

How workplace culture affects mental health

Piers Bishop, Director at We Thrive, identifies the problems and outlines solutions

Poor performance at work and the sudden departure of talented staff may be warning signs of mental health issues in the workplace.

The problem is probably getting worse for many organisations as the drive for greater productivity impacts on staff, placing increased levels of stress on employees. For many organisations the root causes may be hidden – but the symptoms are all too evident when a key team member leaves suddenly or productivity declines sharply, for example.

Over the last twelve months more than forty per cent of UK organisations have seen a rise in reported mental health problems – such as anxiety and depression – says the annual *Absence management 2015* survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. “Reported increases are most likely in large and medium-sized organisations, with 69 per cent and 51 per cent respectively showing rises. They’re also associated with long working hours and the extent to which operational demands take precedence over employee wellbeing,” say the report authors.

The ability of managers to respond to staff needs is critical in addressing and resolving the problem. But only thirty per cent of organisations currently provide relevant training for managers, to equip them with the capability to engage appropriately and constructively with team members – and know what steps to take.

Current thinking is to engage human resource (HR) teams in the process: equipped as they are with an understanding of the prevailing culture in the organisation, they can train and support line managers and provide signposting for employees to appropriate help. HR can also look into whether and how well the corporate culture generally supports good mental health and employee wellbeing.

However, this all takes time and other resources. Is there a more immediate and direct resolution for workplace mental health

issues?

Yes there is, but only when managers understand the underlying workplace problems.

In fact, the majority (some forty per cent) of workplace mental health problems result from ‘factors intrinsic to the job’ identified as: workload pressures, including tight deadlines and too much responsibility and a lack of managerial support. This is followed by interpersonal relationships at work, at over twenty per cent, and also changes at work (source: HSE: *Work related stress, anxiety and depression statistics in Great Britain 2015*).

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It is doubtful whether busy line managers, unaided, can ever have the ability or time to understand what’s really troubling their staff. Particularly when many people are reluctant to admit to feelings of stress and anxiety in the first place.

So, how do you find out what is troubling your staff and what to do about it?

Identify the specific cause

Identifying the specific cause of unhappiness in the workplace is the critical starting point. It is achieved by using a survey questionnaire of staff members and benchmarking the results. This then identifies the key issues that concern each employee.

From research and analysis of hundreds of organisations at We Thrive, there is a clear set of predominating issues that cause staff anxiety and may leave them frustrated and unable to perform to the best of their ability,

including:

- clarity of understanding about the performance that is expected of them
- adequacy of resources, training and attention from supervisors
- levels of anxiety and feelings of achievement about control of their work.

A review of the results needs to be in a one-to-one meeting between the relevant line manager and member of staff. Equipped with the results of the questionnaire – and clear guidance of on how to use them – the meeting can become a constructive coaching session.

Steps to resolve the problems

The results of the questionnaire and guidance notes are indispensable to the process of agreeing the steps to resolve the problems. These might include:

- clarification of required project outcomes
- review of workloads
- further delegation of tasks
- reappraisal of deadlines, and
- revision of reporting processes.

Clarity and agreement around the steps that are required to meet staff concerns can have a significant impact on feelings of anxiety and stress.

Periodic reviews

Periodic reviews of the problems, the steps taken and resolution should be arranged. An annual, or even a quarterly, review is probably not enough.

To ensure progress, regular one-to-one meetings are needed between the staff member and line manager who has responsibility for the allocation of work and management of the processes affecting the staff member.

Where this process is implemented effectively, it supports a new culture of coaching – moving away from the ‘command and control’ practices that have become the default style in too many workplaces today, with negative results for the individual, team and organisation. ■