When will organisations <u>really</u> take stress seriously?

Most organisations and many managers within them are probably aware of the costs and consequences of stress and stress related problems. They may have some insight to the actual numbers involved – e.g. over 13.7 million days lost in a year. Managers have challenges around maintaining business performance, or even surviving, coping with their own jobs and handling their own pressures. They may well be feeling stressed too. However, can they recognise or admit it?

One way to encourage organisations to think about things seriously is to look at some numbers. Stress and other mental health conditions are costing about £1,000 per employee per annum. The HSE (Health and Safety Executive) believe that stress is the most dangerous risk to business in the early part of the 21st Century. Aviva's Health in the Workplace survey showed 4 out of 5 managers thought stress would be the biggest issue facing them. A recent survey found that 16.7% of employees thought that their workplace and jobs were *very* or *extremely* stressful. 415,000 reported that workplace stress was making them ill. Yet a survey by the Employers' Forum on Disability found that 45% of managers chose not to believe the problems of mental health in the workplace! The IIP (Investors in People) found 38% felt that work stress had risen. What was more worrying in their survey was that 29% felt their bosses were not doing anything about it!

What does it take to get managers, at all levels, to recognise that stress is a genuine problem? It has a negative impact on business performance, individual health and morale and people's lives in general. If a piece of plant or office equipment is faulty or not working properly, do they just leave it? No, something is done to fix it. Why not do the same for people?

The HSE and CIPD identified the importance of management competencies in controlling workplace pressure, for themselves and their people. Yes, employees have a responsibility for their own wellbeing. This might be a combination of increasing their own resilience to a reasonable amount of pressure and those times of pressure "spiking" at work, and taking responsibility for how they live their life outside of work. As organisations have usually invested a significant sum, directly and indirectly, in recruiting, developing and employing their people surely it is worthwhile to pay attention to how these people are doing? Apart from anything else, law firms report an increasing number of cases for compensation from employers for issues relating to stress (and bullying) from managers. Remember, in the UK, these aspects are now something where both the organisation and individual managers can have liability.

Despite all of this evidence too many organisations opt for the ostrich approach and bury their heads. They either deny there is a problem, hope it goes away, or feel it is not their responsibility. This is irresponsible in several ways, in particular it is commercially crazy and also really poor people management. There is plenty of evidence that organisations which pay attention to the health and wellbeing of their staff have better performance in many different areas. They consider it an investment rather than a cost.

Although there are many pressures on us all outside the workplace, organisations can help their people to handle these more effectively as part of their overall support for tackling stress, Pressure within work has increased recently, or people's perception is that it has. Many of these pressures are genuine. They frequently start from the top and cascade throughout. In many cases managers feel under pressure to deliver results, often with fewer resources, and their response is to behave in a more aggressive or challenging manner with their people. Less time is given to explanations, listening, supporting and other people skills. Combine this pattern of behaviour with other pressures such as increased workloads,

www.managingpressure.com   +44 (0)1483 480656

concerns about job security, longer working hours and the external ones and it is not surprising that many people are feeling more stressed.

The current situation seems to vary from those organisations who invest in health and wellbeing, employee assistance programmes, thorough training and support for all levels through to the other end of the spectrum where they do nothing. Some organisations feel they are addressing the issue with short, input sessions or offering some literature or access to on-line resources. If they can tick a box to say they have done something that is enough.

The consequences of not taking stress seriously are many. Apart from the costs resulting from absence due to stress related issues, others are incurred through potential problems with quality of work, performance levels, staff morale and possibly turnover. On a personal level, when individuals begin to feel stressed their health may be affected, their relationships with family, friends and colleagues deteriorate and quality of life suffers.

There are many benefits from taking stress seriously – and addressing it. The first step is to recognise that whatever is done is an investment, so do not go for cheap options! The next is to decide on which (or which combinations) of the many different options are going to be the most appropriate for the organisation. One of the key steps is to start with some sort of stress audit of the organisation. There are a number available ranging from the one developed by the HSE to ones such as our "Organisational Health Profile"©. The results from this kind of exercise can help the organisation to identify where to focus their efforts. It might be a good idea to introduce an Employee Assistance Programme. When choosing providers for this type of service make sure it is the right kind of "fit" and not just done on price. You do tend to get what you pay for!

As an organisation you might consider introducing flexible working. It can reduce stress and improve wellbeing and staff morale. Figures suggest that every £1 invested in flexible working gives a return of £3.5 as a result of increased staff retention, lower absence and improved productivity. Other wellbeing initiatives to encourage healthier lifestyles can pay dividends in similar areas. These might include things such as nutrition and diet; encouragement to exercise; offering massage, reflexology and complementary treatments; creating decent staff rest areas. Although these are fundamentally coping strategies rather than long-term solutions it is still worthwhile investing in them.

Consider introducing training throughout, not just for particular levels. We have a programme which we call "Stress Matters" which is aimed at managers, ideally from top down. As the name suggests, we want the participants to realise why it does matter to them and the organisation! We also want them to be able to spot the early signs of stress in others and do something about it, and to have some insights for handling their own pressures and avoiding becoming stressed. Without them having this awareness there is a risk that they will become stressed themselves and can be significant stress creators for those around them. Also, any attempts to offer stress management training for other levels will have a limited impact without proper support from above. Provide training for all other people on how to handle pressure and prevent themselves becoming stressed, giving them a better understanding of themselves and tools for taking ownership of the ways they handle pressure.

Whatever form of training you do have, recognise it will almost certainly mean a degree of personal change (and development.) It needs a realistic commitment of time to achieve this plus reinforcement and support. This could come from on-line resources, management and peer coaching and support, and having access to an EAP provider. It does not matter what the exact combination is, what is important is that the support is there! Remember, at the end of the day, doing nothing is an expensive option. Look back at some of the facts and figures at the start of this. It is time to really take stress seriously and invest in reducing it in your organisation.