

HOME
EDITORIAL
OPINION
UAE
BUSINESS
WORLD
SUBCONTINENT
MIDDLE EAST
APPOINTMENTS
USED CARS
CLASSIFIEDS
GOLD/FOREX

WEEKEND

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Managing Stress

By Carole Spiers (Pressure Gauge)

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In my previous article I looked in detail at the causes and effects of work-related stress. But what do organisations need to do to manage it? What works and what does not?

 As I briefly introduced last week, the first thing is to carry out a risk assessment, the results of which should highlight problem areas that need to be focused on in order to reduce (or ideally remove) the causes of stress in the organisation.

In addition to these specific actions, there are general measures you should also introduce, including the following.

A stress policy should be implemented in conjunction with staff liaison groups, and commitment should begin at the most senior level and be cascaded downwards.

There's little point in introducing stress management training for line managers, for example, if senior managers have little or no commitment to minimising or eliminating excessive pressure within the organisation.

Recruitment and selection

When recruiting it's important that both the organisation and applicant understand the requirements of the post and potential pressures involved.

It's therefore essential to combine an appropriate selection policy with sufficient job-specific and practical training - to enable individuals to carry out their jobs within their capabilities and with the minimum of stress.

'First Contact' counselling teams. These teams are made up of volunteers (from the organisation) who are trained in basic counselling skills, and receive ongoing training and supervision.

They're often used as a 'first contact' for employees, for whom they can provide an active listening service and help to deal with work-related problems such as stress, bullying, change and mediation.

Management style

Effective communication is often neglected in management training, yet it's essential to good management - by reducing misunderstanding and the opportunity for discontent.

Good communication at all levels will help ensure that everyone in the organisation can work with confidence - reducing the opportunities for stress to develop.

Access to mediation and negotiation are vital in enabling workplace disputes to be resolved before they escalate into stress-inducing or bullying behaviours which can be much more difficult to resolve.

Stress awareness and stress management training

For stress management to become integral to corporate culture, initiatives must be introduced that will raise awareness of work-related stress.

In particular, recognising the early warning signs and symptoms should become integral to management strategy. This can be achieved by monitoring sickness absence (especially short-term), carrying out confidential staff surveys, observing working relationships (especially team dynamics), and questioning changes in attitude and behaviour.

Stress management training can then build on this by teaching employees about the nature and sources of stress, its effects on health, and the personal skills needed to reduce it.

Training may also help reduce stress symptoms such as anxiety and sleep disturbances, and has the added advantage of being relatively inexpensive.

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) and employee counseling should be regarded as an intervention to be included alongside other supportive services available to employees.

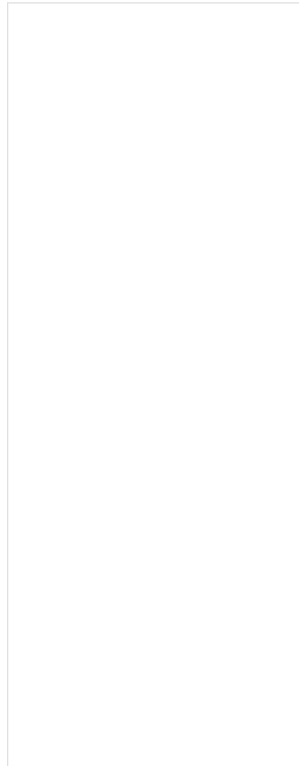
An EAP offers employees access to a confidential counselling and information service, and to be effective must have the backing of senior management. However, although it can play an important role in helping to deal with stress-related problems, it should not detract from the importance of line managers actively listening to their staff.

Nor must an application to the EAP be misinterpreted by managers as suggesting a lack of confidence in their own ability to deal with stress-related issues.

What doesn't work?

Depending on the nature of your organisation, concierge services, or complementary therapies such as reflexology, yoga, massage etc, may also be of benefit.

Typically, however, they should be incorporated within a holistic approach to work-related stress - rather than being expected to resolve underlying problems on their own



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expected to resolve underlying problems on their own.

If an organisation introduces these types of 'stress-busting' initiatives without a solid foundation of stress management training and employee counselling support, they risk adding to problems of work-related stress through frustration, disillusion, and a belief amongst employees that the true causes of stress aren't being taken seriously, and the organisation is simply paying lip service to the problem.

Whereas, the key to successful stress management in the long term is to deal with the causes as well as the symptoms.

Ultimately, reducing workplace stress is largely a matter of common sense and good management practice, and simply requires employers and employees to work together for the common good. Both share a joint responsibility for reducing stress - which, when this is successful, can help employees to enjoy their work more, and businesses to thrive as a result.

Key learning points

1. The first thing to do in managing work-related stress is to carry out a risk assessment, the results of which should highlight problem areas.
2. A range of further interventions are also available through which to reduce (or ideally remove) the causes of stress in the organisation.
3. But if an organisation introduces 'stress-busting' initiatives without a solid foundation of stress management training and employee counselling support, they risk adding to problems of work-related stress.

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.

Editor: This is Carole Spiers' last column..

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