Countering stress

Workplace stress costs £9bn each year, so it is worth finding out how to prevent it

Stress can act as a 'canker' within a company, making it unhealthy, difficult to manage and unprofitable, and steps need to be taken to counter this.

Stress is an extremely complex phenomenon that can affect individuals in many different ways and to differing degrees, and can, therefore, severely affect the performance of an organisation to the detriment of its staff, its end product or service.

The most detrimental effects of stress include high levels of absenteeism, poor job performance, low morale, low commitment, increased incidence of accidents, difficult industrial relations, poor relationships with customers and possible litigation.

The link between absence and stress is so well proven, with non-attendance statistics often used as an indicator of stress 'hot spots' within the organisation.

A BARRIER TO SUCCESS

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. Where an individual is unable to perform their job to the required standard, this will eventually produce its own stress response.

Many stress-related problems can be exacerbated by management not having the required expertise to deal with them. Employee morale is vitally important to the success of any organisation, so low morale, or lack of recognition by the employer, will often lead to the loss of valuable trained personnel.

Where relationship boundaries within the workplace are not clearly defined, this too can lead to misunderstandings that cause undue pressure. Conflict can be endemic within the workplace and, if not addressed, will damage both the organisation and the individuals involved. In its most extreme form, workplace stress can result in bullying, violence or even suicide, either within or outside the workplace

HUGE HIDDEN COSTS

Some of the most common warning signs of stress in an organisation include workplace bullying and harassment, high levels of absenteeism, low morale, poor staff retention levels, a 'long hours' culture, 'presenteeism' (the need to be seen to be working at all times) and reduced productivity.

Among the familiar signs and signals that indicate a stressed employee are a negative change in mood or behaviour; deteriorating relationships with colleagues; working longer hours without obvious signs of additional achievement; indecisiveness; absenteeism; poor performance (such as increased mistakes, missed deadlines or a reluctance to tackle or prioritise difficult tasks); being late for work and taking long lunch breaks; clock-watching and leaving early; reduced output; poor memory and impaired judgement; withdrawal socially and lack of personal care.

REPAIRING THE DAMAGE

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

> "Pressure is healthy; stress is not, and some people manage stress better than others"

Managing attendance

Absenteeism throughout industry is still rising. Past methods of managing attendance are not working, and it is time to move on and find new ways of managing employee ill health. Health surveillance, for example, is an important component of employee wellbeing. Early intervention to manage musculoskeletal and stress-related problems is essential, as is dealing with mental health issues which are still pushed under the carpet. Employers need to overcome a 'taboo' over mental health problems which, according to the charity the Shaw Trust (June 2006), are costing them £9bn per year.

Employee wellbeing programmes

Implementing a stress management programme might seem to be easier and less expensive than conducting a culture audit and going through the process of improving the company's culture. However, providing a stress management programme to someone who is working in a toxic culture is obviously not going to have much of an impact. Instead, an 'organisational health' approach would be to integrate healthy workplace strategies into the organisation's vision in order to get to the bottom of what is causing the greatest stress, and work towards a culture that will attract and retain energetic, talented people.

Supporting rehabilitation to work

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 to the organisation 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.

Monitoring the stress profile

Regular staff questionnaires, focus groups and appraisals will enable managers to identify stress hotspots and manage them effectively before they spread within the organisation. Pressure is healthy, stress is not, and some people will manage pressure better than others. Individual responses to pressure need to be considered at the recruitment stage where a job is known to be pressurised.

Induction and training

Welcoming an employee into the company and ensuring that they have all the information they need to perform their duties is essential. This is an area that is often neglected by employers. Joining a new team is always a daunting prospect – even for the most outgoing personalities. Meeting the team and understanding everyone's role is critical for successful integration, as is knowing what resources are available within the company.

Empowering individuals

Managers need to be sensitive and non-judgemental regarding their employees' concerns, and know where to refer on cases 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; aim to make every team member feel properly recognised and valued; and see how a motivational and engaging culture unleashes its full potential.

The author
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