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Beating stress

By Carole Spiers (Pressure gauge)

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A COMMON theme underlying several of my articles has been the damaging effect of stress on both individuals and organisations, and the importance of developing a 'healthy' workplace culture that is as stress-free as practicable.

 The reason is that stress can act as a disease within an organisation, making it unhealthy, unmanageable and under-performing.

The link between work absence and stress is so well proven that non-attendance statistics are often used as an indicator of stress 'hotspots'. The effect of stress on work performance is also damaging to the extent that individuals suffering from high levels of it may eventually find that their powers of creativity and rational thought have been weakened. And, where an individual is unable to perform their job to the required standard, this will eventually produce its own additional stress response.


Many stress-related problems can be exacerbated as a direct consequence of managers not having the required skill-set to deal with them. Where relationship boundaries within the workplace are not clearly defined, this too can lead to misunderstandings that cause undue pressure. Conflict within an organisation can become endemic and, if not addressed, will damage both the organisation and the individuals involved.

Some of the most common warning signs of stress in an organisation include workplace bullying, high levels of absenteeism, increased accident levels, low morale, poor staff retention, a 'long hours' work culture, and reduced productivity.

Among the familiar signs and signals that indicate a stressed member of staff or manager are frequent mood changes or negative behaviour; deteriorating relationships with colleagues; working longer hours without obvious signs of additional achievement; indecisiveness; sick leave, poor performance, such as increased mistakes, accidents, missed deadlines or a failure to meet targets; bad time-keeping; clock watching; reduced output; poor memory and impaired judgement; withdrawal from social activity and a lack of personal care.

So how can these behaviours be managed in order to reduce their impact and lead to the creation of a healthier workplace environment?

Identifying factors

Absenteeism is unfortunately rising in most developed economies and it is essential that existing methods of managing attendance are improved by identifying and reducing or removing factors that induce stress and lead to employee ill-health. 

Employee Wellbeing: Implementing a stress management programme is recommended only after action has been taken to identify and reduce, or eliminate, known causes of stress in the workplace (or organisation) by means of a stress audit and/or a risk assessment programme.

Supporting Rehabilitation to work with counselling and coaching: It is inevitable that organisations will have a degree of sickness absence and that some of this may be long-term. Supporting employees through their absence and managing their rehabilitation back to work will reduce the cost of the absence and give the employee a sense of being valued.

Where the root of the absence or ill-health is work-related or linked to a traumatic life event, counselling and coaching are invaluable ways of supporting individuals and assisting them back to full health and ultimately to work.

Regular staff questionnaires, focus groups and appraisals will enable managers to identify stress hotspots and manage them effectively before they spread within the organisation.

Whilst 'pressure' is healthy, 'stress' is not, and some people are able to manage pressure better than others. This factor needs to be considered at the recruitment stage and where a job is known to be a high-pressure position, then individual responses to withstanding that environment need to be properly considered.

Induction and training


Welcoming an employee into the company and ensuring they have all the information they need to perform their duties is also essential.

This is an area that is often neglected by employers as joining a new team is always a daunting prospect. Meeting the individuals and understanding everyone's role is critical for successful integration - as is knowing what resources are available within the company.

Empowering staff to report problems openly and frankly: Managers need to be sensitive and non-judgemental regarding their employees' concerns, and know where to send people needing professional support.

Creating a 'community' culture: The organisation must consider the hidden costs of bad attitudes that are so corrosive to team spirit; rethink the performance management approach in human terms and aim to make every team member feel properly recognised and valued in order to achieve their full potential.

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- Stress can act as a disease within an organisation affecting performance.
- The link between absence, sick-leave and stress, is well proven.
- Many stress-related problems can be exacerbated because managers lack the skill-set to deal with them.
- Stress audits and risk assessments enable management to identify the causes of stress and to take appropriate

action.

Carole Spiers, the UK's leading Guru on corporate stress-management and organisational change, is also a regular BBC broadcaster and international author on these major, business issues. She is also a regular motivational speaker at UAE conferences. Your questions and input on this article or any related topic, is welcomed. Each Friday, we will discuss a selection of your letters or case studies. Please write to Carole Spiers at: ktwkd@emirates.net.ae. Website: www.carolespiersgroup.com

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