

## EXECUTIVE VITALITY™: CAN YOU HELP REDUCE YOUR ORGANIZATION'S BLOOD PRESSURE?

Imagine an executive team meeting with five participants. Two of them routinely take their blood pressure at home and periodically drop by the doctor's office for the same purpose. A third participant owns an at-home blood pressure measurement cuff but rarely uses it. One takes blood pressure meds, one does not, and one has a bottle of the meds but has never opened it. And because regular exercise is known to both reduce stress and help lower blood pressure – amongst its many benefits – it is good news that one of these team members works out hard, one works out regularly, but less strenuously, and one takes yoga.

Something they have in common is a demanding workload that could induce stress if not handled well. Why should leaders care about their talents' blood pressure? Evidence shows that chronic high blood pressure leads to heart attacks, stroke, and death. Organizations that care for their people want their employees to be healthy and well. Blood pressure is one effective measure of wellness. Little spikes may be no big deal; chronic high levels are what to watch. Providing employees with early detection strategies and helping them create stress-reducing programs for themselves will be beneficial to the bottom line and to everyone involved.

What is the relationship between long-term stress and chronic high blood pressure? Short answer: scientists don't know. It looks like for the short term, for the so-called blood pressure spikes, there is direct causation. Stress causes physiological reactions (hormone release, blood vessel constriction) that will raise blood pressure in an immediate response. The relationship to long-term hypertension and stress is less clear and still under study. It is possible that stress leads to behaviors that in turn influence blood pressure directly, e.g., overconsumption of food or alcohol or insufficient sleep.

As a leader of an organization, there are steps you can take to help your employees maintain healthier blood pressure levels:

- Provide education through health fairs, the medical department, the HR department, a newsletter, a video – whatever makes sense in your organization – about the dangers of hypertension to hearts, kidneys, and blood vessels. Also educate about steps to take that will help ease stress and high blood pressure. Include information about the benefits of measuring, monitoring, and keeping records, both of the blood pressure itself and also stress – the triggers, the outcomes, and what could be done better the next time to manage stress (better).
- Through similar mechanisms, promote the healthy habits known to favorably affect blood pressure – exercise, healthy diet, adequate sleep, not smoking, controlling alcohol intake, and managing stress.
- You as a leader also can directly help with that last one – managing stress. Extreme pressure on employees can lead to all sorts of ill effects – both on the company (think Wells Fargo and the illegal accounts for one type of ill effect of extreme pressure, attrition is another) and worse ... what happens to the individual (inability to successfully manage time or achieve work/ life balance and find the time to exercise and sleep; depression, anxiety, or feelings of inadequacy.) We are not saying don't give stretch goals, but we *are* saying do not exert undue stress or have unrealistic expectations; make sure employees are comfortable pushing back on you. Make sure your corporate culture allows someone to say – "Wait! Let's renegotiate that time frame," (for example).

- Institute a wellness program, if you do not already have one, that includes a physical fitness facility, nutrition counseling, ongoing education, and other health resources.

Two good articles on the status of what we know and don't know about stress and hypertension are (1) from Mayo Clinic, [Stress and High Blood Pressure](#), and (2) from the American Heart Association, [Managing Stress to Control High Blood Pressure](#).

The best way to motivate an organization on healthy lifestyles and to promote healthy blood pressure is to role model the behavior, e.g., measuring/monitoring blood pressure, Take yours!

*Do you know what your blood pressure is? Does your organization demonstrate care about its employees (and by the way, its productivity) by fostering healthful practices?*