

Helix Top Tips for tackling work-related stress

A Doctor once said to me "Stress causes depression, which is horrible and expensive. And depressed people are depressing! If I was a businessman, I'd want to understand the causes of stress, so that I could keep it out of my business". Wise words, and yet workplace stress is responsible for more than ten million lost working days a year in the UK. Doctors deal with the effects of stress, often depression or anxiety, and business carries the cost in terms of lost productivity, a whopping £530 million in 2005 according to the HSE. The HSE is clearly taking the issue seriously and has begun to issue improvement notices to organisations who fail to make the right efforts to remove causes of stress.

Of course, in addition to complying with the law, eliminating major causes of stress can benefit your business through:

- Higher productivity
- Increased staff commitment
- Increased staff retention rates
- Higher customer satisfaction
- And an enhanced corporate image and reputation

So, here are our top tips to help you deal with both the symptoms and the causes of stress:

1. Recognise the signs of stress

Sometimes the signs are obvious: patterns of absence, sickness or attendance, or a drop in performance of an individual or team. Sometimes they're not so easy to spot: normally outgoing people become withdrawn and quietly overwhelmed by workload, even tempered individuals become moody for no obvious reason. Get to know your staff and recognise the symptoms. Use existing mechanisms such as appraisals and regular monthly reviews.

2. Conduct a Stress Audit

In reality, managers are often part of the problem, as they control the resources, lay the foundations for culture, and manage workload. Consequently, people often don't feel comfortable speaking out publicly. An anonymous stress audit, perhaps as part of a wider staff survey dealing with issues such as morale, motivation and management support, can generate much useful information.

All organisations are required to assess and manage the causes of ill health at work, including work related stress. An audit will test against the HSE's standards for managing stress. These management standards cover areas of work design that, if not managed well, are associated with poor health and well-being, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. In other words, the causes of stress at work. They are:

- **Demands** - such as workload, work patterns and environment
- **Control** - how much say individuals have in the way they do their jobs
- **Support** - such as the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues
- **Relationships** - such as promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- **Role** - such as whether people understand their role within the organisation
- **Change** - such as how change is managed and communicated

With the resulting data, you will be able to identify and address real staff concerns. We can arrange a stress audit, call us for a chat.

3. Deal with the causes of stress

Symptoms are frequently ignored. If the root causes are ignored, issues escalate, costing the business in lost productivity, staff turnover and even litigation. The most common causes of stress I see are:

- Overwork
- Under resourcing
- Lack of support (from management and colleagues)
- Lack of positive feedback
- Poor communication
- Senior managers as poor role models
- Inconsistency in management approach

So, review working practices, work load and resources. Most importantly develop your management capability. The Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development has partnered with the HSE to produce a set of management competencies to target stress (available at www.cipd.co.uk). For each of the competencies it gives comprehensive examples of both positive and negative manager behaviour. Essential reading for managers who care.

All workplaces will cause stress to some degree. High pressure environments like recruitment, banking and increasingly the caring professions can be particularly stressful. Equally, individuals have different 'stress thresholds'. If jobs aren't challenging or interesting enough this will be reflected in lack of commitment, underperformance and satisfaction. The trick for managers is to ensure each individual has the right degree of challenge and support to avoid boredom at one end of the scale and stress at the other.

4. Promote Well Being and Good Management Practice

CIPD research shows that happy and engaged employees perform better than others, are more likely to recommend their organisation to others, take less sick leave, and are less likely to leave. It's hardly rocket science.

I also know senior managers who fear that if you talk about stress, staff are more likely to use stress as an excuse to take time off. This can make it difficult to sell to senior management the benefits of stress management. So why not concentrate on the positive business benefits of a healthy motivated workforce, supported by good management practices. National recruitment company Rullion did just this and significantly improved staff retention and reduced absence rates. Read more here <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/casestudies/rullion.htm>.

Nic Marks, Head of the centre for well-being, at nef (the New Economics Foundation) says "By measuring and focusing on well-being at work we can create good jobs - and good jobs not only benefit employees, but also employers." In another example, Microsoft has a well being policy and a centre which provides staff with an open door to a calm environment, away from the pressures of work.

5. Fill any skills gaps - quickly

It is fairly predictable that individuals will get stressed in certain circumstances - presenting or speaking to groups, chairing meetings, making cold sales calls. Help people with the skills and confidence to deal with these situations now, when they need it. Don't let them suffer until their next appraisal or next year's training programme.

6. Resolve conflict swiftly

Some of the most stressful situations involve interaction with others. The scope for conflict or disagreement is high and the need to be assertive is clear. But not everyone will find this easy. Help people build relationships with colleagues, with suppliers, with customers. Try mentoring, coaching or training to build skills and confidence.

Implement and communicate a process for resolving conflict between individuals, whether this involves line managers, HR or external mediators. Manage the behaviours of those who step outside acceptable boundaries, and tackle bullying head on.

7. Measure your managers on their 'people' skills

The best managers can manage, motivate, and inspire their staff. If they can also coach, mentor and counsel their staff, then the chances are they will be able to pre-empt stress related problems. Too often however, managers are focussed on the quantitative deliverables, and supporting staff with 'the soft stuff' often doesn't happen. Until there is a problem. So, train them, support them and make this 'people management' a requirement of their job against which they are measured.

8. Put the spotlight on senior management

If the example set by senior management is not conducive to stress-free working, then the seeds are sown. Directors who work endless hours in the open plan office make it almost impossible for their team to go home at a reasonable time and maintain a healthy work/life balance. They have to be seen as positive role models. For example, monthly one-to-ones with staff to review workload and objectives should be sacrosanct to managers. Include this 'walk the talk' in appraisal processes and performance management systems.

9. Implement a stress management procedure

Most employers by now have procedures for disciplinary and grievance issues, sickness and absence. Not so for stress management.

A robust procedure will enable managers to take appropriate action and to offer the best support. What do you do when someone returns to work following illness - stress related or not? What do you do if you suspect someone is suffering an adverse reaction to stress that you feel is at an acceptable level? Your managers will need this clarity to take the right actions consistently across the organisation. Inconsistency in itself can cause stress.

10. Get stress on the agenda

For both the Health and Safety agenda, and senior management meeting agendas. This way stress management should get the profile and the high level support it needs. The health and well being of your people is as important as your growth strategy and the bottom line to the long term success of the organisation.

Useful links:

More information from the HSE is available at hse.gov.uk/stress.

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