

Manage stress and mental health to improve performance

There is so much in the media about the levels of stress and other mental health issues (depression, panic attacks amongst others) that it is mystifying why so many organisations and managers do nothing about it. It is a great example of “ostrich management” – head buried in the sand and rear raised in the air ready to be kicked! They ignore the impact of these on the business and people’s performance. Some research suggests that for every 1 day of absence, the cost of covering it to the business is 1.8 times the cost. It is estimated that stress related absences cost organisations £666 per employee (as a whole workforce, not just the absentees). Further research looking at the impact of mental health illness (including stress) has a cost of £1,000 per employee. With managers having their focus on performance, results, profit etc it might help to widen their sights to recognise the costs and impact of stress and do something to help reduce stress within their teams or across the organisation.

Although stress can be caused by many factors, or combinations, 65% of people said it was due to work related issues. To reinforce the lack of attention management give to stress and mental health issues, in one survey only 29% of people felt that their bosses were doing anything about stress. To make it worse, 49% felt that stress levels were worse because they had a lack of confidence in management.

Management attitudes do vary, but it is apparent that many are not willing to acknowledge the problems these things can cause the business. Perhaps some think that “I didn’t get where I am by feeling stressed”, or “it’s not my job to deal with people’s problems”, or “My aim is to achieve our objectives, come what may.” Others are under pressure themselves and are worrying about how they will cope, whilst getting the results. Whatever the reason, 45% of managers do not believe there is any issue or problem with mental health. A huge majority of managers (97%!) recognise there is a link between people’s health and productivity and 86% say they need their workforce to be more productive. However, when it comes to doing something about it, 62% of employers feel that investing in people’s health is a luxury they cannot afford. A real chicken and egg situation! We want people to deliver more, yet we cannot, or will not, invest in helping them feel better able to cope. The danger with this situation is that nothing changes. If there are problems with staff feeling stressed, absenteeism, poor performance etc, they will not go away and still affect productivity and add to management’s challenges. It is estimated that fewer than 10% of organisations have a mental health policy and of those who do only 14% believe it is any good.

Carrying on with these attitudes and behaviours not only preserves the status quo, it has the potential to lead to the organisation, and possibly individual managers, into legal problems. Stress is now covered by the Health and Safety at Work act, where you have a duty of care for your employees. However, managers should want to support their staff and help them cope with any stressors for the positive outcomes around improved performance.

To change things for the better and manage stress and mental health does not have to cost a fortune. In fact, many of the actions you can take could pay back on any initial costs. When the police in Northern Island started a programme of stress awareness workshops they found that absenteeism levels halved! The first step is to acknowledge how you think about stress and what your role is in relation to it. Do you think it is part of your job to support and help your staff? Are you wary of getting involved as you feel you don’t know what you should do?

A good starting point is to raise managers’ awareness of stress, its causes, the potential consequences, how to spot early stress symptoms, what to do to help staff (or colleagues) and even how to prevent themselves becoming stressed. This can be achieved through training workshops, providing individual guidance and coaching or identifying on-line

resources or providing reading material. The organisation can get a better understanding of how people are feeling and whether specific areas or behaviours are creating pressure which may lead to stress by carrying out an audit. This might be across the organisation or within departments or teams. There are various options for audits and the challenge is to research them and choose the one which will work best for your organisation and deliver your outcomes.

Encourage managers to spend more time with their staff, getting to know them as people rather than part of a workforce. This can help them to get a clearer idea of what motivates the individuals. Another potential benefit is that it might mean that the staff feel their manager is more approachable if anything is worrying them.

When someone gets to the point when they are stressed or suffering from some other illness within the mental health category it means that they and others around them have ignored, or missed, the symptoms. It is extremely unlikely that these types of illness just happen they tend to be a result of a build up of circumstances. As part of raising managers' awareness it is important to get them to understand the range of early warning signs and symptoms which people give out when pressure is building. By having this understanding the manager can go to the individual and explore what is happening. In a perfect world you would want to prevent these things happening. However, in the real world the best option is early intervention whilst things are at a low level.

One thing many organisations forget to do, which can help to reduce stress and other issues, is to introduce absence reviews. This is a process which is used when an employee returns after any absence. It helps to build up a picture of what is happening, whether illnesses are genuine and to spot any patterns within teams or for individuals. Carrying these out can reduce absence and also provide a format for staff to express concerns.

By changing the way managers, and organisations, view stress and mental health issues a number of benefits will follow:

Improved performance and productivity

Improved communication and support for colleagues

Reduced absenteeism

Reduced staff turnover

Lower costs of recruitment and training

A more positive, open and enthusiastic workforce

Stress and mental health are not issues which managers should ignore. They cost the organisation money, both directly and indirectly. Investing in the measures outlined above need not cost much, yet the outcomes can deliver a wide range of benefits. These can be in saving on costs or improving performance and productivity. Surely it is worth addressing these issues?