

## How to prevent stress in the workplace

- ▶ HR and employers must address the stress problem as soon as it arises
- ▶ Preventing stress before it surfaces is the best way forward
- ▶ The key to preventing stress is to train and develop managers in the art of attentiveness towards people



*The prevention of stress at work is a big problem in search of a big solution, yet is astonishingly easy to achieve, says Derek Mowbray.*

Stress is at the wrong end of the pressure-strain-stress continuum. Those who suffer from it badly may also suffer some of the most serious physical health problems of all if the initial stress is left untreated. The costs attributed to stress are enormous. Sickness absence and staff turnover represent significant costs, but on top of this is the cost of people staying at work but incapable of performing effectively. Amazingly, few top managers have much interest in dealing with stress, and even less in its prevention.

One of the difficulties is that stress is ambiguous. Although the symptoms of stress (such as dizziness, lack of concentration and memory loss) can be measured, there is no clear definition of what stress actually is. This ambiguity feeds straight into the hands of managers many of whom perceive stress sufferers as weak and inadequate, often eroding profits or ripping off the taxpayer.

However, various recent government-funded reports have elevated the issues of health and wellbeing at work into the consciousness of working people, including some managers. The focus for many recommendations remains on fixing the stress problem once it has arisen, whilst at the same time recognising that prevention is the way forward in having any major impact. As Dan Olweus, the man behind one of the world's most effective bullying prevention programmes, said: "An ounce of prevention is worth a ton of treatment."

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## Working communities

Each workplace is basically a controlled community. Communities are people, and whilst social communities offer the relative freedom for individuals to act and behave as they like within the law, working communities tend to squeeze out individual freedom of action and expression. This is a big mistake. The most effective working communities are those where all the workers are engaged positively; can contribute part of themselves, their personalities as well as their skills, and where individuals are seen as a highly valued part of the business or service.

Simply think of the best places to shop, eat, stay or have your hair done. They tend to demonstrate a personal interest in their customer, offer services beyond expectation, know their business backwards, and feel able to take personal decisions to help the customer wherever possible, and refer to someone else if the problem is beyond their pay grade. These are almost always stress-free environments – a feeling that is felt by the customer who often comes away wanting to go back.

HR professionals and others will know only too well that the key to preventing stress is to train and develop managers in the art of attentiveness towards people, and to add this to their portfolio of skills, knowledge and experience. Man or person management is the essential skill that is frequently absent in many commercial, service and educational organisations. Attentiveness creates commitment, trust, engagement and resilience – the key to stress prevention. Easy.

Obviously there is more to this. Managers behave according to the expectations of the culture of the business or service. The culture, like the cultures of communities, is constructed of structures, rules and behaviours. Managers construct structures, rules and can specify behaviours. HR professionals can help them to achieve this by guiding the approaches to be adopted, based firmly on the creation and maintenance of a stress-free environment. These are some key characteristics:

- Clarity of purpose for the business or service expressed simply and with conviction
- An organisational structure that enables as many workers as possible to be engaged in decisions about themselves – as flat a structure as possible.
- Rules that are written to ensure commitment, trust and engagement. The key rules are:
  - Recruitment rules based on narrowing the gap of expectations between the organisation and the applicant
  - Communication rules based on seeking a response
  - Work-life balance rules based on organisational response to domestic crisis
  - Openness rules based on valuing the contribution of all workers

- Teamworking rules based on the concept of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts, and groups that can discuss anything without humiliation
- Performance appraisal rules that recognises that workers like to be continuously appraised
- Job rules that recognise that workers like challenge
- Management encouragement – rules that recognise the virtue of individual encouragement and discretion
- Behaviours of managers towards their staff, principally:
  - Attentiveness
  - Intellectual flexibility
  - Reliability
  - Conflict resolving
  - Encouragement

The impact of stress prevention is highly significant in the success stories of many businesses and services. The vibrancy that is felt in stress-free environments produces the energy that makes such places grasp opportunities to increase market share, cut corners towards greater efficiency, increase effective productivity, reduce errors and mistakes, solve problems quickly and effectively, and hit the bottom line by reducing costs of sickness absence, presenteeism, and increasing profits or delivering more services within budgets. The return on investing in a stress-free environment is made year-on-year, and can transform the image of the organisation to being an employer of choice.

**About Derek Mowbray PhD., CPsychol., CSci., DipPsych., FIHM**



Derek Mowbray, Director of OrganisationHealth, is a consultant organisation health psychologist who specialises in implementing mental health and wellbeing at work. Dr Mowbray focuses on the behaviour of leaders in relation to their employees, and helps leaders to develop the behaviours that encourage commitment, trust and staff engagement.

Dr Mowbray's background includes over 20 years as a chief executive of several organisations in the public, private and educational sectors. He is a visiting Professor in Psychology; an Independent Technical Expert for the European Commission and an Expert Witness in Stress Management.

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