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### Take your work from stressful to impactful

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Mark Whitacre, the man whose actions inspired three books and a film starring Matt Damon (*The Informant!*), spoke to me about workplace stress,<sup>[1]</sup> a timely topic, with as many as 94% of US workers suffering from it in 2019.<sup>[2]</sup> Even before pandemic disruptions, studies show that more than half of Americans experience stress nearly every workday, a rate 20% higher than seen outside of the United States.<sup>[3]</sup> And according to Oracle, the year 2020 holds the ignominious title of most stressful ever.<sup>[4]</sup>

While this stress is a problem in and of itself, research also shows, repeatedly and clearly, that deviant workplace behaviors ranging from theft and fraud to mistreatment of coworkers all rise when employees experience workplace stress.<sup>[5]</sup> The questions then are what to do with all of this stress, and how can we help ourselves, our colleagues, and our employees?

Whitacre knows something about stress. He infamously spent three years working undercover for the FBI in the early '90s, all while serving as the 4<sup>th</sup> ranked executive—out of 30,000 employees—at the multinational food-processing company Archer-Daniels-Midland Company (ADM).

Whitacre was nothing short of a *wunderkind*. One of the youngest people to graduate from Cornell University with a PhD in biochemistry. A senior executive by 32. He'd bought the CEO's 13,000-square-foot house, filled up the eight-car garage, popped in and out of a corporate jet, and was adding seven figures in stock options and bonuses to his bank account annually. With his three superiors around twice his age, Whitacre reasonably anticipated his star climbing yet higher. Whitacre joked, "I was Justin Bieber before Justin Bieber. I really thought I was a movie star. In reality, it was probably the beginning of my demise."

### Leaf-blowing at 3 a.m.: The consequences of profound stress

Whitacre, in coordination with other executives at ADM, was central to one of the largest price-fixing cases in US history. Put simply, ADM conspired with its competitors to artificially inflate prices and boost their profits. But when Whitacre agreed to cooperate with the FBI, a three-year undercover operation began. He would work for ADM by day while wearing a wire, then debrief for hours every night with the FBI. Whitacre explains that "working for the FBI was by far the most stressful experience of my life."

Stress occurs when experiencing demands that exceed one's capacity. At its worst, it leads to *physiological, behavioral, and psychological strains*.<sup>[6]</sup>

At the physiological level, immune systems may weaken—perhaps you always seem to come down with a cold during your busiest time of the year. Whitacre lost 60 pounds during his three years wearing a wire. "People at work thought I had cancer. I was literally falling apart."

Behaviorally, we may grow more aggressive or short in temper. Or compulsive behaviors may rise to the surface, such as overeating, or substance abuse, including alcohol and drug abuse. “There were neighbors that would see me at 3 in the morning with a gas leaf blower on the driveway,” recalled Whitacre. “During a thunderstorm. Wearing my suit and tie.”

At the psychological level, those under stress often experience depression, anxiety, and repetitive negative thoughts. By some estimates, depression costs businesses \$51 billion in absenteeism and another \$26 billion in treatment costs.<sup>[7]</sup> Sixty-six percent of Americans experience stress-induced sleep deprivation. In addition, workplace stress is associated with burnout, an adverse reaction in which we lose our workplace motivation, grow cynical and detached from our tasks and coworkers, and ultimately perform at a significantly lower level. Indeed, 63% of US workers report that they are ready to quit their jobs due to stress.

Eventually, the pressure became too much for Whitacre. “I wasn’t sleeping well during that time. The FBI would say ‘Mark, if these guys catch you wearing a wire, they’re going to kill you.’ And the pressure of wearing that every week, that was the pressure. This was risking life wearing the wire.”

He attributes this unbearable weight to a series of deeply flawed decisions. Though he was offered a plea deal that would see him imprisoned for six months, he ripped it up and embezzled \$9 million from ADM while wearing a wire for the FBI. Caught in the act, Whitacre served not the six months he’d rejected, but eight-and-a-half years in prison. “A lot of the mistakes I made was part of that nervous breakdown and just not thinking clearly.”

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