

A no-nonsense approach to stress management

Reducing stress levels within an organisation can be achieved by adopting simple techniques such as engaging all levels of the workforce to make them feel more valued, says **Carole Spiers**, the author of a new book on stress management.

Managing workplace stress is not complicated and doesn't need any major monetary investment. It involves creating a healthy organisational environment that requires the building of a climate of trust and respect, where good communication, employee recognition, flexibility of control and cultural difference are all valued.

The aim should be to foster a culture where everyone feels that they are a part of the business – from the office cleaner to the CEO – a climate where everyone is important to the organisation and where all employees work towards a common goal for the success of the business or public service. Implementing and maintaining a healthy corporate structure helps lower stress levels, increases productivity and reduces absence through sickness – all without raising costs.

Accountability

Managers need to be accountable for the climate they create in the workplace. It is a manager's role to build a "listening culture" where it is acceptable for any individual to feel comfortable talking about a stress-related issue. Managers need to have an "open door" policy and be there when an employee needs to communicate with them in person – or at least be accessible soon after. They also need to know how, when and where they can call on OH for support.

Closing the effort/reward gap is another way to improve workplace culture. This means making sure that employees are recognised and rewarded appropriately for the effort that they put in. The best way to ensure this would be to ask employees directly what single action by management would make them feel more valued. Employers are sometimes surprised by the

answers they receive. Many of those questioned will say that they would appreciate merely a simple "thank you" for a job well done and delivered on time.

A healthy work environment is a key element for a stress-free workforce. Wherever possible, stress factors such as excessive noise, heat, cold, overcrowding or long working hours need to be identified and mitigated where possible. Staff wellbeing must be a primary consideration – internally and externally. Health screening and stress awareness programmes should be a part of a normal workplace routine, and the place of work needs to feel more like a community rather than simply the place where people earn their living.

Key factors in stress management

Organisations need to move away from an over-reliance on technology and systems, and adopt approaches that are more successful in engaging the individual. The missing ingredient in achieving effective performance is often the fact that many management systems lack leadership and are neither motivating nor inspiring.

It is vital for managers to engage with their teams, although it has to be recognised that they cannot always be "all things to all people". Sometimes they have to be authoritarian, while still being a good listener.

Modern managers need a comprehensive toolkit of people management skills in order to encourage a two-way dialogue between themselves and the members of their team. It is essential to get "buy-in" from their team in order to establish loyalty and commitment in return. While it may not be possible to increase remuneration, praise and recognition will encourage employees into wanting to do more for their manager and to give their best. The team that engages – the team that is inspired and motivated –

SHOW STRESS WHO'S BOSS! – THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO MANAGING STRESS

■ This is an eminently practical book, refreshingly free of psychobabble and full of tried-and-tested techniques to manage stress both in yourself and in those around you.

Show Stress Who's Boss! is easy to read and intellectually satisfying. The presentation is such that it can be "dipped into" in 10-minute intervals on short train journeys or else read from cover to cover without exhausting the reader.

Each sub-section has key learning points identified and is illustrated with great cartoons, apposite quotations and practical examples, which bring the text to life.

This book will be invaluable for readers looking to better understand the nature of stress, its causes, physical, emotional and behavioural effects, and, crucially, how to bring it under control. For individual readers, it is an excellent self-help book.

For managers and supervisors, it points the way to creating a working environment and culture in which people can thrive and excel.

The final section of the book contains a wealth of proven tools and resources for combating stress and flourishing, even in the face of life's difficulties.

At a time when stress is the leading cause of long-term sickness absence from the workplace (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2011*), this is an important and timely publication, which I thoroughly recommend.

Book review by John Perry, MA, MSc, FHEA, principal teaching fellow in healthcare communication, the Faculty of Medicine, University of Southampton.

**Based on findings from an online survey, completed by 592 UK employers in June 2011.*



will invariably build competitive advantage.

Good communication is a key factor in the culture of any organisation in order for stress to be quickly identified and effectively managed. It is important not only to have an open two-way dialogue between employer and employees, but also between the CEO and the board, between the board and its line management, and between OH and staff at all levels.

Ineffective communication has been found to be a weakness in many organisations – from the largest to the smallest – and insufficient time and training is given to this key area. Middle managers often find themselves promoted to a position with responsibility for a team without the necessary communication skills to manage that team effectively.

There is little that is more important to personal morale than receiving praise for a job well done. Regular appraisals identify strengths and weaknesses and allow for assessment of both continuing professional development and on-the-job training. Appraisals should be a two-way process that enable the manager and the team member to agree targets for performance and to have a clear area of responsibility. It is at times such as these that stress-related issues should be addressed and resolved.

Being recognised as a crucial part of the business machine is almost as important as the monetary reward on offer. Recognition and reward have to be commensurate with the task, but undervaluing skills at any level can lead to low productivity and poor morale. Providing specific benefit packages, over and above the basic salary, is another way of expressing recognition and enhancing reward.

To perform well within an organisation, individuals need to be aware of the corporate goals and, where possible, to have an individual stake in achieving them. Bonuses and performance-related pay are great incentives for employees at all levels in the organisation.

The morale of an organisation is fundamental to its success. High morale suggests a well motivated and energised workforce that is keen to succeed. Employees will be committed to meeting, and even exceeding, targets when stress factors are identified and either eradicated or minimised. Good morale is essential for success, in any sphere.

Given that long working hours are endemic in some sectors, understanding the importance of work-life balance, and how to achieve it, is a key management skill. This balance needs to be implemented as part of an organisation's legal framework and company policy, together with building a factor of resilience within the workforce.

When organisational health is approached from a cultural perspective – rather than taking a programmed approach – there is a much greater likelihood of effecting employee wellbeing (mental, physical, emotional and social).

A feel-good factor is conducive to an organisation's competitive advantage. A sense of community, a shared vision and a positive outlook bind groups and organisations together and enable them to be more productive and creative.

How to achieve a healthy workplace culture

Communication skills to motivate individual talent include: "active listening" techniques to identify and rectify grievances; techniques for effective announcing, interviewing and cautioning; getting important answers without appearing to interrogate; and defusing conflict through key phrases to keep dialogue moving. Better interpersonal communication results in smoother running, better outcomes and, quite often, less pressure.

First-contact counselling teams – where volunteers from the organisation are trained to listen effectively to employees' stress-related problems – are just one example of how employees can be encouraged to commit "more" of themselves for the benefit of their colleagues, their customers, their employer and the community.

Creative self-development is the new dynamic of career progress. Individual empowerment requires a greater understanding of the impact of positive attitude on individual and group performance; an increased resistance to those who are contemptuous of effort.

Flexibility is key to reducing stress levels. Organisations often lose valuable talent because of an unwillingness to be flexible, or to alter work patterns in order to cater for particular needs, such as those of the disabled. Home working and buddying schemes (where new recruits are provided with an informal mentor) are just two examples of the approaches that can be taken to reduce stress levels.

Demonstrating a commitment to society isn't just about social conscience, it makes good business sense – helping to attract and retain the best talent, influencing customers and buyers, and powering long-term success. Activities such as supporting a local charity can prove beneficial to both parties by becoming identified with the community in a positive role. Being associated with a local charity is something that professional firms such as lawyers and accountants are often well aware of, but many commercial and industrial companies could also learn and benefit from this.

Winning the "war on stress"

Winning the "war for talent" and the "war on stress" also means attracting the best and brightest recruits by improving the organisation's cultural understanding of diverse mindsets.

Within a properly constructed and managed workplace culture, employees need to feel included within the vision of the business and to have a sense of security and belonging, and, as we spend at least half of our waking hours at work, that is of great importance.

The drive to ensure that stress is recognised and mitigated wherever possible, needs to come from senior management. The top management team needs to ensure that all employees:

- are not frightened to talk about stress-related factors;
- know that if they have problems, then it is acceptable to discuss them; and
- are aware that they can go to management and occupational health as and when they are needed.

As has been stated many times, an organisation's human resource is the essential key to sustainable success. When that simple fact fails to be appreciated, then staff turnover and associated costs will rise, and valuable training, talent and ability will be lost – leading to higher overheads and a reduced return on the most important investment of all: human resources.

Therefore, the following question arises: why do so many companies and organisations ignore the fact that stress not only can kill people, but also kills motivation and creativity that is then reflected in increased staff turnover and, ultimately, profits? However, after working in the profession for more than 25 years, I am now seeing increasing success in getting the message across. OH

■ Carole Spiers has been CEO of a leading UK stress management consultancy for 20 years, working in the UK and the Persian Gulf. She is an authority on corporate stress, a BBC guest broadcaster and author of *Show Stress Who's Boss!* She is regularly called upon by the media for comment.

■ *Show Stress Who's Boss!* is available from Amazon, or from www.showstresswhosboss.co.uk where you will also receive a free stress-test card and a signed copy of the book.