



Focus your mind

When it comes to tackling work-related stress, what's working and what isn't?

Whether we like it or not, the release of the Health & Safety Executive's (HSE) new Management Standards are forcing companies to take the issue of work-related stress seriously and identify whether, or not, the measures they are taking to alleviate it are working.

If you follow the HSE guidelines, the first thing you need to do to tackle work-related stress is carry out a risk assessment, the results of which should highlight problem areas that you'll need to focus on in order to reduce (and ideally remove) the causes of stress in your company.

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

A STRESS POLICY

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

There is 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 company.

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

One conclusion of the landmark Court of Appeal case in February 2002 was that 'there are no occupations that should be regarded as intrinsically dangerous to mental health'.

It is, 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.

There is also a need for first contact counselling teams, made up of volunteers (from the organisation) who are trained in basic counselling skills, and receive ongoing training and supervision.

They are 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.

LISTEN AND LEARN

Effective communication is often neglected in management training, yet it is essential to good management as it helps to reduce misunderstandings and the opportunity for discontent.

Engaging with the person you are listening to and responding appropriately are key to achieving effective communication.

Good communication at all levels will help ensure that everyone in the company can work with confidence and reduce the opportunities for stress to develop.

THE NEGOTIATOR

In mediation, the parties in a dispute express their views on a contentious matter, establish common ground, and move towards a solution that is acceptable to all.

Negotiation aims to reach agreement on a course of action that satisfies at least some of the claims of both sides.

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Access to mediation and negotiation are therefore 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.

RAISING AWARENESS

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 part of the management strategy.

This can be achieved by monitoring sickness absence, carrying out confidential staff surveys, observing working relationships (especially team dynamics), and questioning changes in attitude and behaviour.

Stress management training can then help to 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 to reduce the symptoms of stress, such as anxiety and sleep disturbances, and has the added advantage of being relatively inexpensive.

OFFER OF HELP

In February 2002, the Court of Appeal ruled, among other things, that 'any employer who offered a confidential counselling service was unlikely to be found in breach of duty of care by the courts'. Counselling should, therefore, be regarded as an intervention to be included alongside other supportive services available to staff.

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

An application to the EAP must not be misinterpreted by managers as suggesting a lack of confidence in their own ability to deal with stress-related issues.

IT'S NOT WORKING

Depending on the nature of your company, concierge services, or complementary therapies such as reflexology, yoga or massage, may also provide a benefit.

Typically, however, they should be part of a holistic approach to work-related stress, rather than being 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 among employees that the true causes of stress aren't being taken seriously.

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.

For this to become a reality, companies need to work towards the creation of a 'healthy' work culture – one where there is an intelligent two-way dialogue between managers and employees.

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