

Is your workplace suffering from contagious stress?

We wonder how many of you might recognise this scenario? Although it happened with a male manager, it could apply to men or women. The manager we worked with had been promoted to a more senior role and was experiencing demands from all sides. He became increasingly tired, was working long hours and spending less time with his family. His overall energy dropped, anxiety levels increased, sleep was disrupted and concentration and focus diminished. He no longer took time to exercise, found himself snatching meals of dubious quality and kept himself going with constant fixes of coffee and Red Bull. Apart from the impact on him – what do you think were the effects on his family and the people who worked for and with him?

Imagine what it was like working for him. How supportive was he as a manager? How clear was his direction and communication? Was he just seeing the errors and problems? Were his team, and colleagues, starting to feel stressed because of his behaviours?

What about someone working in a customer facing role, who has had trouble getting to work, pressures at home, a sudden increase of customer complaints and problems? The pressure gets to them and they start to become irritable with colleagues – and then with customers. What will that do to the colleagues and the business? The colleagues may be understanding for a while, but the longer it goes on, the risk is that they catch the disease! Communication and team support disappear and morale goes down. Suppose it gets worse and our person feels they cannot face it and so take some time off. Now who bears the brunt of this? Oh, and what happens with the customers? What would it be like to visit this workplace? Imagine what you would see, hear and feel.

Stress rarely happens in isolation or to one individual. (Although it may feel that way!) When someone begins to get stressed there will be a ripple effect spreading out from them. Those closest feel the effect first! Whether it is the person at the top who cascades the problems down and through the organisation, a line-manager struggling to cope with their job (especially when promoted into it) or a person with loads of pressures in their non-work life – they are contagious!!! The spread will be insidious if nothing is done about it. It becomes a vicious spiral and creates more work for those still there to do it.

Many of you reading this are aware that you have pressures on you from all sides, possibly from your family, your friends, colleagues, your own teams and direct reports – and yourself! Juggling your time and attention across these is a difficult challenge! What makes these pressures worse can be your own expectations of yourself and what you believe you should be doing. This could be concerned with demonstrating how capable and professional you are in your role. It could be because you feel you should be giving your family or friends more of your time and attention.

A consequence of this could be that you start to feel the pressure mounting and begin to react to things differently. Maybe you become less patient with some colleagues, the department who miss the deadline, the people in your team who do not communicate in the right way for you. If you are not careful you may be the originator of the “virus” and before long it is spreading to those you interact with and they start to act in a stressed way!

Why does it matter? Stress is likely to lead to problems within the business. These will effect the bottom-line, directly or indirectly. The most obvious impact can be loss of business, maybe through poor service, or poor quality. Your costs certainly rise, whether because of lower productivity or having to correct or rework mistakes. Then there is the “human cost” of low morale, probably leading to absences (eventually long-term) – and possibly leaving. This results in increasing staff turnover, with all the ensuing costs and pitfalls.

Stress accounts for around 40% of long-term absences – and can reduce performance by up to 70%!! If it leads to a high staff turnover that compounds the situation, disrupting the business, increasing costs (direct and indirect) and reducing profitability. It is estimated that over 270,000 people are absent from work every day due to stress related issues! 1 in 5 report feeling extremely stressed at work. That is 5m people!!

If you are an employer, or a manager, you need to pay attention to what is happening in your workplace regarding stress. It affects the people, performance and you! Stress is not an illness, it is a state and can be managed or changed. However, not doing so can result in someone becoming ill.

The other reason for paying attention to this is that there is legislation around it! There is the duty of care and responsibility attached to managers as part of the Health and Safety legislation. This means undertaking risk assessments, creating a positive environment and managing work activity to reduce stress and pressure at work.

You can use these questions to get an immediate sense of where you are meeting HSE criteria and where issues may occur for your business:

- The culture of your organisation - how does it approach work-related stress?
- Demands on people, such as workload and exposure to physical hazards. Is work sensibly scheduled so that the workload levels are right?
- Control over their work and the way they do it – how much say do staff have?
- Relationships – how do you deal with issues such as bullying or harassment? (Remember, up to 1 in 5 reports they have been bullied at work.)
- Organisational change – how is it managed and communicated?
- Understanding of role – do individuals understand their role in the organisation? Does the organisation ensure that individuals do not

have conflicting roles or challenges? (Is there a clear definition of roles?)

- Support and training from peers and line managers for the person to be able to do the core functions of the job – do you cater for individual needs and differences?

How well would your workplace score? Which areas could do with some attention? Remember, prevention is usually preferable to cure in most things. Pay attention to these factors and you can start to address stress early on, preventing it becoming a problem. This will reduce the chances of it spreading. If you can identify specific areas, or individuals, where stress seems to occur frequently, consider how you can “quarantine” them!

Look at your organisation, and yourself if necessary, and think about what you can do against these factors to vaccinate it against stress! You do not want it becoming an epidemic – it is bad for business!! Make time to avoid pressure turning to stress for you personally and you will be in a better position to look at those around you and spot the early warning signs – and support the people who may be in danger of becoming the stress spreaders to stop them at source!

To keep yourself in the right state to avoid becoming stressed or a stress spreader, learn to be reasonable with yourself – and others. Keep things in perspective and set realistic standards and expectations for yourself.

When things are building up ask yourself:

– what will this look like in a year when we look back on it? (Or 3 years or 6 months.) How important will it seem then?

- what will be the worst that might happen if I don't.....?(or do!)

- what am I gaining by always thinking I have to be “Superwoman” or “Superman”? How often do I manage it?

Stress can be contagious – and when it is the negative form of stress it spreads quickly and no-one enjoys it or benefits. Prevent it with your attitudes and behaviour to yourself and others.

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