Thriving Under Stressful Working Conditions

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Major Objectives

• Translate research on organizational stress and positive motivational constructs into recommendations for allowing employees to thrive under stressful conditions

• Highlight that the complete absence of stressors is antithetical to thriving at work, and that the emphasis should be placed on employees actively harnessing stressors for improved performance and growth

• Summarized in a book *Thriving Under Stress: Harnessing Demands in the Workplace* (April, 2015; Oxford University Press)
Agenda

Background on the authors

Define Thriving and distinguish it from related constructs

Discuss the major influences on thriving

Present a comprehensive model of Thriving

Discuss the implications of the model for research and practice
Background on Authors

• Thomas W. Britt, Ph.D.
  – Professor of Psychology at Clemson University
  – Numerous publications on organizational stress
  – Grant funding from Department of Defense

• Steve M. Jex, Ph.D.
  – Professor of Psychology at BGSU
  – Has been conducting research and writing about organizational stress for over 25 years
  – Has collaborated with NIOSH, U.S. Army
What is Thriving?

- Actually doing *better* under stressful working conditions

- Most stress models propose moderator variables, but the impact is *buffering* (Jex & Beehr, 1991; Jex & Yankelevich, 2008)
Thriving and Resilience

• Resilience implies a *buffering* effect; that is, high resilience attenuates stressor-strain relationships (Jex, Kain, & Park, 2013)

• Thriving, on the other hand, implies a *positive* relationship between stressors and well-being
Classification of Work Demands

- Quantitative Demands – Amount of work, pace of work

- Interpersonal Demands – Communication of role demands, interpersonal conflict, workplace incivility

- Balancing work and non-work demands
Challenge vs. Hindrance

• These work demands can be further broken down into:
  – Challenge Stressors
  – Hindrance Stressors

• Evidence for motivational and performance benefits of challenge stressors (LePine et al., 2005)

• Challenge stressors still associated with negative effects on well-being (Podsakoff et al., 2007)
Major Influences on Thriving

• Job-Related
• Employee
• Interpersonal
Job-Related Influences

• Autonomy and opportunity to make decisions about one’s work (Hackman & Oldham, 1980)

• Significance of one’s work for both the organization and for other people (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Grant, 2007)
Employee Influences

- Personality Traits – Optimism, Hope, Self-Efficacy, Emotional Stability (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012)
- Proactive Motivation (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010)
- Job Crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001)
- Recovery and detachment (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007)
- Challenge vs. Threat Appraisals (LePine et al., 2005)
Interpersonal Influences

- **Quality Interpersonal Connections** *(Spreitzer et al., 2005)*

- **Safe and supportive Environment** *(Kahn, 1990; Kark & Carmeli, 2009)*

- **Leader actions that promote perceived safety, autonomy, and recognition** *(Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006)*
Thriving-Related Experiences

• Personal engagement in job performance
  (Britt, et al. 2005; Kahn, 1990)

• Perception of growth and development
  (Porath et al., 2012)

• Vigor/vitality  (Shirom, 2010)
A Model of Thriving Under Stress

**Job-Related Influences**
- Autonomy and Ability to Make Decisions
- Significance of Work for Organization and Other People
- Presence of Challenge Stressors

**Employee Influences**
- Optimism, Hope, Self-Efficacy, Emotional Stability
- Proactive Motivation
- Job Crafting
- Challenge Appraisals
- Recovery & Detachment

**Interpersonal Influences**
- Quality Interpersonal Connections/Safe and Supportive Environ.
- Leader Actions that Promote Perceived Safety, Autonomy, Recognition, and Recovery

**Thriving-Related Experiences**
- Vigor/Vitality, Personal Engagement, and Development

Kahn (1990); Parker, et al. (2010); Shirom (2010); Spreitzer, et al. (2005)
Failure to Thrive

- Characterized by high levels of person-environment misfit and job boredom
- Failure to thrive separate/independent from burnout; employees may need to leave job
- Thriving at work is not possible in...
  - Physically unsafe work environments
  - Work environments characterized by high levels of extreme interpersonal mistreatment/abuse (e.g., abusive supervision, pervasive bullying)
Implications for Practice

• Stress management training
  – Don’t eliminate all work stressors
  – Train employees to harness demands that are present, highlight benefits that may result

• Leadership training
  – Actions leaders can take to help employees approach stressors in adaptive ways
  – Emphasis on importance of recovering from demands

• Job design/redesign
  – Creating the right type of challenging conditions, opportunities for growth
Future Research Directions

• Investigate how employees may use certain stressors to achieve higher levels of functioning
  – Job-related, employee, and interpersonal influences may not only blunt impact of hindrance stressors, but enhance benefits of challenge stressors

• Investigate whether extremely low levels of stressors can lead to negative outcomes such as boredom and the failure to thrive (Fisher, 1993; Mael & Jex, under review)