

Stress: Still a workplace taboo in the 21st Century?

I often hear the question... "So why is stress still such a big problem in so many organisations right now...and why does it continue to get worse year on year?" But then just as often I hear from senior managers: "I don't believe there's any such thing as stress, it's just that some people can't cope with the pressure" or "If they can't stand the heat they shouldn't be in the kitchen" or "It goes with the territory and they should be in a lower paid job where they can handle the workload". Which all point to the same problem: people don't really agree on what is meant by the word 'stress' and still the 'macho' approach is to try and ignore it. The reality though, is that it is hurting badly, for employees, employers and businesses. All too often the substantial financial and human costs are hidden dangerously from view.

Although 'stress' is a much used word in relation to the workplace, many senior managers in organisations wish it would just 'go away' or that people would 'just deal with it'. The problem is that most of us don't quite know 'how' to deal with it yet, or even necessarily what 'it' is! Having delivered stress management workshops over a number of years and talked in depth with many hundreds of people working in organisations large and small, public and private sector, at senior and junior levels I have come to some very distinct conclusions.

Stress is a major taboo

The first conclusion is that in most organisational cultures stress really is a major taboo. In the research articles we read about all the various stigmas attached to the subject, where people are frightened to admit to feeling stressed, or even of using the word at all, because they believe they will be castigated, seen as not good enough or shamming, labelled weak, limited in their career progression and so on. Hence the 'condition' gets hidden and this of course makes it worse – people think "I'm the only one having difficulties", they suffer in silence or visit the doctor for medication which deals with the symptoms and ignores the causes. There is much greater understanding now within the medical profession regarding the links between 'stress' and serious health issues – both as a contributory cause and in exacerbating pre-existing conditions. Some believe that there are strong links between this 'workplace

taboo' and the relatively poor state of health in such a highly developed nation.

People sometimes dismiss the problem by linking it with pressure in the workplace and saying "I work better under pressure". There is of course some truth in this; we do tend to become motivated when under a degree of pressure...but it also hides a myth. If we plot a graph of performance against pressure for example, most people will notice that their level of work performance does increase as the pressure increases...but only to a point. Then the curve tends to flatten out; we are performing at our optimum. If the pressure increases still further, what usually happens is that performance begins to diminish; we become less effective, particularly if the pressure is sustained for any length of time. The reason is that actually our success in organisations is more about being creative and productive, so that we can generate useful results, rather than about being busy. When we become tired, or the pressure feels like too much, our ability to think creatively and act quickly starts to drop to below optimum again.

Have you ever noticed yourself in that state of mind when the pressure is just too much for too long? You are very busy, but mainly reacting to the latest situation, problem, or crisis and your ability to think clearly, focus on priorities, review options and make good decisions is running away from you? Often we get into this state without even realising it's happening, perhaps until afterwards. It reminds me of the notion of 'doing things right' rather than 'doing the right things'...when I'm busy and feeling under too much pressure I can find myself spending more time trying to get things 'perfect', rather than completing them 'adequately'. Especially when 'adequate' is all that is needed and a clearer mind would enable me to engage in other higher priority activities.

Stress management is up to you

My second conclusion is that unless each person in an organisation is well tuned into their own individual experience of 'well-being', or otherwise, at these critical times (so that they can notice when the peak is reached and surpassed) it is difficult for them to resist further pressure and step back in a way which will restore or maintain a healthy state of mind and body.

Their performance will diminish and the business will suffer as a direct result. So rather than trying to 'hide' from the issue of stress, or pretend that it doesn't exist, I would do better for myself as a manager, and get better results from my team, if I recognised that this effect is real and if I actively encouraged people to notice it themselves and be more proactive in how they respond to it.

One might ask: what would be a better way of dealing with stress, which will be healthier for the organisation, the business and the individual? Well, if we accept that we all do experience 'stress' in one form or another and remember that, simply defined, 'stress is an adverse reaction to increasing levels of pressure', then we can help by learning how to recognise the early warning signs and taking appropriate action straight away. Or at least before there is a resultant effect on productivity, health, other people's stress, business performance and so on. A useful way of approaching this problem is to change our way of thinking and talking about stress, individually and within organisations.

Stress is normal

Which brings me to my third conclusion: stress is not something we might 'suffer from', or that we 'have' or 'don't have', or is 'good' or 'bad'...stress is just a natural, healthy aspect of normal life. We all regularly experience stress, it's just that we might not recognise it as such or call it that. (We might call it tiredness for instance, or fatigue or even boredom.) We all experience adverse reactions to anything that we do, if we do it for long enough. For example, too much looking at a computer screen, too long painting the bedroom wall, too long sitting in one position, too much thinking about a particular problem, too long talking to one person and so on – these all lead to some sort of adverse reaction, be it physiological or emotional. So the secret is knowing when to change, move, stop or do something different. It really is that simple and the only reason we make it complicated is because we try to label ourselves and others according to whether we think someone is 'prone to stress' or not. The reality is that we all experience it to a certain degree but some of us respond to it and recover from it more effectively than others, consciously or unconsciously.

Imagine trying to avoid all the potential sources of stress around us. If we didn't have some stress in our lives then we would hardly be living – so the axiom is 'too much and you burn, too little and you rust' - we simply have to maintain a healthy equilibrium. To improve our health, success and happiness we need to

accept that we will regularly experience some degree of stress, learn to recognise how and when it starts, treat it as a welcome warning indicator and do something useful in response to it.

More managers are now discovering how to help themselves and their staff to respond to stress more creatively and thereby sustain both a higher level of work performance and a healthier lifestyle. Even introducing some new phrases into the language of the organisation gets people talking in a way that begins to break down that old taboo!

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