of guidelines to think about and articulate factors that may lead to burnout or other stress-related mental health issues.

- **Appearance (physical):** Sleep patterns, eating habits, exercise and energy levels
- **Performance (mental):** Ability to take decisions, concentration and memory, ability to generate new ideas



- **Growth (spiritual):** Seeking opportunities for personal and professional growth and development
- **Affect control (emotional):** Ability to feel, understand and show emotions appropriately
- **Relationships (social):** Quantity and quality of relationships

Learning from our clients

Comments in the learning lab revealed a variety of ways in which organisations deal with stress, identified actions to consider and support that may be required. We heard from organisations where:

- The HR leadership has already **created safe spaces to talk** about stress with **support in place to help**. Their challenge is to develop and embed these practices to have a lasting benefit on the culture beyond the Covid-19 crisis.
- The HR leadership has recognised the need to address workplace wellbeing and put in **place initiatives to role model from the top**. They are in the process of developing, testing or embedding initiatives, including a change in mindsets.
- The HR Leadership is working to tackle long-held beliefs that business leaders aren't willing or ready to put the topic on the agenda. They may be able to **partner with influential champions in the organisation to raise awareness**, as well as include a **focus on healthy performance** as part of **performance management**.
- The topic is still taboo. Showing vulnerability is considered weak. The more stress you experience or you are put under, the more you show how tough you are. **Testimonials and support from the C-suite** can help begin to break this taboo.

Creating reflective learning cultures

Discussions also revealed a number of dynamics which can undermine the effectiveness of stress and wellbeing interventions.

- In some organisational cultures where it is taboo to show signs of vulnerability, it would be hard for people to feel safe to connect emotionally, understand the signs of stress and engage with it.
- Many executives also only realise their stress levels when they have crossed the tipping point; others can carry on for a long time before admitting there is an issue or a need to seek help.
- Wellbeing interventions can also be perceived as one-offs, leading to skepticism around the sincerity of such initiatives.
- Another dynamic is a strong tendency to default into a task mode in response to stress and pressures and to forget to check in and to connect with people emotionally.

While disruptive, one of the positives of this crisis is that it can result in leaders and colleagues being able to open up, speak up and to connect and in doing so, to create cultures where psychological safety is part of the DNA.