

Psychological Dilemmas in the Performance-Oriented Era: Exploring Pathways to Resolving Workplace Stress

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Abstract: Currently, a management environment oriented towards efficiency and growth has led to a "performance-first" approach dominating many organizations. While driving efficiency, this model has also profoundly reshaped the workplace ecosystem, triggering widespread psychological distress among employees. This article focuses on the workplace stress fostered by this culture, systematically analyzing its core manifestations—including persistent anxiety, deep burnout, fluctuating self-esteem, and interpersonal alienation—and uncovering its underlying causes: instrumental management thinking that alienates individuals into metrics, individualized risk-shifting exacerbates the burden of responsibility, and a lack of organizational support and the erosion of life boundaries by technology, all of which create a breeding ground for stress. To address this dilemma, the study proposes a multi-dimensional, coordinated intervention approach: organizational management must shift from control to empowerment, implementing flexible goal setting, strengthening developmental feedback communication, and fostering a psychologically safe environment. Individual employees should proactively cultivate psychological resilience, decouple performance from self-worth, master stress management techniques, and firmly maintain healthy boundaries between work and life. At the societal level, there is an urgent need to strengthen the occupational mental health service system and, through media, academia, and industry, guide society in reshaping a healthy performance ethic, promoting work-life balance and the concept of "decent work." Research indicates that alleviating performance pressure requires moving beyond technical solutions and re-evaluating the core values of organizational culture—anchoring the ultimate purpose of development in people rather than metrics. Only by fostering a new workplace ecosystem that respects individual integrity and fosters symbiosis between organizations and employees can we achieve true health, dignity, and sustainable prosperity in the era of efficiency.

Keywords: Performance Management, Workplace Stressors, Burnout, Management Practice Optimization, Psychological Resilience, Work-Family Balance, Social Support Network, Work Ethic.

1. Introduction

Driven by globalization and the information technology revolution, "performance first" has become the core operating philosophy of many organizations. From piece-rate wages to KPIs and OKRs, to last-place elimination and mandatory rankings, performance management has become deeply embedded in the modern workplace. While this system has proven effective in improving efficiency and focusing on goals, when the pursuit of performance reaches its extreme, an invisible "high-pressure culture" spreads, posing a serious challenge to the mental health of those in the workplace.

Real data sound the alarm. The 2024 "Workplace Mental Health Report" by the Chinese Human Resources Development Research Association shows that nearly 80% of respondents cite performance indicators as a core source of stress, with over 40% experiencing "high stress," often accompanied by persistent anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and sleep disorders[1]. The World Health Organization has officially classified burnout as a disease. It stems from chronic, unresolved work pressure. Its core is persistent exhaustion, apathy from work, and a plummeting sense of personal accomplishment. High performance pressure is undoubtedly the most direct trigger that ignites this inner fire.

But the problem goes far beyond the superficial burden. Performance pressure is quietly seeping in, corroding people's hearts like a slow-burning poison. Those cold, cold ranking numbers silently tear at the flesh of a team. Colleagues who should be working side by side, under the shadow of rankings, foster defensiveness and suspicion. The warm mutual support between them gradually cools, shrouded in the cold of

alienation. Even more heartbreaking is that when a person's entire sense of self-worth is pinned to a single performance report, every fluctuation in their score can trigger a devastating wave of self-doubt: "What am I doing all this for?" This bottomless confusion is more damaging than physical exhaustion.

These silent psychological wounds burn far more than just the individual's spiritual home. They gradually dry up organizational creativity, and talent, like sand, slips through fingers at an accelerated rate. Faced with this dilemma, we must ask: How has the performance-first logic gradually pushed people to the brink? Through what hidden channels does this invisible pressure gnaw at individual dignity and team bonds? And most importantly, where should we begin to find a true path out? This article focuses on this era's workplace pain, attempting to uncover the deep-seated root causes and find a practical solution to the problem.

2. The Reality of Performance-Based High Pressure: Multi-Dimensional Stress Manifestations

Performance is an invisible squeeze, churning day and night, twisting pressure into a rope that tightens the screws on workers—exhausting their bodies, draining their spirits, and sapping even the slightest bit of energy to work.

Many people don't fully understand what they want before looking for a job, nor do they have a clear understanding of what a career entails. Once they land a job, they discover their lives are completely different from what they imagined: they want to be creative, but spend their days sifting through

spreadsheets; they enjoy interacting with people, but find themselves staring blankly at a machine. This mismatch between work and passion is a potential pitfall from the outset. To make matters worse, the fear of being called "unstable" when switching jobs is too great, and switching careers means starting over from scratch. The risks are too great, so they can only grit their teeth and watch their initial enthusiasm slowly fade[2].

Anxiety is like a shadow, impossible to shake off. Rankings are hanging there, evaluation forms are piled up one after another, and the prospect of last-place elimination hangs like a sword. I constantly feel like someone's watching me, fretting about falling behind and worrying about performance targets. These thoughts revolve around me daily. Even after work, I'm still restless; the thoughts of performance targets, rankings, and the looks from my boss keep swirling around in my head. The tension of being "on call" is constantly on edge. Anxiety is mounting, and so is my risk of depression. I'm even more afraid to make a mistake. A single misstep could land me in a performance review, so who dares to think of a new approach? The very thought of innovation is suppressed.

I'm drained, exhausted. High pressure is like a blunt knife, slowly hollowing me out. I'm exhausted to the point of exhaustion-not just physically, but also mentally, feeling like something's missing. No matter how much I rest, nothing works. Everything annoys me-I have no motivation to work, I can't even bother with colleagues or clients, and I just want to be alone. I constantly feel useless-I wonder what the point of this job is, and if I'm truly inadequate. With this constant drain, my last bit of enthusiasm and efficiency is gone. I might even develop physical problems and sink into a psychological pit. "How much am I really worth?" It all hinges on a few performance numbers[3]. A person's abilities are ultimately reduced to a score on a spreadsheet. If the score is low, they feel like nothing; if it's high, their confidence is shaky, relying entirely on others' approval, leaving them feeling insecure. Work has become a shattered existence, not about achieving something, but a competition to prove their worth. Even the slightest fluctuation in performance can shake one's self-perception.

Performance has also eroded the camaraderie among colleagues. With everyone competing against each other, those around them unknowingly go from partners to rivals. Good skills are hidden, making it difficult to find others to lend a hand. Suspicion and defensiveness permeate, leaving the team disorganized. In severe cases, there's even scramble for resources and backstabbing, creating a chaotic atmosphere that makes one feel even more isolated and burdened.

These pressures have formed a knot that holds people back. To solve this problem, it is useless to just deal with it on the surface. We have to put in real effort and solve it from the root.

3. Tracing the Sources of the Dilemma: The Deep-Sewn Generative Mechanisms of High Performance Pressure

To mitigate the harmful effects of performance-based pressure in the workplace, we must first recognize that this pressure stems from more than one source, but rather from a high-pressure system woven together by multiple forces.

Efficiency Obsession: People Are Like Cogs: Many current management approaches are overly obsessed with efficiency, numbers, and control. Popular tools like KPIs and OKRs

appear to offer precise management, but in reality, they forcibly flatten living people, complex creativity, and collaboration into cold, impersonal data points[4]. While management may appear "scientific," the cost is the "instrumentalization" of employees: people are reduced to components to accomplish goals, their true needs and emotional value are ignored, and the meaning of work is compressed into "performance targets." The core value of people is obscured by digital logic, and this is the root cause of the deeper dilemma.

Risk Shifting, Carrying the Burden Alone: In stories that emphasize individual struggle, organizations often place the burden of market fluctuations, competitive pressures, and heavy performance targets on individual employees. Good performance is viewed as a reflection of individual skill, while poor performance is often attributed to a lack of commitment or incompetence. This tendency toward "completely individualizing responsibility" forces employees to bear immense, untransferable pressure alone, leading to endless self-exhaustion and internal exhaustion. Even necessary rest breaks can be perceived as slacking off.

High Pressure, Low Support: Many organizations, while implementing intensive performance appraisals, suffer from a severe lack of necessary supporting support, creating a dangerous "pressure cooker" environment. Employees' psychological support channels are poor or nonexistent (for example, EAPs are not truly valued or utilized), and managers lack the awareness and skills to care for their employees' psychological well-being. Employees are often given overly ambitious goals but receive insufficient time, training, or collaborative resources. Performance feedback becomes a one-way process of scoring or accountability, lacking genuine guidance and communication that fosters development. This structural contradiction of "exerting pressure without providing support" is a key factor in crippling psychological defenses.

Lack of psychological support: Convenient and confidential psychological counseling channels are lacking, and managers lack the ability to identify and address employee psychological issues.

Inadequate resources: Employees are pressed to meet excessively high targets but lack adequate time, training, staff, or technical support, leaving them in a dilemma of "wanting the horse to run without eating grass."

Feedback becomes "empty cannon": Performance feedback often becomes a formality of scoring, or simply assesses results without providing constructive guidance, leaving employees without truly meaningful growth assistance. This "pressure without support" dynamic is the key to employee collapse[5].

Technology "kidnapping" and life "losing control": Mobile phones and office software blur the boundaries between work and life. Bosses can issue instructions at any time, and employees face the implicit expectation of "always being online." Work constantly encroaches on personal time, severely compressing rest space. Technology, supposedly designed to boost efficiency, has become a tool of 24/7 surveillance and exploitation within a distorted culture. Performance pressure permeates life 24/7, leaving people exhausted and unable to escape.

4. Organizational Healing: Building an Empowering Performance Ecosystem

As the design and implementation body of the performance management system, organizations are primarily responsible for alleviating employee performance pressures and must promote systematic change from concept to practice.

Core Concept Transformation: From Control to Empowerment

Organizations must abandon the traditional mindset of viewing performance management as a mere control tool and establish a new goal of "promoting the shared development of both people and the organization." Leaders should deeply understand that sustainable high performance stems from employee well-being, capability development, and intrinsic motivation[6]. A people-oriented approach focusing on employee growth, not just performance, must be embedded in HR policies, manager training, and cultural development.

4.1. Performance Management System Optimization Practices

Flexible Goal Setting

Promote a balance between challenging and feasible goals when setting them, avoiding unrealistically high targets. Encourage employee participation in the goal-setting process to foster a sense of autonomy and responsibility. Design team and individual goals in a coordinated way to mitigate the negative effects of ranking competition.

Developing Feedback Mechanisms

Shift the focus of performance evaluations from scoring and accountability to supporting growth. Managers are required to regularly conduct in-depth performance interviews with employees, focusing on reviewing work processes, identifying areas for growth, resolving practical challenges, and jointly developing development plans, rather than simply reporting results. Furthermore, specialized training in feedback skills for managers should be strengthened, providing the necessary tools and methods.

De-extreme Assessment Methods

High-pressure tactics such as last-in-first-out elimination should be used with caution. When they are necessary, their scope and frequency must be strictly limited, and they must be accompanied by appeal channels, performance improvement plans, and job transfer support to avoid crude, one-size-fits-all approaches.

Build a Psychologically Safe Environment

The attitude of the leader is crucial to creating an organizational atmosphere where employees dare to speak up and tolerate mistakes. A leader's attitude is crucial. Managers should lead by example, genuinely welcoming differing opinions, encouraging employees to speak freely, and responding promptly[7]. They should cherish the exchange of ideas and view it as a valuable opportunity to stimulate thinking and seek better solutions. At the same time, they must firmly oppose all forms of workplace bullying, discrimination, and humiliating behavior.

4.2. Establish a Multi-Dimensional Support System:

Deepen Employee Psychological Support

Provide employees with professional psychological counseling support to effectively help them cope with work pressure and regulate negative emotions, and ensure that the

services are easily accessible and the process is strictly confidential. Strengthen EAP promotion and awareness, making it a regular benefit rather than an emergency measure.

Empower Managers' Support Capabilities

Train managers to identify employee psychological risk signals and master listening, empathy, and stress management skills. Incorporate "employee mental health care" into manager competency assessments and promotion evaluations. Optimize work resource allocation

Streamline redundant processes to ensure employees have adequate authorization, information support, and collaborative resources when performing critical tasks. Allocate manpower scientifically to prevent continuous overload.

5. Individual Coping: Cultivating Psychological Capital and Healthy Boundaries

When faced with external pressures, individuals proactively strengthening their internal coping abilities and mastering practical strategies are key to improving psychological resilience and achieving effective self-adjustment. The key lies in changing concepts, improving psychological resilience and strengthening behavioral management.

Untying the ties between performance and self-worth

We must realize that external factors such as market environment, teamwork, and company resources often play a key role in determining whether performance is good or bad, and personal effort and ability are only one part of the equation. Don't easily equate work performance with overall personal value. Clearly distinguish between work and performance: Work is only one aspect of life, and performance is merely one measure of it. Don't let work evaluations become the sole metric for measuring your entire worth[8]. Actively establish a robust self-evaluation system based on multiple dimensions, such as moral character, family relationships, interests, and social contributions, to reduce over-reliance on work evaluations. 5.1. Cultivate Core Psychological Capital

Actively develop four key psychological resources:

Self-efficacy: Gradually increase confidence in completing challenging tasks by breaking down tasks, accumulating small victories, learning from role models, and seeking constructive feedback;

Optimistic Perspective: Cultivate the habit of positive attribution, linking success to internal effort and viewing setbacks as temporary, changeable external challenges;

Goal-Oriented Aspiration: Set clear and achievable goals, proactively explore diverse paths to achieve them, and maintain the motivation to continue taking action;

Resilience: Cultivate the ability to quickly recover from adversity. The key lies in accepting reality, proactively seeking help, focusing on solutions, and learning from experience. These qualities reinforce each other and form the psychological foundation for resilience to stress. They must be continuously strengthened through daily practice [9].

5.1. Master Key Stress Management Skills

Mindfulness: Investing a short period of time daily in focusing on your breathing and being aware of your present physical and mental state without judgment can effectively reduce anxiety levels and improve emotional stability and

focus. Guarding Boundaries:

Time/Space Isolation: Minimize work notifications during non-work hours. Designate a dedicated work area when at home, switch to rest mode upon leaving, and strictly enforce meal and rest periods.

Communication Limits: Clearly communicate to the team when individuals are offline, handle non-urgent matters during work hours, and politely but firmly decline non-core requests that exceed your workload.

Mental Switching Rituals: Actively clear your mind of work after get off work through rituals like walking, meditation, or hobbies. Protect your personal rest space and view it as an essential investment in maintaining productivity.

6. Social Support: Improving Systems and Reshaping Ethics

Resolving workplace stress is not solely the responsibility of organizations and individuals; it also requires collaborative efforts at the societal level to foster a supportive external environment and value orientation.

Improving the Occupational Mental Health Service System:

Policy and Regulatory Support: Promote the explicit inclusion of "occupational mental health" in labor protection, occupational safety and health laws and regulations. Clarify employers' responsibilities and obligations in preventing work-related psychological risks and providing psychological support. Explore the establishment of industry standards or guidelines for workplace mental health.

Public Resource Investment and Popularization: Increase government public health resources for workplace mental health services and support the establishment of more convenient and accessible psychological counseling and support networks at the community level[10]. Encourage the development of diversified, affordable social psychological counseling institutions and service models. Carry out large-scale, regular public mental health literacy campaigns to reduce the stigma of seeking psychological help.

Professional Talent Development and Standardization: Strengthen professional training for psychological counselors and social workers, particularly specialized skills in familiarizing themselves with workplace situations and occupational stress issues. Establish and improve a certification and ethical standardization system for workplace mental health service providers. Promoting the Reshaping of a Healthy Performance Ethic:

Media and Public Discourse Guidance: Encourage media, opinion leaders, industry associations, and other forces to critically examine and discuss distorted performance culture narratives such as "996 is a blessing," "KPI-only theory," and "involutionary rationalization." Promote healthy workplace values that focus on work quality, employee well-being, long-term sustainability, and work-life balance. Tell successful corporate stories that emphasize humanistic care.

Academic Research and Knowledge Dissemination: Support scholars in fields such as management, psychology, and sociology to conduct in-depth research on the double-edged sword effects of performance management, the mechanisms that generate workplace stress, effective interventions, and their long-term impact. Promote the translation of research findings into corporate practice, policymaking, and public awareness. Build an evidence-based, healthier performance management knowledge system.

Promoting "Decent Work": Actively echo the International

Labor Organization's concept of "decent work," emphasizing that work should not only provide a livelihood but also protect workers' dignity, equality, safety, and personal development. Recognize mental health as an indispensable core dimension of decent work and promote its elevated status in corporate social responsibility and ESG evaluation systems. Building a collaborative network of diverse stakeholders: Relevant government departments, businesses, industry associations, trade unions, professional academic institutions, and social service agencies should strengthen communication and collaboration[11]. They should establish an information-sharing platform to jointly research workplace mental health issues, promote best practices, and jointly launch employee support programs, fostering a holistic focus on and support for workplace mental health.

7. Conclusion

The psychological difficulties in the workplace caused by a performance-first culture are deeply embedded in management logic, the technological environment, and societal value systems. Rampant anxiety, deep burnout, diminished self-worth, and a loss of interpersonal trust create a high-pressure workplace. The root causes lie in a tool-based management mindset, risk shifting to individuals, a lack of organizational support, and technology blurring the boundaries between work and life.

Solutions require a multifaceted collaborative effort. Organizations must shift their mindset: shifting performance management from control to empowerment. Setting flexible and achievable goals, replacing simple assessments with developmental communication, fostering a psychologically safe environment, and providing tangible support. Individuals must proactively address this issue: decoupling performance from self-worth and recognizing the multi-factorial nature of outcomes; focusing on cultivating resilience, optimism, problem-solving confidence, and a sense of purpose; mastering practical skills such as mindfulness and emotion management; and firmly establishing and maintaining clear boundaries between work and life.

Social support is essential: improving the occupational mental health service system, clarifying employer responsibilities through legislation, increasing public investment to improve service accessibility, and cultivating professional talent; and reshaping the ethics of healthy performance. The media, academia, and industry should criticize the "metrics-only" and "involutionary rationality" mentality, advocate for employee well-being, sustainable development, and work-life balance, and promote "decent work." Governments, businesses, trade unions, professional institutions, and social organizations need to form a collaborative network.

The key lies in striking a balance between efficiency and humanity. The ultimate goal of development is to serve people, not to alienate them into vassalage of metrics. The goal of healing is not to eliminate stress, but to break the absolute dominance of performance and allow instrumental rationality to serve the development of human subjectivity. This calls for the construction of a new workplace ecosystem that respects individuals, prioritizes holistic health, and promotes symbiosis between organizations and employees. Only then can we achieve true health, dignity, and sustainable prosperity in the performance era.

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