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Embedding Psychological health and wellbeing at work

A brief guide to the Psychology of
Manager – employee relationship

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Case study

A PA for a senior executive developed a working relationship that involved the PA covering for the errors and omissions of the executive. Over time, the PA took on more of the responsibilities of the executive. To complete her work she felt no dissatisfaction in working long hours. In other words she was filling a void created by the incompetent executive. This all progressed without anyone noticing and suited the PA and the executive at the time.

However, the domestic situation for the PA changed for the better and she found herself in a happier frame of mind at home. Her focus drifted away from work towards her social and domestic situation, a shift that exposed the degree of incompetence in the executive, as he was left having to undertake his normal functions, but was incapable of doing so effectively. The executive became psychologically distressed, as he was not in personal control of events, and could find no way of regaining control without admitting his inadequacy to his senior peers, and seeking help.

The situation came to a head when the executive started shouting at his PA with others present. This provoked a retaliation by the PA, and the conflict became common knowledge, with the usual consequences of general psychological distress, office gossip, reputations in ruins, and low performance all round. The PA started to take sick leave. The Chief Executive didn't feel equipped to intervene, nor did HR, except to seek outside assistance. There was an absence of psychological health and wellbeing, and commitment and trust between the PA and her employing organisation was moving to zero. The costs to the organisation were escalating by the minute.

Outcome

With our help it was uncovered that the executive had a history of management failure; that he had let others take over his responsibilities in the past his silence was a signal to his assistants and colleagues that he was encouraging them to expand their roles. It was a culture of drift.

We assessed the competencies of the executive through a development centre approach, and identified his deficits in skills, knowledge and experience. We brokered a change in his role, and helped him to develop his skills in managing people through an intensive coaching regime. We provided the same for the Chief Executive and the HR director given their inability to intervene with one of their senior executives. The PA remained where she was, but was given the opportunity of doing the job of the executive, which she accepted, after we undertook the appropriate assessment of her abilities. She soon restored her commitment to the organisation.

Brief guidance

1. The manager-employee relationship is at the heart of creating and sustaining psychological health and wellbeing at work. A breakdown at this level is the basic cause of psychological distress, and is the major contributor to sickness, absence and staff turnover. Creating positive relationships based on trust significantly eliminates the risk of psychological distress.
 2. Managers at all levels need the skills to manage people. This involves acquiring the skill of 'attentiveness to others' a sense of awareness of how others react to them, and how managers can respond in ways that foster commitment and trust. High levels of Emotional Intelligence can be helpful.
 3. Manager behaviour takes place within a context. The culture of an organisation emanates from the top, and this directly involves the chief executive and his/her ability to manage people and set the example in leadership.
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Our role

- Our 3 step programme embeds a culture of psychological health and wellbeing at work.
- We provide a leadership development programme, as well as individual coaching and mentoring to rectify any deficits in the abilities of managers in managing people.
- We provide individual assessments to establish individual competence and the ability to create and sustain commitment and trust, leading to a psychologically healthy workplace.

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