



Pressure proofing your centre

*Call centres are perhaps unique environments for winding up workers so here **Carole Spiers** offers some calming words of advice*

To a stress specialist, a busy call centre presents just about every symptom of today's pressurised workplace rolled into one: an all-day schedule of repetitive routines with no opportunity for impulse-breaks, a crushing responsibility to exceed a minimum hit-rate and maintain yield per square foot and relentless downward pressure on wages in an intensely competitive field.

It's no surprise that the employees are sometimes tempted to view their boss as the author of these pressures. But the boss is experiencing them too, at second hand - and having to pay the phone-bill as well!

So nobody denies that the stress is there, in punishing measure. But any idea of applying stress management techniques seems oddly out-of-culture. To some, complaining about stress will seem too much like wimping-out. To others, at high risk of unemployment, it raises the fear of possible victimisation. Better keep your head below the parapet. In other words, bottle it all up.

And underlying all of this, nobody feels that there's any time for stress management anyway. "Don't bother me now. Can't you see the lights flashing? I've got my targets to think about."

Pressure build up

But this conveyor-belt mindset is just what winches-up the pressure further - on management and workers alike. Call centres are, in fact, quite unique for the combination of stressors they generate. For example, nowhere else do you have to speak calmly and politely to people who may be hurling abuse at you, yet may not be free to get up and walk off your feelings afterwards. Even with friendly calls, the international dimension sets up enormous stresses of comprehension between people with different languages. And all the pressures are heightened by each new leap in computer telephony integration.

In a Call Centre, of all places, managers must

be seen to be approachable. They need to be people-orientated and manage people as their first priority. After all, call centres are about communication, and stress management training can do much to encourage team-members to communicate and bond with each other.

In the HR field, this is called a 'healthy workplace culture', and it is the soil in which stress management techniques can flourish. It is where enterprise thrives and employees are highly motivated and hungry for success. A business is like an engine - if one part goes wrong it has a knock-on effect on the rest. The aim should be for an inclusive culture where everyone feels a part of the business, and part of its success.

Healthy culture

The benefits of a healthy workplace culture can be seen most plainly in improved employee wellbeing - mental, physical, spiritual, emotional, social. A heightened sense of community, shared vision and positive outlook can hold groups and organisations together and enable them to be highly productive and creative. In turn, this results in lower absenteeism and higher staff retention, leading to sustainable growth and profitability. If you are new to workplace stress management, you need to remember the standard 3-part sequence of a successful programme:

1. CONDUCT A RISK ASSESSMENT

Formally identify sources of stress - increasingly a legal requirement

2. ENCOURAGE DIALOGUE ABOUT STRESS

Get over the stigma and awkwardness of admitting stress symptoms

3. DEMONSTRATE TANGIBLE RESULTS

Establish systematic plans and follow them through, to justify policies


It may be that your own HR staff are already equipped to organize this. But experience shows

that for best results, some or all of it should be outsourced to stress management specialists.

Remember that stress management is recognised as a subject for formal study, with exams and diplomas, and training courses both for HR staff and line management that have made a massive difference to the physical and emotional health of whole workforces.

And if the call-centre industry possesses unique stress-factors, it merits its own 'niche' training packages.

Generally, the more tailor-made the course, the more effective it will be. To take one issue among many, there could be an age factor. One course might be entirely suited to a team that dealt mostly with retired customers. But that team might be less-suited for selling to the PlayStation generation, with their Text English, short attention spans and deliberately different jargon. So they would need a different course.

Those who have seen the benefits of these tailor-made programmes are often keen to explore further the various options of stress counselling, training and regular consultancy, from shop-floor presentations right up to boardroom briefings for senior directors who have never studied workplace stress, but need to gain an overview of it. 

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