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by Dr. Tiffany McDowell

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Providing stress counselling to Quest International's employees

Stress issues can have detrimental effects on staff wellbeing. Quest International, a UK fragrance specialist, has addressed the issue by forming its own counselling group, explains occupational stress consultant, Carole Spiers.

A group of employees at fragrance specialist Quest International have been delivering occupational stress management and counselling to staff, guided and supported by occupational stress consultant, Carole Spiers.

Addressing stress concerns

I was commissioned to roll out a stress management and counselling skills training program to seven employees at Quest International's Ashford site. Even though there were no immediate stress concerns that needed to be addressed, Quest saw the benefits of providing counselling skills training. Employees were tutored in recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress; key stress-related issues such as post trauma, organizational change, workplace bullying and bereavement; and foundation counselling skills.

The program provided an excellent learning opportunity, by enabling experiences to be shared, and an increased understanding of the

challenges faced by different employees within the entire organization. Attendees were keen to use the new skills they had learned from the program at their workplace. I suggested they form an in-house First Contact Counselling Team (FCCT) – an idea that was subsequently accepted by the company's senior board. The FCCT members were well accepted and quickly gained the employees' trust.

Active listening is a key preventative stress management technique, and early intervention is vital in preventing problems from escalating. Because FCCT members are perceived as "independent" (i.e., not part of management and/or personnel), employees are often more comfortable speaking to them. Also, managers may not necessarily possess the communications skills needed to be good listeners – they might lack the right training, may not see it as their role or even perceive it as being of little value to the business.

What are the benefits of FCCTs?

Having an FCCT in place means an employee can phone or make an appointment with a team member to discuss any subject that may be troubling them. In this respect, the team's not a replacement for personnel or occupational health, but a relatively low-cost means of providing invaluable

support to employees, that can also be used for in-house mediation, and has been shown to improve morale and increase the credibility/respectability of the organization.

What does the team do?

Participants from the initial training program named their counselling group "Listening Ears." The problems dealt with by Listening Ears range from abuse, bereavement and terminal illness, to harassment, stress and organizational change.

Individuals within the team request (and receive) management buy-in for their role, as there may be times when their services are required by an employee whose manager needs to be accepting and understanding that this is the case. The manager must also accept that they cannot ask the employee about the nature of their communication with Listening Ears, meaning a relationship of mutual trust is paramount.

The team members' photographs, names and contact details are promoted on all workplace noticeboards. They're a highly respected and integral part of the organization, have their own identity and presence, and are part of the ethos and culture of the Ashford site. Management recommend their services to employees if they need someone to talk to. A leaflet explaining the team's activities is given to all new employees in

QUEST INTERNATIONAL

Quest International is a fragrance specialist, now part of the ICI Group. The company has activities in more than 30 countries and employs over 3,500 people, 570 of whom are at the Ashford site.

their induction packs, and the group is also mentioned in the company handbook.

Ongoing support and supervision

Team members' time is given voluntarily, and it's their responsibility to ensure that their own work does not suffer in any way. New members from the workforce are suggested by the group and individuals also contact the group to ask if they can join.

A foundation counselling skills program is given to new members and the team hold regular bi-monthly peer group support meetings – a time when issues are discussed and problems shared, all in strictest confidence. (The team have, however, been trained to know when they might have to break confidence, for example, in a high-risk situation – such as suicide – and the protocol for this eventuality.)

The mutual support within the group is vital to its function, with openness and honesty between members forming a strong bond. I meet with the team twice-yearly for one-day training updates and provide specialist support or guidance if necessary. These sessions are important for the smooth running of the team – members are tutored on current stress-related issues and have the opportunity to raise any queries they may have.

Extending skills to management

The Quest International team provide an excellent role model for many other businesses. For example, the team suggested that training sessions on stress management and bereavement are provided for management – these sessions were subsequently arranged. The team has also written its own series of information leaflets to give to employees during challenging times such as organizational change.

Each year, to mark the UK's National



FIRST CONTACT COUNSELLING TEAMS

What to consider when setting up a counselling team at your organization:

- What is the team's role to be within the organization?
- Are there areas of the business for which FCCTs are inappropriate?

Resourcing:

- FCCTs must have the backing of the senior board.
- Its members are volunteers from throughout the organization, who will need to be actively "recruited."
- Usually, many more people apply to be members of FCCTs than will be needed, and will therefore need to be interviewed – preferably by an external consultant – to ascertain their suitability. They need to have basic foundation skills of effective listening, understanding, caring, support, empathy and trust.
- FCCTs need to be truly representative of the workforce – however this is structured – and also preferably diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on.

Operation:

- Training requirements are likely to include basic counselling skills, modules on crisis, trauma, redundancy, workplace bullying, mediation, conflict resolution, internet gambling, bereavement, suicide and so on.
- Confidentiality and safety.
- Operating parameters.
- Publicity and promotion.
- Peer group support.
- Ongoing training and supervision.

Stress Awareness Day, the team arrange promotional activities. Employees have been invited to experience complementary stress-management activities such as yoga, tai chi, reflexology, aromatherapy, Indian head massage, shiatsu, back massage and even juggling.

Anne Cooper, PA to the VP supply chain EMEA explains, "As a founder member of the Listening Ears group, I've seen enormous growth in the confidence and professionalism of all its members. We've earned great respect across all levels of management and staff, gained the support of senior management and are sponsored by Ashford's management team. The money invested in our training is seen as a cost-effective way of keeping

stress-related absenteeism at a very low rate."

Continuing to progress

Now in its tenth year of operation, the team's 10 members include management, team leaders, personnel, occupational health and some non-managerial employees. There's no hierarchy, and members are chosen for their skills and enthusiasm rather than their job function. Although its membership has changed over time, the team's commitment has continued undiminished.

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