

Human Capital

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Crash Course in... managing stress

You've just asked one of your teams to carry out a simple little task; one team member did an impression of the Large Hadron Collider and another burst into tears. Quite a few of your people have been looking like they're close to breaking point. It's National Stress Awareness Day on 5 November, so perhaps it's time to do something about it.

Understand what it is. It's important to appreciate the difference between stress and pressure, says Derek Mowbray, director of consultancy OrganisationHealth. 'We all thrive on pressure; but only when the individual becomes unable to cope does it become stress. That's when someone is no longer in personal control and feels there is no way of regaining it.'

Spell it out. A written policy should tell your people what to do if they become stressed in the course of their work, and what responsibility you'll take as employer.

Watch your back. There's no specific law on stress, but under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, you must take measures to control the risk. Failure to do so could cost you dear in an employment tribunal.

Check the sick roll. A spike in sickness or absentee days is often the first indicator of stress in one part of the organisation. But Cary Cooper, professor of organisational psychology and health at Lancaster University, adds: 'In the current downturn, people won't stay away from work even if they feel stressed, because they will feel vulnerable - so you will have to look harder.'

Get the measure of it. Call it a stress audit or risk assessment, but you must find out who is feeling stressed and whether they are clustered in a particular area. If you have more than five employees, health and safety regulations require you to assess the risk. This is usually a questionnaire asking a representative sample of staff for their views on stress and how it is handled in the organisation.

Identify the causes. Among the common causes of stress are: excessive workload; individual's lack of control over their work; poor relationship with boss; poor work/life balance; and an emphasis on fault-finding rather than encouragement. Bullying and organisational change are two more. HSE Management Standards for Work-related Stress provides a benchmark for best practice in dealing with each.

Blame the management. 'The biggest single source of stress is incompetent, poorly trained and inappropriately promoted managers,' says Cooper. A study commissioned by HSE and the CIPD identifies the skills line managers need to minimise the risk of stress developing. Get training.

Be attentive. 'Quick-fix managers may spot a problem but they simply refer it on to someone else, such as occupational health,' says Mowbray. 'Good managers intervene, to establish trust and commitment.'

Do say: 'People who suffer from stress are not going to perform at their best for us.'

Don't say: 'If you can't stand the heat, get out of the bloody kitchen.'