

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGING STRESS IN THE ORGANIZATION

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Purpose: The main purpose of the paper is to systematize and analyze relation between the role of leadership and stress management in the organizations, indicate sources of stress as well as to determine possible responses to such situations with regard to their impact on the organization.

Design/methodology/approach: The approach applied in the paper is of descriptive-empirical nature. The research methods involved in this paper are: induction, deduction, literature studies, as well survey and data analysis. The method of critical and comparative analysis was used in relation to the views presented in the literature.

Findings: The paper ends with a brief presentation of research findings which correspond to the formulated research questions on most common causes of stress in organizations and its impact on the organization and people as well as their behaviors and reactions.

Research implications: Future research directions should focus on further, expanded research exploration in the area, taking into account various industries. Additional work is needed to disseminate research findings among managers and employees and to implement them in appropriate stress management trainings.

Practical implications: The results of the research discussed in the paper have a number of practical implications mainly for the managers in terms of use of stress management tools and improvement of stress management strategies.

Social implications: Building awareness of stress management issues.

Originality/value The paper has a cognitive value for managers as well as employees working in organizations. Results have theoretical as well as practical implications in search of solutions to stress management.

Keywords: stress management, leadership, employees, organization.

Category of the paper: research paper.

Introduction

The paper constitutes theoretical and empirical study relating to selected aspects of stress management in organizations and the role of leadership in this regard on the example of chosen companies. The paper was divided into two major parts: theoretical and empirical.

The theoretical part completed the theoretical goal which was the extensive review of the literature on management of stress and leadership both in managerial and psychological aspect of the concept. The second part of the paper is of empirical nature. In this part, the author performed the cognitive goal which was the identification and analysis of stress factors in organizations, sources of stress as well as appropriate responses to such situation and possible resolutions from the perspective of leaders. For this goal the survey method was involved. It was carried out among respondents, both employers and employees in two selected companies. The first company was the social insurance institution and the other was the electronic engineering company.

The following research questions were formulated in the paper:

- How do leaders perceive stress at work?
- Do leaders pay attention to the stress occurrence among their subordinates?
- What is more important for leaders: company results or employees' well-being?
- How significant are the levels of stress among leaders?
- How does stress influence leaders' work performance?
- Do employees count on leaders when it comes to solving stress issues?
- How does stress influence employees' work performance?
- What are the similarities and differences between these two perspectives?

Introductory remarks on leadership

Companies would not be able to exist without humans who actually make it work. From the psychological point of view there are three main psychological traits which effective leaders should understand and be able to manage, namely: motivation, fear and anxiety, uncertainty (Kelloway, Turner, Barling & Loughlin, 2012).

There is nothing surprising in a statement that a leader should lead the team towards reaching a common goal. In order to do so every single team member has to do his job as best as possible (Bass & Bass, 2018). Nevertheless at times the amount of work may seem so overwhelming that many would be tempted to give up. That is a place where a leader's job is indispensable (Kotter, 1995). He has to constantly motivate the team to keep pushing forward. The same applies to stress and pressure. Leader has to know how to manage stress and fear, how to work under pressure and overcome anxiety. What is more leaders have to know how to deal with such states and emotions not only in themselves but also among the members of the team (Boyer-Davis, 2018). Noticing it at first glance may seem pointless, as some researchers believe that leaders should simply focus on getting a task done, however a responsible and effective leader knows that the best results can only be achieved when the employees' well-

being is taken care of (Barcik, Małysiak, Dziwiński & Jakubiec, 2021). That is the reason why both strategic and transformational approaches to leadership, discussed in more detail above are centered around the assumption that such workers are much more effective and efficient than those whose needs are ignored (Kirkeby, 2008). The last trait – uncertainty applies mostly to the leader figure. Business is indeed an uncertain area, many unexpected factors can influence it and leaders have to be ready for such challenges and know how to act even in the most unpredictable conditions (Holten, 2015).

Both strategic as well as transformational styles of leadership are built up around the psychological aspects of the concept. In the beginning of the twenty first century the idea of emotional intelligence started to gain popularity (Podgórska, 2014). The emotional intelligence can be perceived as an ability to recognize own as well as others' feelings, ability to be guided by emotions – again, own and employees' – in accordance with being able to motivate teams. The emotional intelligence is completely different from intelligence, knowledge or intellect (Barcik, Małysiak, Dziwiński & Jakubiec, 2021). It is also suggested that a high level of emotional intelligence is closely connected with organizational successes as a leader, characterized by emotional intelligence, possessed the ability to recognize and regulate employees' emotions which directly leads to building successful interpersonal relationships at work (Kouzes, Posner, 2002). That theory strongly emphasizes the role of intuition in making organizational decisions, trusting one's instincts instead of constantly relying on pure facts and knowledge. The major emotional competences of this type of leaders are as follows (Podgórska, 2014): self-consciousness, self-control, motivation, empathy, interpersonal skills.

It should also to be emphasized that a strong relationship between leaders' personality as well as situational experiences and the projects' success, claiming therefore that it is leaders' emotional intelligence, plays a significant role in a project's success or failure (Barcik, Małysiak, Dziwiński & Jakubiec, 2021).

The same point of view was also presented in literature which referred to transformational leadership and determined four areas that affect its success which are as follows (Bass, Avolio, 1990):

- idealized behavior – it makes a leader to be trusted and respected,
- inspirational motivation – the ability to stimulate employees to outperform themselves,
- intellectual stimulation – leaders stimulate the employees to ask questions and to solve old problems in new ways,
- individual consideration – refers to the habit of listening to the needs and wishes of subordinates.

Psychological aspects play an equally important role in the concept of strategic leadership (Hiller, Hambrick, 2005). There are three main ideas that strongly connect psychology of management with abovementioned type of leadership, namely (Sajdak, 2014):

- intuition – hardly measurable but highly effective tool,
- passion – leaders positive attitude spreads among the employees,
- core self-evaluations (CSE).

Researchers of strategic leadership have long been investigating the influence of leaders' self-esteem on their actual actions (Mansaray, 2019). It was observed that high self-esteem determines the most commonly valued leaders' characteristics, such as self-confidence, knowing own strengths or willingness to face challenges as well as influences the process of organizational decision making (Lussier, Achua, 2004).

Psychology and management should be examined together in order to grasp the underlying meaning of all the dimensions of leadership. The major attributes of leaders are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Attributes of a strategic leader

Characteristic	Description
Ability to anticipate	Identification of opportunities and threats achieved through, for instance, conversations with strategic partners of the company, conducting market research.
Willingness to take on challenges	Challenging oneself requires patience, courage, open-mindedness and innovative thinking.
Ability to interpret	Solving complex problems and dilemmas, verifying various hypothesizes, searching for missing information, etc.
Ability to make decisions	Requires taking responsibility for the team's actions, setting short- and long-term goals as well as choosing best options in a rapidly changing work environment.
Ability to find common areas of cooperation	A dialogue between parties with opposite visions and purposes in order to achieve common understanding.
Ability to learn	Leaders should learn from both successes and failures as they are figures whom the employees observe and look up to.

Adapted from: Own study based on Schoemaker P., Kupp S., Howland S. (2013). Strategic Leadership: The Essential Skills. *Harvard Business Review*. January – February Issue; pp.131-134.

Leadership undeniably cannot be considered, nor characterized, apart from both management and psychology. As it was briefly presented above, psychological aspects are visible in the most popular types of contemporary leadership as many personal traits still remain the basis of determination whether a certain leader can be perceived successful or not (Prentice, 2008).

Defining stress management

Stress is a phenomenon hard to avoid in a workplace. Perhaps most of the leaders, as well as the majority of employees, at least once in their career faced the necessity of working under pressure (Satpathy, Mitra, 2015). Such experiences can strongly influence the workers' effectiveness, organization's goals and the way leaders manage their teams. Therefore, there

are several reasons behind the importance of knowing at least the basics of stress management by the leaders (Maxfield, Hale, 2018).

Both workers and leaders can experience stress in their careers, for instance, when they are at times supposed to work under pressure and do not possess knowledge nor ability to effectively cope with it. As in was pointed out in the previous section, employees' well-being in many styles and types of leadership plays a crucial role as it directly impacts the company's effectiveness (Houghton, Wu, Godwin, Neck & Manz, 2012).

Coming back to the concept of core self-evaluations to the business environments, it was further developed in order to show that it can be considered in relation to organizational spheres, such as: job satisfaction, motivation and job performance. What is more, as it was discussed above, the CSE scale not only determines that people with higher results, with more self-esteem, make better leaders, but also affects the intensity of perceived stress (Panigrahi, 2016). Therefore, individuals with higher CSE results are proved to recognize less situations as stressful, are able to deal much better with pressure and in effect their well-being is reflected in the outstanding job performance (Barcik, Małysiak, Dziwiński & Jakubiec, 2021). Analogically, less self-confident human beings, with lower numbers on core self-evaluations scale, tend to consider more situations as threatening or stressful and thus their levels of perceived stress are significantly higher. Stress undoubtedly affects the employees psychologically, physiologically and behaviorally and all of these factors have been associated with lower job performance which is invariably a negative outcome for the organization" (Nelson, Burke, 2000).

The reasons behind stress at work can be both personal or result from poor leadership and company management. Stressors can be grouped into following categories (Burke, Cooper, 2000):

- individual work stress sources – resulting from own role at company,
- group – caused by the group's dynamics and managers' behavior,
- organizational – resulting from company's policy.

One can observe that either causes or results can be both considered from individual as well as organizational point of view. Focusing hereinafter on the organizational ones, one may distinguish, for instance, high absenteeism and employee turnover, poor productivity and effectiveness of work which in result leads to higher recruitment costs and various money losses. A company consists of people and it is individuals' well-being that plays a significant role in the company's success or failure (Romas, Sharma, 2022). Therefore it is the leaders' role to manage and reduce stress in their teams.

What can be done to manage stress? The four steps are presented below (Sahoo, 2015):

- Identifying potential work-related stress hazards – gathering information among employees, reporting it to higher instances, etc.,
- Assessing the work-related stress risks – identifying when, how often stress occurs and what results it brings,

- Controlling the work-related stress hazards and risks – presenting ideas of how to prevent stress occurrence and consulting it with employees,
- Implementing continuous improvement – reporting the effectiveness of implemented ideas to higher instances and regularly searching for stress risks.

Sometimes leaders identify factors which are difficult to deal with and in such case the author suggests taking it slowly and starting from reducing high-stress situations to lower stress. In extreme cases it is also suggested to use available counseling assistance programs. Most importantly however leaders should listen and stay in touch with their employees, make sure that the workload and working hours are compatible with each other as well as take care of the work environment and respectful atmosphere in the team (Van den Bergh, 2021). At times, reducing stress to zero may be impossible to achieve nonetheless it is perceived as leaders' responsibility to ensure employees' well-being and manage stress as successfully as it is in their power (Gardner, 2012).

Pressure nowadays can be considered on various grounds. One can distinguish time pressure, performance pressure but also innovation pressure. Both stress and pressure can be experienced by either leaders or employees however the leaders are believed to find themselves under pressure much often because of the fact that they are responsible not only for their own work but also for the results and well-being of their subordinates (Xu, Jin, 2022).

It should be pointed out that the biggest source of stress at work comes from time pressure. People in general do not find working under pressure to be a positive experience and search for ways which allow them to avoid such situations (Van den Bergh, 2021). Long-term planning as well as good organizational skills of leaders undoubtedly can be of help here. Working under pressure of time may also have a negative influence on the company in general as either employees or leaders, who need to meet short deadlines will certainly not have enough time for conducting additional analysis and therefore may be tempted to make unreasonable or even reckless, decisions (Romas, Sharma, 2022).

The twenty first century also introduced a new type of pressure which can be observed in the business environment namely innovation pressure. The world is changing so fast that many organizations must constantly implement new solutions to stay on the market and not to be replaced by the competition. Continuous learning, creation and use of knowledge, treating it as one of the business functions is now indispensable. The main advantage of the contemporary enterprise aspiring to be perceived as innovative are competences of its employees, especially their developmental, learning and creativity capacities as well as the ability to forecast, react and produce (Tran et al., 2020). Searching for innovative solutions and implementing them may decide about the organization's survival on the market. Leaders should therefore face such innovation pressure, remembering that employees should have the opportunities to constantly develop their skills and competences provided (Seaward, 2017).

Surprisingly, not all the types of pressure are considered as negative. Some leaders who rely more on task-oriented than human-oriented leadership perceive performance pressure as a useful tool of motivating their teams to use their full potential (Gardner, 2012).

Selected survey results

The survey was conducted among the group of the leaders and employees of two companies. In order to have a broader range of answers it was decided that not only employers and their deputies will be included in this group but also managers of different departments. The survey was conducted on a research sample of 30 participants who were the leaders and 90 participants who were the employees.

The first company to be surveyed was the social insurance institution. It is a strictly Polish state organization which has been operating since 1934. It is responsible for social insurance matters. It is the public sector company.

The other company was established in 1991. It is a Polish private sector company operating in the electronic engineering industry, mostly focused on digital scanning technologies.

The survey took place between September and October 2021. The questionnaire used in the study was designed solely for the purpose of the study.

According to the first question of the survey, respondents were asked if they have ever experienced any stressful situation at the workplace. It should not surprise that 0% respondents have never experienced stress at work which strongly supports the statement that it is simply impossible to avoid some stressful situations at the workplace. The questions shows that 13.3% of respondents have experienced stress at work either rarely or every day. Twice as many of them tend to experience it from time to time – 26.7%, and majority of 50% admits to experiencing stress relatively often. Table 1. includes the answers.

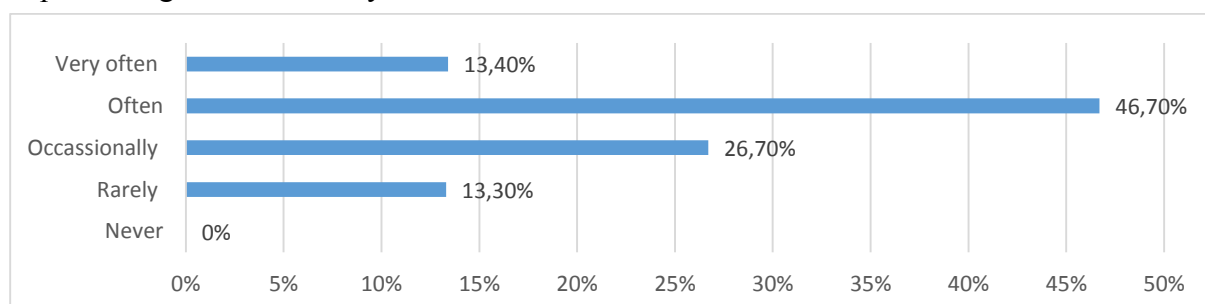


Figure 1. Have you ever experienced stressful situation at workplace? Source: own study.

According to Figure 2, half of respondents claim that they often have to work under stress for a longer period of time. 23.3% admit that it happens from time to time, 13.3% experience it rarely and only 3.3% never at all. Unfortunately about 10% claim that it occurs very often.

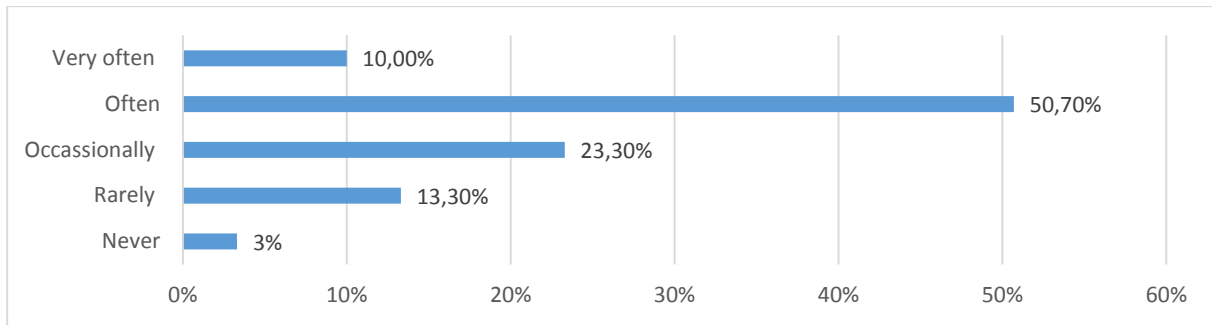


Figure 2. Have you ever been under stress at work for a longer period of time? Source: own study.

Working under pressure also appears to be difficult for most of the leaders. Half of them work under pressure often, 20% from time to time, 16.7% every day and only 13.3% rarely. One can observe that the option “never” was not chosen by any of the respondents. The results are presented in Figure 3.

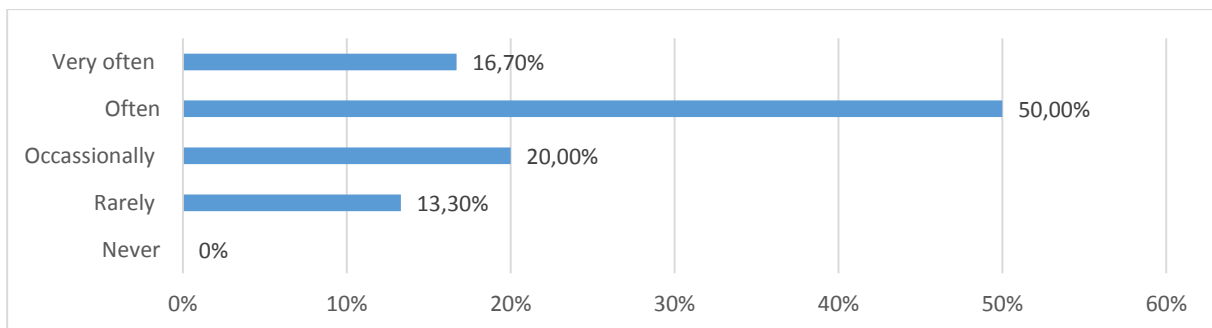


Figure 3. Have you ever worked under pressure? Source: own study.

When asked about limitations in performance caused by pressure, 13.3% of respondents claim that it has never stopped them from doing the best they can, twice as much – 26.7%, that it happens rarely, 33.3% admit that such effect occurs from time to time, 16.7% experience it often and exactly 10% deal with it daily. Fortunately, 43.3% of surveyed leaders claim that pressure never stopped them from going to work, 33.3% that it happens rarely and 23.3% voted for sometimes. Higher results remain at 0%. The results are presented in Figures 4 and 5 below.

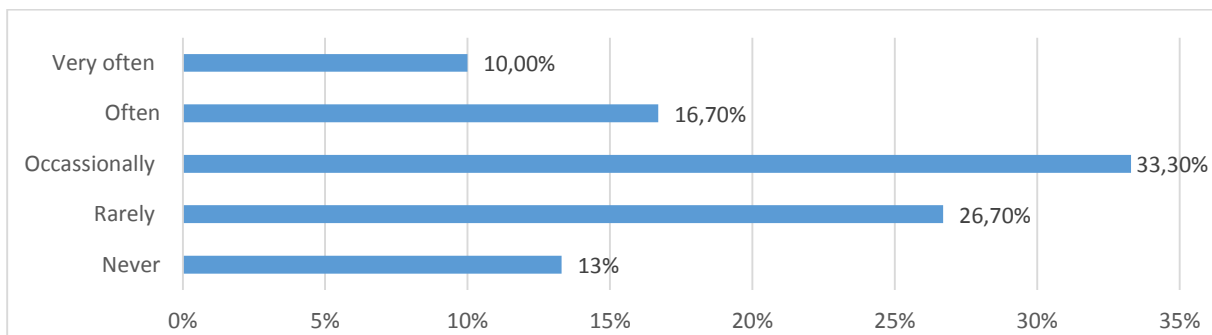


Figure 4. Have you ever been in a situation when pressure was so overwhelming that it stopped you from doing your job? Source: own study.

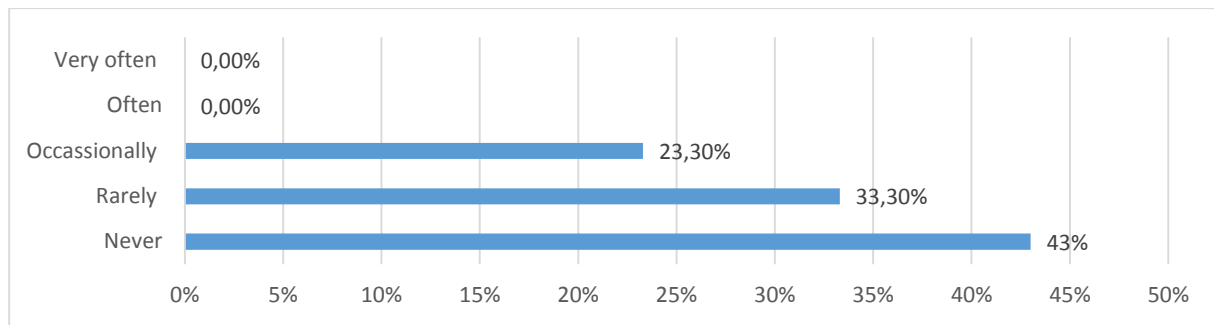


Figure 5. Has stress/pressure ever stopped you from going to work? Source: own study.

It has always been emphasized that for some leaders it may be difficult to treat work and personal life separately. Therefore only 3.3% of them say that stress never or rarely influences their personal life, 43.3% claim that sometimes it happens, 33.3% that it is often a problem and 16.7% admit that it is a daily struggle.

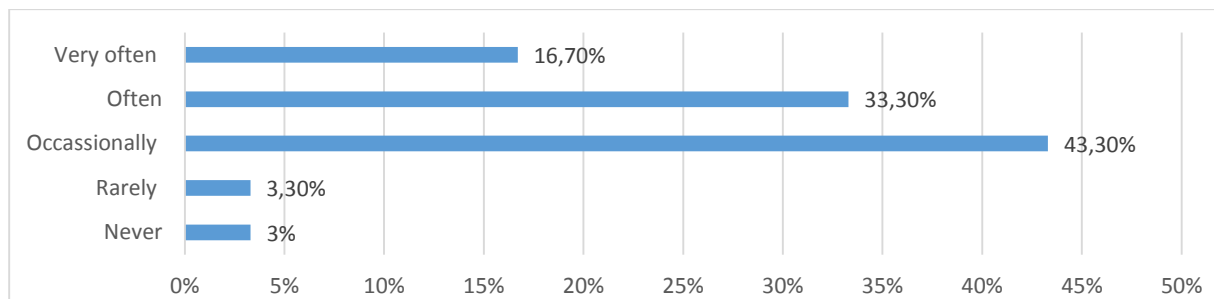


Figure 6. Has stress/pressure ever influenced your personal life? Source: own study.

It was also asked what is the leaders' personal attitude towards stress and pressure occurrence at work. 23.3% decided it cannot be motivating, 33.3% that it can motivate, but the majority of 43.3% said that it depends on circumstances. On the other hand, when asked if it can be discouraging, the huge amount of 83.3% voted that it may. It appears worth noticing that even though some leaders may consider pressure to be motivating, most of them are perfectly aware of its potential negative influence.

The half of respondents perceive stress and pressure as a limitation in reaching personal goals. 43.3% believe that it does not have such a powerful influence on their lives and only 6.7% of them are not sure of the answer. What is more, as much as 80% of respondents admit that sometimes they are anxious of starting another working day, when only 20% of them are completely free of such fear.

Stress can often be a reason for many issues connected with health. As we can observe in figures 17 and 18, 56.7% of respondents admit that at least once in their life they experienced health issues caused by stress and 50% state that such difficulties were on the basis of their mental health.

Leaders, motivated by the role they are supposed to play in the company, also tend to observe their subordinates and co-workers. That may be a reason why 70% of them did notice the influence of stress and pressure on their colleagues.

Remembering Covid-19 threat as well as difficulties connected with constant change, among others, it appears to be of no surprise to see that as much as 90% of respondents admitted to the belief that stress levels have significantly risen in recent years. Asked about the reasons behind stress and pressure occurrence at work, surveyed entities voted for several options. The 3 most voted were:

- work-life balance issues – 93.3%,
- competitiveness among colleagues – 53.3%,
- excessive demands of the job and feeling overworked – 46.7%.

The next question in the survey was concerned with the levels of stress at work in the recent year which due to unexpected circumstances of the pandemic was difficult for many businesses. Therefore, answering the question whether or not a given person experienced too much stress that year it does not surprise that 20% respondents found themselves under too much stress daily, 40% leaders often, 26.7% at some part of that year, and only 10% rarely. There was only one individual who claimed that he/she managed to avoid stress at work in the recent year completely.

The very last question in this part of the survey is concerned with making a mistake due to overwhelming pressure or stress at work. Surprisingly honest responses indicated that 60% of respondents have indeed at least once in their career had trouble overcoming stress and made a mistake because of that reason. Only 33.3% of leaders claim that this problem does not apply to them.

The first question in this part of research is concerned about whether or not a leader talked to his/her subordinates about stress occurrence at work. According to Figure 7, 87% of leaders believe that they did. Only 10% admit that it did not cross their minds and only 3% indicate a group of those who are not sure of the answer.

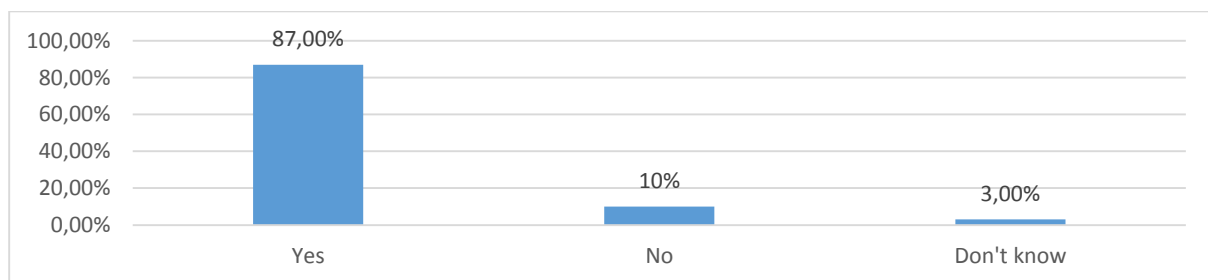


Figure 7. Have you ever spoken to your employees about stress at work? Source: own study.

The situation looks almost entirely similar in the question whether or not the leaders talked with their subordinates about potential consequences of stress occurring at the workplace. Figure 8 shows that 83% claim to have had such a conversation, while only 17 % of responses vary from complete denial to not being so sure about the answer.

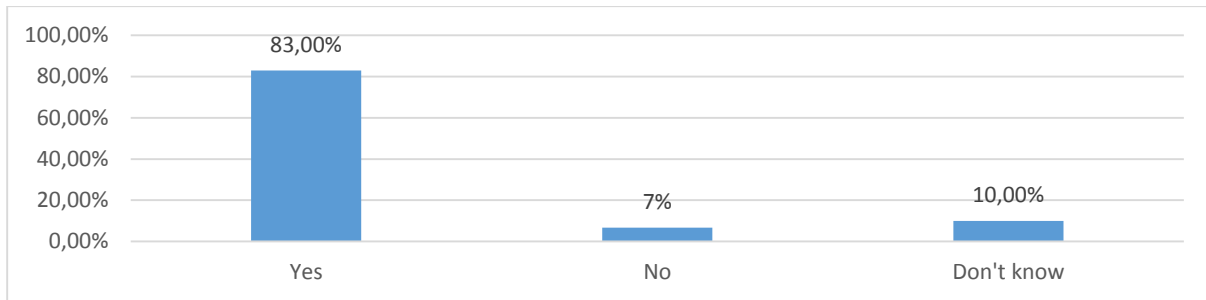


Figure 8. Have you ever surveyed your employees on consequences of stress at workplace? Source: own study.

According to Figure 9, 87% of leaders believe that employees can seek their help in stress and pressure related problems, 7% emphasizes that it depends on a problem and only certain individuals claimed that they would not be interested in hearing about such issues.

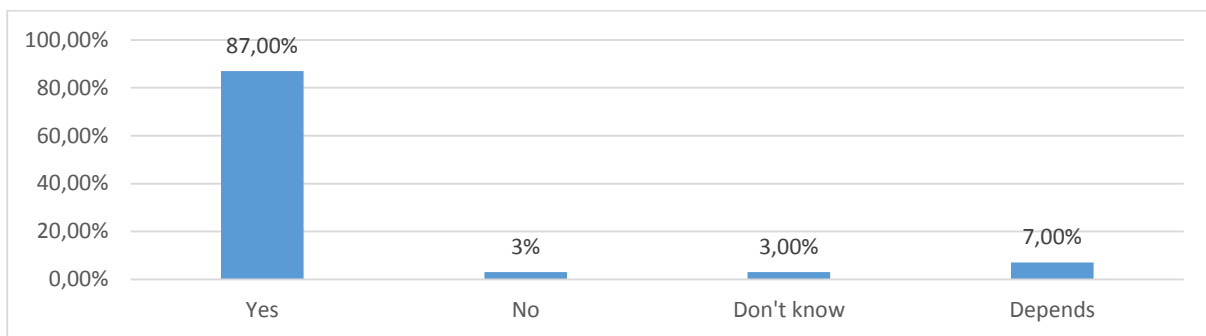


Figure 9. Do you think your employees could talk to you about stress/pressure related problems? Source: own study.

The following question (Figure 10) regards whether or not certain leaders did anything to combat the issues causing stress at work among their employees. 73% confirmed, 7% of respondents denied and 20% remained unsure. What is more, to those leaders who answered “yes”, the questionnaire included one more question, namely: what exactly do they do? Respondents gave many various answers, but the ones which were mentioned more than just one time included:

- encouraging subordinates to honest conversations,
- observing and staying willing to listen about employees’ problems,.
- team conferences where issues such as mobbing or stress are openly discussed

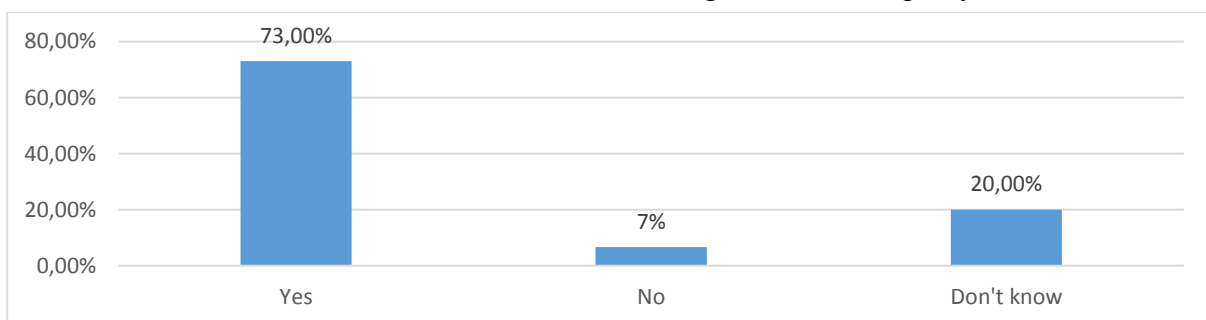


Figure 10. Have you ever done anything to combat the issues causing stress at workplace among your employees? Source: own study.

Yet another question poses a challenge whether or not a certain leader believes that she/he could do more to eliminate stress in the team of his/her employees. 66% of respondents admit that they could think some more about potential solutions, 17% claim that they could not do anything more than what they are already doing and exactly the same percentage remain undecided.

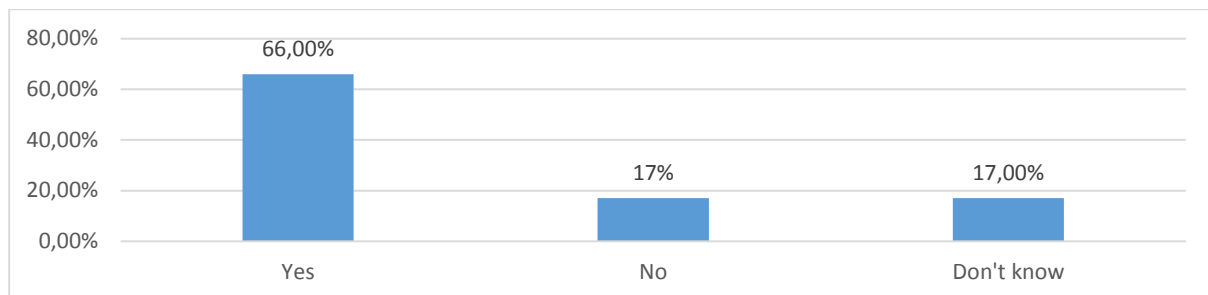


Figure 11. Do you think you could do more to manage stress at work? Source: own study.

The next question requires a distinction whether or not a certain leader could be a potential source of stress among his/her subordinates. The results show that 60% of leaders believe they were not the reason why employees felt pressure, 10% claim that they could be and 13.3% of them are not sure. Moreover, several leaders added additional answers to that question, most of them emphasizing that they hoped they were not such a stress-causing type of boss or that they did never intend to be such a leader.

The following question of the survey asks leaders to answer if they perceive themselves as supportive when it comes to stress and pressure at work. 90% of them openly believe they indeed are, 6.7% left the question diplomatically unanswered while 3.3% admitted that they may in fact not be.

Similarly, about 80% of surveyed entities claim they considered creating any form of support to help their subordinates deal with stress and pressure at work while 13.3% admit it has never crossed their minds and 2.6% remain unsure.

When considering a phenomenon of responsible leadership, as much as the majority of 90% of respondents believe that stress and pressure occurrence at work should not be overlooked or underestimated (Figure 12).

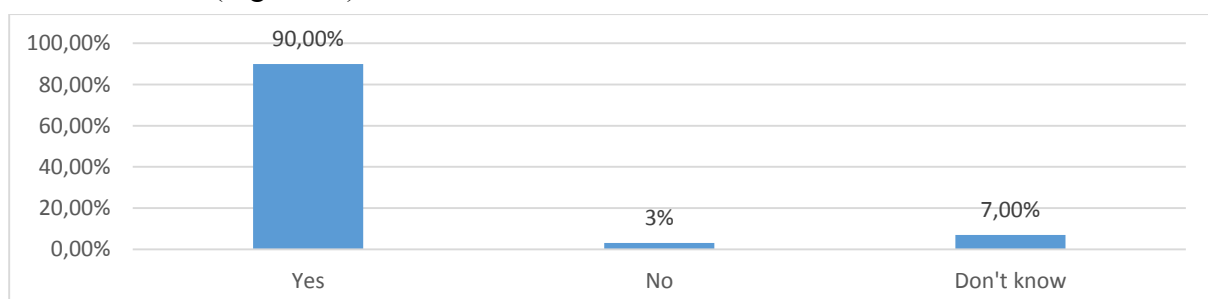


Figure 12. Do you think that responsible leader should not underestimate stress and pressure among workers? Source: own study.

The very last short-answer question asks whether levels of stress and pressure at work increased due to Covid-19 pandemic. 76.7% of respondents gave a positive answer, 13.3% denied and 10% remained undecided. The following question states that “if yes, in what way exactly?” Again, 23 respondents gave here their answers, but the ones that appeared at least more than once are as follows:

- increased workload and appearance of new tasks,
- more absences at work, a need to delegate workers to different departments,
- uncertainty about what will happen on the market,
- constant changes in daily tasks,
- moving to partly-online work.

Eventually the last question in that survey asks the leaders of their own forms of managing stress and dealing with pressure that they could share with their employees based on their own experiences. Among 30 responses those which appear the most often are:

- trying to keep healthy life-work balance,
- yoga; exercising; sport; or at least taking long walks,
- setting goals which can truly be achieved like relaxing at home after work for at least, 1h a day by reading books or news online,
- spending at least few hours a week doing what one loves most; giving oneself time to develop passions and focusing on self-development,
- supporting each other instead of competing,
- if stress and pressure get too overwhelming several leaders also mention beneficial support of a therapy.

Some overall conclusions resulting from the analysis of the gathered data may be useful to construct at least a simple characteristic of how leaders perceive the phenomenon of stress and pressure occurring at the workplace, how they deal with it and try to help their subordinates to overcome potential difficulties.

Leaders who have agreed to take part in this research generally admit to being under a lot of stress at work relatively often and at times even for a longer period. What is more, about 50% of them admit to be working under pressure. Leaders also claim that both stress and pressure can be considered as limitations in performance, as many of them pointed out that it is easier to make a mistake or not to reach a desirable goal due to its negative influence. Several of them acknowledge stress as a factor which can strongly impact both physical and mental health and general well-being of individuals. Despite the fact that approaching another working day and facing the challenges which it poses make 80% of leaders slightly anxious, hardly anyone of them is willing to skip such a day at work, which subsequently shows the responsible approach to handling their own duties. Even though some leaders acknowledge motivating influence of pressure at employees, most of them are more concerned about the possible negative consequences it may cause and therefore, are not at all willing to be leaders of whom employees tend to be afraid.

Among the most common causes of stress at work one may distinguish that leaders point out to the difficulties in keeping a healthy balance between work and personal life. They also mention the problem of competitiveness among colleagues as well as feeling overworked which may result from the abovementioned issue of taking work home. Respondents also emphasize that in recent years the levels of stress increased significantly, especially during the last year, as Covid-19 pandemic forced them to face many completely new daily challenges, introduced additional tasks as well as invented necessity of keeping employees well-informed even if they need to work from home.

The surveyed group of leaders generally tends to acknowledge if their colleagues or subordinates are under stress and around 80% of respondents claim to be supportive in such circumstances as well as value the opportunities to openly talk about it with employees, either individually or during some kind of a conference. If necessary, they are willing to listen and solve such problems. Nevertheless, around 60% of surveyed entities admit that, in fact, they could do much more when it comes to creating means of supporting employees in this sphere and acting against pressure occurrence. Moreover, 90% of the leaders acknowledge that responsible leadership requires paying attention to dealing with stress and pressure at work and not overlooking such dilemmas as it may in result significantly limit the work performance in teams of their subordinates. Obviously, there is no one universal solution to fully and irreversibly eliminate stress and pressure at work, but the group of surveyed leaders comes up with several ideas, among others emphasizing the importance of keeping balance between work and personal space.

Therefore, looking at the gathered data from the leaders' perspective, one may draw the conclusion that employees' well-being is taken into account at least as much as the company's results and that stress and pressure are considered only as a limitation in work performance and productivity. The following part however will take into account the same matters from a different perspective and will present the role of leadership in managing stress and pressure at work from the employees' point of view.

The second part of the questionnaire was prepared specifically for employees and focused on the role of leadership in managing stress and dealing with pressure from the perspective of the group of subordinates.

When it comes to a question whether or not employers talked to their subordinates about stress, 53% of respondents give the confirmation, however, 32% of them deny it and 15% cannot precisely recall such a situation (Figure 13). In comparison, 87% of the leaders claimed that they did conduct such conversation with their subordinates which makes both results not entirely compatible. Similar situation occurs when the question is formulated in a little bit more specific way and regards whether or not employees were spoken to about stress consequences. A half of them admit that they did, but the other half is either not sure or claims that their boss never talked about it – in this case 34% of respondents (Figure 14). It is worth noting here that 83% of leaders believe their emphasized consequences of stress when talking with employees.

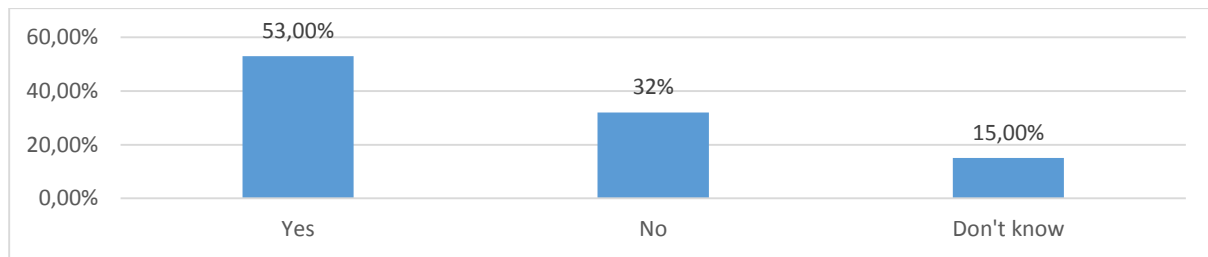


Figure 13. Has your employer ever spoken to you about stress at work? Source: own study.

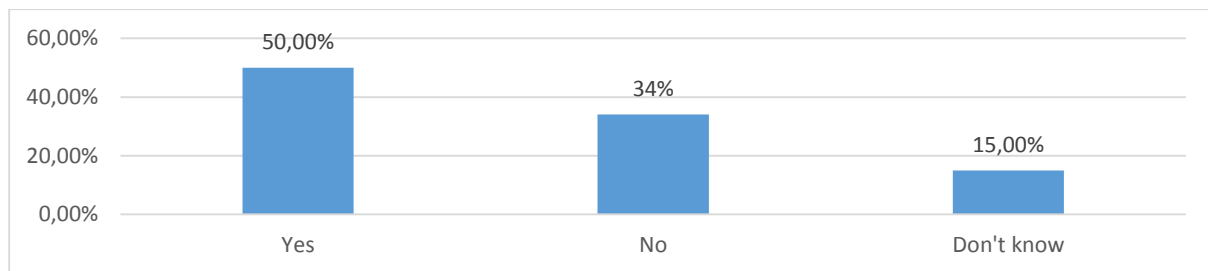


Figure 14. Has your employer surveyed you about the consequences of stress at your workplace? Source: own study.

The following question directed to this group of respondents focuses on the dilemma of whether or not in their careers have they ever feared losing job due to any mistakes made under pressure. The majority of 61 % decided that indeed, such an idea did at some point cross their minds, 28% have never experienced it and 11% did not recall either of the possibilities.

Another question explains the employees' perspective on whether or not they could directly talk to their bosses when considering a problem stress- or pressure-related. The vast amount of 42% of respondents were surprisingly more eager to claim that it depends on a given matter than simply decide that they would seek their employers' help – 30% or would definitely avoid such a solution – 16%. 12% of employees would consider it but not necessarily choose it as a first option and one individual adds his/her own idea that they would do it if the problem was important enough. In comparison, 87% of leaders claimed that their employees could definitely talk to them about stress and pressure-related issues which therefore shows that what seems obvious for one group, can not necessarily be perceived in the same way but the other one.

According to the survey results, over a half of all the respondents in this group decided that their employers have undertaken any action aimed at limiting stress occurrence at the workplace, the rest either denied it or remained hesitant (Figure 15). On the other hand, 66% admitted to the belief that their employers/managers could do more in this area, 17% claim there was nothing more that could be done, and again 17% of respondents did not pick any side (Figure 16). Moreover, the results of research conducted in the group of leaders revealed that both employees and the leaders' responses in this case correspond with each other pretty accurately.

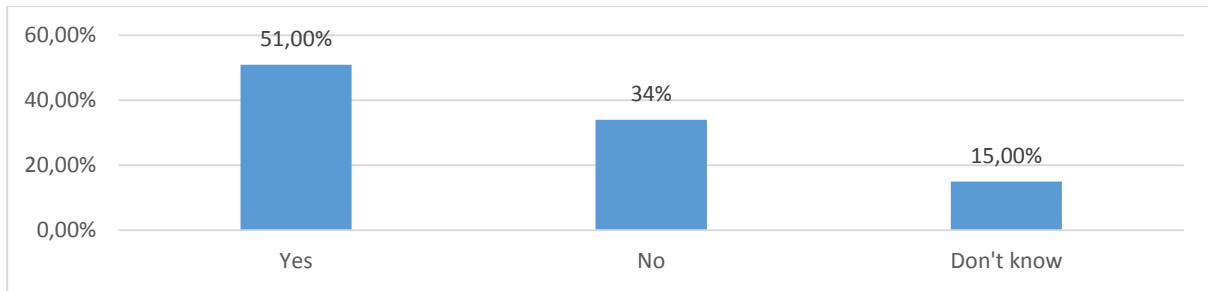


Figure 15. Has your employer done anything to combat issues causing stress at work? Source: own study.

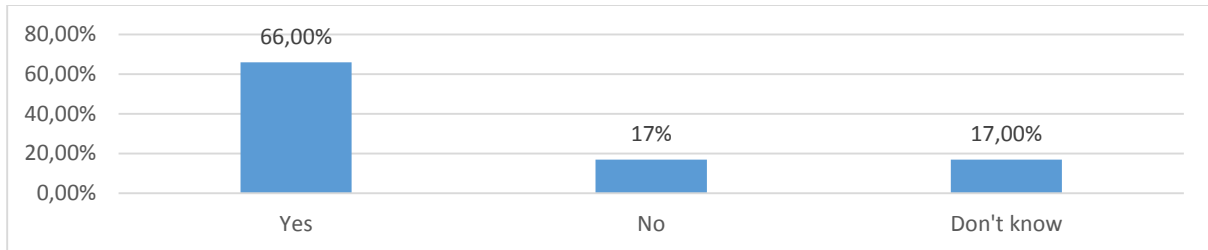


Figure 16. Do you think your employer could do more to manage stress at work? Source: own study.

Surprisingly enough the biggest dissonance can be observed in the question if the employer/manager had ever been a source of pressure for employees. While only 10% of leaders admitted that it could have happened, the remaining 90% hoped, and expressed in various ways that they would never intend to be. Meanwhile, 52.2% of employees admitted that, intentionally or not, their bosses caused them to feel pressure at work (Figure 17). On the other hand, while 90% of leaders expressed their support when it comes to stress and pressure occurrence at the workplace, over a half of surveyed employees indeed admitted to receive such assurance from the leadership layers of the company (Figure 18).

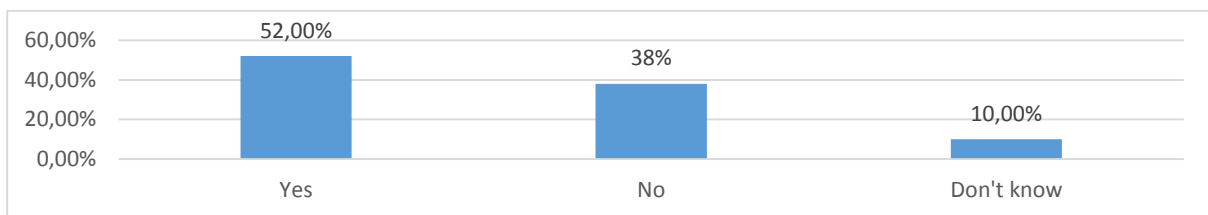


Figure 17. Was the employer ever the main reason why you felt pressure at work? Source: own study.

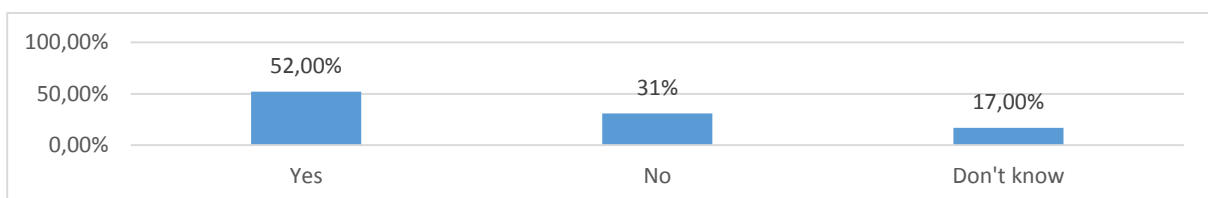


Figure 18. Do you think your employer supports you when it comes to stress and pressure at work? Source: own study.

While only 40% of respondents claim that they are aware of some means of support provided by their employers/managers, 80% of the leaders' group claim to be willing to put such solutions into practice (Figure 19). Although the difference here may seem twice as big, it is worth remembering that the research sample in both surveyed groups varies significantly, between 30 leaders and 90 employees, therefore differences in percentages are inevitable. What is worth noticing here is that no matter how many participants are taken into account when it comes to that question in both questionnaires, 90% of leaders and 81% of employees unchangeably believe that responsible leadership requires dealing with stress and pressure on a daily basis and supporting employees in overcoming any potential difficulties caused by stress and pressure at workplace (Figure 20).

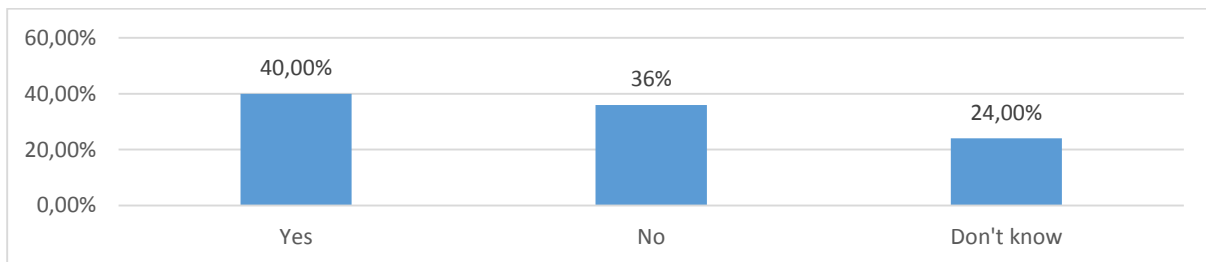


Figure 19. Are you aware of any support your employer provides to help employees to cope with stress and pressure? Source: own study.

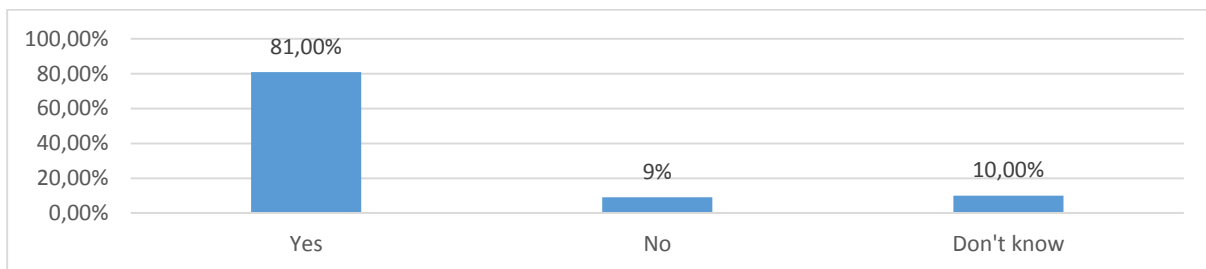


Figure 20. Do you think that responsible leader should not underestimate stress and pressure among workers? Source: own study.

Employees as well as leaders acknowledge Covid-19 pandemic's negative influence on levels of pressure and stress in the companies. Both companies have experienced it and have to deal with consequences it introduced to their daily routine. More than a half of the group of employee respondents claimed that the levels of stress and pressure significantly increased under the pandemic regime. Asked in the following question about the exact examples of what has changed, many answers did repeat several times, including:

- dismissals and worry for potential dismissals are any moment,
- having to additionally do the work of absentees alongside with their own,
- new tiring tasks and duties (for instance, lists of people under quarantine in Human Resources departments),
- being overworked,
- receiving less money monthly,
- working from home with limited access to resources.

As one can observe, there are some areas in which both leaders and employees have similar opinions, and there are other group-specific ones. At times employees may not be entirely sure of the leaders' intention as well as sometimes employees' worry and fear of leaders is completely unfounded, as was presented in numerous examples above, and therefore one most important conclusion which sums up the conducted research would be that both sides should communicate with one another in as clear and plain way as possible, in order to avoid stress and pressure causing misunderstandings.

Conclusions

Summarizing the above deliberations the following observations based on the survey were made attempting to offer the answer to the research question: The research results showed that:

- both leaders and employees admitted to experiencing stress and pressure at work often or even daily,
- both leaders and employees acknowledged that stress and pressure occurring at the workplace have disruptive influence on their work performance (such as making mistakes under pressure or not reaching desirable goals due to stress occurrence),
- both leaders and employees agreed that stress can be either motivating or discouraging, indicating also that negative influence is of greater possibility,
- both leaders and employees claimed that responsible leadership should pay close attention to problems stress- and pressure- related,
- considerably more leaders than employees admitted that the stress at work has a disruptive influence on their personal life,
- considerably more employees were willing to avoid stressful days or situations at work, while leaders emphasized being ready to face and overcome such difficulties,
- considerably more employees fear losing job due to mistakes made under pressure,
- competitiveness among colleagues inside the company appears to be growing problem among both employees and leaders,
- majority of the leaders claim to support their teams when it comes to dealing with stress-related issues while only minority of the employees admit to seek help of leaders while overcoming such issues,
- both leaders and employees stated that stress and pressure levels increased in the last year due to Covid-19 pandemic,
- approximately half of the members of both surveyed groups admit to having health-related problems due to stress at work,

- both leaders and employees emphasized the negative influence of stress on mental health and importance of its successful management,
- the majority of leaders acknowledge the importance of noticing the stress and pressure effects on co-workers and subordinates,
- most leaders claim to be actively acting against stress occurrence at work but also believe there is yet still much more to be done,
- leaders generally tend not to be willing to become a source of stress or pressure of their subordinates, while the majority of employees' voices claim to have experience such situation which subsequently leads to another conclusion that there is yet much to be done when it comes to clear communication between the leaders and employees.

The research results implicated that stress and pressure are still perceived as a huge problem among both groups of respondents and many of them tend to experience it often. Both leaders and employees classify stress as limiting their performance or even as a factor which can stop them from reaching goals while pressure is considered to be most likely the source of mistakes. Nonetheless the leaders appear to truly pay attention to the stress occurrence among their subordinates. They claim to be supportive and willing to offer all the help that is required to eliminate the occurrence of stress among their teams as much as it is possible. Therefore what is worth noticing is that most of the leaders had already acquired the belief that caring about the employees' well-being is equal to caring about the company itself as only motivated teams are most likely to achieve maximum effectiveness and efficiency and motivation is hardly ever achieved through causing fear among the workers. On the other hand the research results have shown that when it comes to stress and pressure at work, employees do not count on leaders to help them solve such issues and are more likely do deal with them on their own, claiming that they would only seek their employers' help if the problem was extremely important or causing a lot of damage among the whole team.

The change in the role of leadership in managing stress and pressure in the modern, competitive world of business appears to have already begun. The research has shown that the majority of leaders truly regard the employees' well-being and are ready to support the individuals in solving the problems they often face, instead of perceiving them just as a workforce, as a mean used to achieving bigger goals. The problem is that the employees' do not necessarily notice it or perhaps do not fully believe their leaders' intentions. Therefore the key to achieving the best cooperation between the leaders and employees is to clearly communicate their intentions by the employers and to more openly express their worries and expectations by the employees.

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