



A no-nonsense approach to managing stress

Managing workplace stress is neither complicated nor does it require any major monetary investment, explains *Carole Spiers*.

Managing stress at the workplace involves creating a healthy organisational environment. This requires the building of a climate of trust and respect, where good communication, employee recognition, flexibility of control and cultural differences are all valued. The aim should be to foster a culture of inclusiveness where everyone feels like a part of the business - from the office cleaner to the CEO. It has to be an environment where everyone feels important in the organisation and, where, all employees and staff work towards a common goal for the overall success of the business or public service.

Implementing and maintaining a healthy corporate structure helps lower stress levels, increases productivity, reduces absence through sickness - and all without raising costs.

Accountability

Managers need to be accountable for the climate they create at the workplace. It is a manager's responsibility to build a 'listening culture' where it is acceptable for any individual to feel comfortable in talking about stress-related issues. Managers should encourage an 'open door' policy and be accessible and attentive to employees that try to communicate with them in person.

They also need to know how, when and where they could call on HR for its support.

Closing the effort/reward gap is another way to improve a workplace culture. This means, making sure that employees are recognised and rewarded appropriately for their efforts. 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 and cold, overcrowding or long working hours need to be identified and mitigated as far as is possible. Staff well being 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 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 frequently 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, whilst 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 members of their teams. It is essential to get 'buy-in' from their teams in order to establish loyalty and commitment in return. Whilst it may not be possible to increase remuneration, praise and recognition will encourage employees into 'wanting' to do more for their managers and to give their best. The team that engages - the team that is inspired and motivated - will invariably build competitive advantage.

Communication

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 finally between HR and staff at all levels.

Ineffective communication has been found to be a weakness in many organisations 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, but 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 CPD and on-the-job training. Appraisals should be a two-way process that enables managers and their team members to agree on 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.

Recognition

Being recognised as an important 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 rewards.

To be effective within an organisation, individuals need to be aware of the corporate goals and, where possible, to have an individual stake in achieving them.

Morale

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

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for success, in any sphere.

Given that long hours of working is endemic in some sectors, understanding the importance of work/life balance and how to achieve it, is a key management skill, and this balance needs to be implemented as part of a company policy. When organisational health is approached from a cultural perspective, rather than taking a programmed approach, there is a much greater likelihood of affecting employee well being.

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.

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; and defusing conflict through key phrases to keep dialogues moving. Better interpersonal

communication equals smoother running and better outcomes, and very often, less pressure.

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 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 team need to ensure that 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 HR, as and when they are needed.

An organisation's human resource is the essential key to sustainable success and when that simple fact fails to be appreciated, then staff turnover and associated costs will rise, 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.

The question arises, therefore, why do so many companies and organisations ignore the fact that stress not only can kill people, but also kills motivation and creativity, which is then reflected in increased staff turnover and, ultimately, profits? However, after working in the profession for over 25 years, I am now seeing increasing success in getting the message across. Is this rocket science? Absolutely not!



Carole's credibility is rooted in 20 years success as CEO of a leading UK stress management consultancy, working with equal success both in the UK and the Gulf. She is a world authority on corporate stress, a BBC Guest Broadcaster and author of a new book 'Show Stress Who's Boss!' Carole is an inspirational motivational speaker, and a weekly columnist. 'Show Stress Who's Boss!' is available <http://www.showstresswhosboss.co.uk> where you will also receive a signed copy of the book + FREE stress test card and in all good bookshops in the UAE.

What you require for a healthy workplace

First contact counselling teams - This is where volunteers from the organisation are trained to listen effectively to employees' stress related problems. They 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 - It 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 - It is a 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 - This is where new recruits are provided with an informal mentor- these are just examples of the new approaches that can be taken to reduce stress levels.

Demonstration - 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 learn and benefit from this.