Occupational Stress: A Junior Manager's Predicament

This case was written by Debapratim Purkayastha, under the direction of S.S.George, IBS Center for Management Research. It was compiled from published sources, and is intended to be used as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation.
Occupational Stress: A Junior Manager’s Predicament

Susanth Kumar (Kumar) was a 31-year-old professional working in a pharmaceutical company. He had joined DrugPharmz, a mid-sized pharmaceutical company in India, as Area Manager (AM) a year earlier. Prior to that, he had worked as a Medical Representative (MR) in a leading pharmaceutical company for nearly five years. To further his career prospects, he had relocated to Hyderabad. It was a big change for Kumar. The pressures of the job and the new life were becoming overwhelming. Of late, he had begun feeling that his was a thankless job. He was getting increasingly irritable, and was suffering from bouts of depression and some other physical disorders as well. The more he brooded over the happenings of the day, the more he feared that what he had done earlier in the day would most definitely end his career at DrugPharmz, if not in the industry.

***

A lot of thought had gone into Kumar’s decision to join DrugPharmz. Till then, he had avoided making a career move as he was working in Warangal—a small town which was also his hometown. He knew that if he wanted a promotion and wanted to progress in his career, he had to venture out of Warangal. He had been contemplating this for the last couple of years and had finally decided that it was high time he went on to the next level.

Once he had made up his mind, he had only to wait for a suitable opportunity to come his way. He had an excellent performance record in his previous company and had taken care to develop himself for the role of AM. In the interview for the position in DrugPharmz, he impressed the Regional Manager, SK Murthy (Murthy). Murthy’s only concern was whether Kumar would be comfortable in relocating to Hyderabad. When Kumar said that he had already made up his mind, Murthy told him that he did not appreciate people who were homesick and rushed off to their hometown every weekend. “I have nothing against people going to visit their family. But the problem is that the work suffers when people rush off to their hometown at every single opportunity,” Murthy said.

Kumar replied, “Sir, I assure you that my first priority now is proving myself in this new role and building my career in DrugPharmz.”

***

For Kumar, the new job brought with it a lot of changes in his life. It was the first time he and his wife, Geetha, were away from the cocoon of the joint family they were staying in. In addition to these lifestyle changes, the demands of the AM’s job were also very different from those at the MR level. “It looks so easy and glamorous from the outside, but when you are in that role you realize how tough it is,” he told Geetha.

Kumar had five MRs in his team. All were based at Hyderabad. He did not have to venture out of Hyderabad, but had to do a lot of traveling within the city. The company had an aggressive growth target for Hyderabad and he had to share a huge load. He felt that the sales targets for the

---

1 Warangal is a district in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The district headquarter being just 145 km from the state capital of Hyderabad, companies generally have an AM based at Hyderabad look after the territory.
Occupational Stress: A Junior Manager’s Predicament

territories under him were rather high compared to what they had been the previous year. However, having been a high achiever in his career thus far, Kumar relished the challenge. He soon realized though that achieving an individual target as an MR was one thing, and managing the targets of five MR’s territories through other people was quite another.

Four of the MRs in his team were older than him. The fifth, Ramesh, was just 22-years-old and had joined the company six months earlier. All of them seemed to have a deep distrust toward the management. Having been an MR himself for close to five years, Kumar knew that the stereotypical image of an AM in the eyes of the MRs was not always that great, but he felt that he could win them over with his friendliness. However, all his efforts to instill a team spirit in the team went in vain. The distrust toward him was more deeply entrenched than he had thought. He was particularly surprised by Ramesh’s attitude. The senior members of the team had left no stone unturned in poisoning his mind against the managers, he felt.

Kumar’s first few months in DrugPharmz could best be described as tumultuous. He soon realized that there was no honeymoon period in the company and he was expected to show results from the first day. To complicate matters further, there was no one to show him the way. He had been a good MR, but was yet to master all the nuances of the AM’s role. Though he shared the same headquarters with Murthy, the RM of Andhra Pradesh, he felt that Murthy was not very keen on developing the people under him.

Murthy had frequent interactions with Kumar and the other AMs but he seldom discussed anything beyond the sales figures and figures pertaining to the outstanding payments of the various stockists. One day when Kumar brought up an issue relating to the territories under him, expecting some guidance from his boss, Murthy said condescendingly, “Kumar, you are a manager now. We saw some qualities in you for which we have selected you for the post. So, don’t come to me with your problems, think about the solutions.”

Kumar replied, “But Sir, I just wanted your guidance. You know I am new…”

“Don’t make me think I have chosen the wrong person for the job. Why do you people come and make tall promises during your job interviews if you are not ready for the job?” Murthy curtly said.

Kumar was very disappointed. He thought that Murthy was probably in a foul mood that day. But when his approach for guidance on another occasion fetched the same response from Murthy, Kumar understood that it was foolish to expect any help or guidance from his boss, who was only interested in the achievement of the sales target and nothing else. In his earlier company, the AM and the RM had welcomed it if any team member had sought guidance from their seniors. At DrugPharmz, it was viewed with contempt.

Kumar missed his first quarterly sales targets. The company did not take such lapses lightly. In the quarterly sales review meeting, Murthy gave the MRs who had missed their targets a thorough dressing down. Kumar too got a sound scolding and was deeply upset by the fact that Murthy had shouted at him in front of all the MRs of the region. After the meeting was over, he told the other AM of Hyderabad, A. Srinivas (Srinivas), “Tell me. Was it proper of him to shout at us like this in front of our subordinates? I could see some of them looking at each other knowingly and trying hard to suppress their smiles.”

Srinivas replied, “In this company you have to get used to this. Murthy is not the type who cares for the sensibilities of others.”

From that day, Kumar was determined that he would not allow such a situation to arise again. Since the MRs in his team were not responding to his friendly overtures, he started taking a tough
stance toward them. Though grudgingly, the team members started working as he desired. However, the situation was not something that Kumar enjoyed. He was used to having a harmonious relationship with AM and other members of the team in his previous company, and the fact that he had to use coercive tactics to get his work done rankled. He felt that he was probably to blame for not being able to make his team members cooperate with him.

After that, his team members never missed their target. But in their endeavor to achieve the target, they resorted to dumping stocks at the stockists. Kumar soon found himself struggling to recover the payments from the stockists on time. The stockists were reluctant to pay on time as the stocks were much more than the real demand for the products. Moreover, Murthy was always behind him, asking him to recover the payment. Kumar was not at all comfortable with the situation as he was used to achieving his targets honestly, and in his previous company had learned to look down upon practices such as dumping.

***

The pressure of the job was gradually getting to Kumar. He had already completed eight months in the new role. The enormous amount of traveling on a motorcycle too was taking its toll. He was suffering from recurring bouts of low back pain. Kumar’s problems were compounded when his wife got a job at a call center. Though Kumar willingly shared the household work and tried to be as accommodating as possible, he found that he and Geetha, who had been a pillar of support to him till then, could hardly spend any quality time together.

As the days for the next quarterly sales review meeting approached, Kumar found himself getting more and more tense. He was confident that his team members would achieve their targets but was not as confident about getting the payments from a few stockists. He was particularly worried as he did not want Murthy to humiliate him in front of the MRs.

A couple of days before the meeting Kumar started suffering from pain and cramps in the abdomen. He also suffered from constipation alternating with diarrhea. At first, he ignored it as he thought that it was due to something that he had eaten at a roadside stall. However, the problem became more acute on the day of the meeting. He had to go to the washroom many times during the meeting. As he had feared, Murthy started shouting at him for not being able to obtain payments from two stockists. When Kumar excused himself to go to the washroom again, Murthy said sarcastically, “Kumar, are you going to get those payments? … Don’t come back without them.”

Loud laughter greeted this remark. Kumar was upset but kept quiet. After the MRs had left and the managers sat down with Murthy for further discussion, Kumar said, “Sir, you have reasons to be angry with me. But you can give us a piece of your mind now, when we are alone. Why humiliate us in front of our subordinates? They will lose respect for us if you treat us like this before them.”

Murthy replied curtly, “Kumar, if you are so concerned about maintaining your respect before your subordinates, you would do well to perform your job properly rather than telling me what I should do.”

***

Geetha was on the night shift. As Kumar lay in bed tossing and turning, he couldn’t help brooding over Murthy’s attitude. A strange sense of emptiness engulfed him. His back was troubling him, so were the cramps in his abdomen.

The next day being Sunday, Kumar decided to seek a doctor’s advice on his physical problems. He went to Dr. GS Goud (Dr. Goud), a renowned physician in his locality.

After a thorough check up, Dr. Goud said, “I can see that you are suffering from a lot of stress – physical as well as mental. You have developed this disorder called IBS … irritable bowel
Occupational Stress: A Junior Manager’s Predicament

syndrome. It is a stress related disorder. Nowadays many young people like you are turning up with stress related disorders. Do you suffer from depression?”

“I have this strange sense of emptiness,” replied Kumar.

Dr. Goud said, “I am giving you these medicines. But you have to guard against stress. Your back pain is due to riding on bike. Try to avoid it. If you don’t develop strategies to cope with your stress you will end up harming yourself. I have seen people who are about your age turning up with gastric ulcers and heart disease.”

Kumar asked, “Will my abdominal condition become better with this medicine?”

“Medicines can only give you temporary relief. Anyway it’s not advisable to take these drugs for too long. You should take a break. Go on a vacation. At the very least, socialize with other people. Or do yoga,” said Dr. Goud.

Much as Kumar wanted to take a break, he could not possibly do so due to the workload. He had found it difficult to even visit his hometown since he had taken charge at DrugPharmz. The last quarter of the year was very important and his team would have to work really hard if they were to achieve their annual sales targets. Kumar left the doctor’s clinic with the prescription. Dr. Goud also taught him a breathing exercise that would help him relax.

***

In the last quarter of the year, Kumar and his team had not only to ensure that the yearly sales targets were achieved, but also recover all the outstanding payments from the stockists. This was easier said than done. The dumping of the stocks in the earlier months had led to a huge stockpile at the stockists. Under Kumar’s guidance the team worked tirelessly to sell the stock by taking personal order bookings. In this running after sales, Kumar’s relaxation exercises were soon tossed out of the window.

For Kumar, problems came from unexpected quarters. Ramesh, the youngest member of his team, resigned fifteen days before the annual sales review meeting. Kumar found that the symptoms of IBS were getting worse.

At the meeting, Murthy congratulated everyone for the achievement of the yearly regional target. However, he had some harsh words for Kumar. “Ramesh resigns and joins another company under your very nose and you don’t get an inkling of it. I wonder why we have AMs. Grow up, Kumar. You are no longer an MR.”

Kumar was so angry that he could hardly remember what else was discussed at that meeting after that. Once the meeting with the MRs was over and they had left the meeting, the AMs sat down with Murthy for further discussions. Murthy brought up the issue of Ramesh again. “Kumar, Tell me. You did not get any indication that Ramesh was going to …”

Kumar was beside himself with rage. He jumped up from his seat and glared at Murthy, his hands on the table. He shouted, “How many times have I told you not to humiliate me in front of my juniors? You don’t listen, do you… you old goat?”

Everyone in the room including Murthy was taken aback by Kumar’s sudden aggressiveness. Murthy said coldly, “Kumar, I am sorry if I hurt you. I think you need some rest. Go home.”

***

Sitting alone in his house, Kumar realized the gravity of what he had done. He was himself aghast at the way he had reacted at the meeting. Knowing the kind of person Murthy was, Kumar was certain that he wouldn’t take the incident lightly. He was not the type who believed in the “forgive and forget” philosophy. Kumar realized that his career in DrugPharmz was as good as over; maybe even his career in the pharmaceutical industry. Murthy was considered to be a very vindictive
person - the kind who would not think twice before ruining the career of the person who had attracted his ire.

Sitting alone waiting for his wife, Kumar bitterly missed his family back in his hometown. His life had turned upside down in the last one year. Health problems, depression, even his relationship with his wife had taken a turn for the worse. Geetha had been increasingly complaining that he was becoming highly short-tempered.

Would going back to Warangal and helping his father with his farmlands be a better option, Kumar wondered.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What, in your opinion, contributed to the condition Kumar found himself in? What are the different causes of stress? Are all kinds of stress bad?

2. What are the dysfunctional aspects of stress? What, in your opinion, should people like Kumar do to cope with stress? What initiatives should an organization take to avoid such situations?