



Creating a Stress Prevention Culture - a route towards improving workforce psychological wellbeing and corporate performance.

We live in the context of “organisations” all the time - when 2 or more people interact together to achieve a common aim which could be a bus queue, a dinner party, a shop or the workplace.

In order to survive, we moderate our behaviour according to our understanding of the expectations of any particular organisation at any particular time.

So, if you're sitting in a company workshop listening to a talk on stress (one kind of organisation) and the chief executive came in unexpectedly (2nd type of organisation), everyone's behaviour would change, in different ways, to reflect their understanding of the new situation. Some would be fearful, because of the general economic climate and exposure to an oligarch, others might think very warm things because the CEO is a great person, known to support their workforce.

We respond to the context we're in all the time. If you follow the XABC formula for understanding what's going on –

X is context,
A is events,
B is our response, and
C is the outcome.

X impacts on both A and B – poorly arranged organisations can precipitate events, hence legislation on accident prevention. Poorly arranged organisations also precipitate strain and stress.

Our response at B is about us, our resilience built up over years of experience combined with specific exercises to strengthen resilience – resilience being our attitude towards events. B contains what we are – our thinking, feelings, evaluation capacity, and behaviours. We weigh up what is expected of us in response to an event, and if we find ourselves with limited options (because of fear, for example) we end up being at risk to strain and stress, particularly if the decision we reach is at odds with our personal driving values.

So, what can we do about it?

Modify the cultural context of workplaces to prevent psychological distress and emphasise the link between wellbeing and performance.

If you feel psychologically well you perform better than if you feel psychologically distressed.

Don't emphasise health as a link to wellbeing, as you can be extremely healthy but work in a cultural environment that provokes distress.



The platform for a moderated culture is commitment and trust, as these psychological features have a profound and lasting impact on distress. Lack of commitment and trust tends to lead to dis-engagement, and places individuals at risk to strain and stress. The positive end of this spectrum – strengthening commitment and trust – tends to result in strong commitment and trust that nudges people towards psychological flow which embraces a strong social engagement and a strong psychological contract.

Performance (in the form of concentration and effort) is improved, less people suffer psychological presenteeism and, consequently, fewer people become psychologically unwell and take sick leave or simply leave.

The cultural context, as suggested earlier, has a profound impact on behaviour. In a controlled organisation, such as the workplace, **the behaviour of managers is hugely influenced by the cultural environment, and by their own resilience (attitude) towards their staff.**

If managers think that their workforce is their most precious asset, for example, then they may think about the attributes that produces the best performance from their assets.

There are about ten attributes that precede the behaviours that are known to promote commitment and trust (between managers and their staff). These attributes can be taught but sadly, very few managers are taught these basic aspects of management.

If employees work within a cultural context that manifests itself in positive, encouraging behaviours of managers, this builds the commitment needed to offset the risks of psychological distress. This doesn't mean that people won't feel pressure (a stimulant), tension (part stimulant part diversion), strain (a diversion) and stress (an impairment) at times in their working day, but it does mean they will have an environment where the causes of these sensations are more likely to be tackled effectively, quickly, and the risk is attenuated.

If risks are overcome effectively, as they are in this kind of environment, the individual builds confidence that future risks will be overcome, and this process adds to self esteem, a critical component of resilience.

The cumulative effect is an endorsement of a resilient attitude that roughly speaking says 'will do' when faced with adverse events in the future.

Intervening culturally and in the behaviours of managers, combined with strengthening cognitive resilience in individuals, is a route towards improving wellbeing and performance corporately, for the workforce as a whole and for individuals.

This is the basis of a primary prevention strategy.



You can easily tell if this cultural environment exists when you walk through the front door of a business or service – the atmosphere almost immediately conveys a sense of security and personal comfort. Think of the five businesses or services you really enjoy doing business with and then work out why.

Adopting this general model to the reduction and elimination of stress in the workplace, you can use a strategic framework to help managers formulate their interventions appropriately. The framework contains five strategic purposes as follows:

Prevention – to prevent people from needing intervention in the first place (primary prevention). This translates into a Wellbeing and Performance Agenda based on a Positive Work Culture.

Prevent deterioration – once identified as being at risk, to prevent the person from deteriorating from this point (secondary prevention)

Restoration – once identified as suffering distress (of any intensity along the spectrum of pressure, tension, strain and stress), to restore back to their normal level of independent life and beyond

Palliation – once identified a suffering chronic distress for which little prospect of restoration can be expected, to provide interventions that raises and maintains the highest level of quality of life as possible.

The next generation – ensuring that the next generation of “controllers” maintain a prevention approach to distress.

Using this framework it isn't difficult to match existing interventions with the relevant strategy to establish:

- a) the effectiveness of the existing interventions
- b) the gaps in provision
- c) the outline for future interventions.

You will probably see that preventing deterioration onwards is about the individual being supported back to something – their normal level of function, and it is these strategies that are most commonly found. They are ‘therapeutic’ in nature.



The big difference between the standard ABC therapeutic model universally used and the XABC model is the context and this is central to the primary prevention strategy. In this strategy there are three main activities:

Managing my Organisation – a focus on the cultural environment within which people are expected to behave and perform. The most successful organisations have this embedded into their corporate strategy. Others that have this as a focus often provide the ‘good to have’ services, such as a good diet, access to recreational facilities such as gyms, but miss the key impact value of culture influencing manager behaviour.

Managing my People/Workforce – a focus on the risks to the workforce, the ‘rules’ that promote prevention and the workforce resilience that should constantly be strengthened. Some organisations provide support services such as medical care, but have rules that make their access threatening to their continued employment. Others have effective absent management services, but pay little attention to rules that encourage involvement or any of the other 13 impact valued enabling rules that this focus requires.

Managing Myself – individual strengthening of cognitive resilience. Physical resilience is of importance, but only really effective when linked to cognitive resilience.

This article was compiled from Derek Mowbray’s input to a discussion on the HSE Stress Forum – June 2011.

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