The 12 Secrets of Managing Wellbeing and Performance

People who are well perform better than people who are ill.

You might think that’s a statement of the blindingly obvious, but nonetheless it’s true and definitely evidence-based.

**But as a manager, how can you manage wellbeing and performance (and prevent stress)?**

Well, the answer is partly dependent on how much influence you have, your level of seniority. However, all managers can make a major difference to the quality of working life for those they manage.

If you’re near or at the top of the organisation, you can potentially influence the culture, the purpose, the structure, and the ‘rules’ of the organisation. You may also be able to influence both the physical and psycho-social working environment. This means you can potentially make changes that have a positive impact on wellbeing and performance for many or all employees in your organisation.

If you’re a middle manager or a line manager lower down in the organisation, your ability to influence the whole organisation is obviously more limited. That doesn’t mean you cannot influence the organisation or its culture; it’s just that it’s challenging because you would need to generate change from below, which is always much more difficult.

What you can definitely do as a manager though is to influence wellbeing and performance locally and you can do that in many, positive ways.

Essentially this boils down to 12 ‘secrets’.

1. **Creating the right culture, climate and working environment.** This is about doing whatever you can to create a Positive Work Culture and good working environment where you are. What can you do to make your organisation/dept/area a great, or at least better, place to work? It’s important to assess the current culture and climate and be aware of the characteristics of a Positive Work Culture. This is as much about ensuring the presence of positive aspects of work such as achievement, job satisfaction, enjoyment, interesting and challenging work as the elimination of negative aspects such as lack of control, conflict and overload.
2. **Prioritising people management activities.** Often there is a tension between being a manager and being a practitioner. Management is other-focussed. It’s about getting the best from your team. Yet what often happens in practice is that people management ends up coming much too far down the pecking order. Firstly, you need to look at what you do now on an hour-by-hour, day-by-day basis. Secondly you need to evaluate whether this adequately prioritises people management activities that promote wellbeing and performance. Thirdly, you need to make decisions about what you need to spend more or less time on and re-think your timetable. And finally, you need to make the necessary changes.

3. **Good communication.** This is about improving all aspects of your communication (organisational, managerial, individual), so that there is clarity rather than ambiguity. This is especially important during periods of change, where uncertainty and ambiguity can be major causes of stress. Change will inevitably increase the risk of stress, so the key is to use good, clear communication and be careful about the content and methods of communication to minimise that risk.

4. **Good person-job fit.** This is about making sure wherever possible that there is a good fit between the person and their job or role. It’s best if you can to address this at the stage of recruitment. But as a manager, you often have to deal with things as they are or as they have turned out. For that reason, the key is finding out about people’s strengths and personal preferences and adjusting or adapting jobs and roles to fit the people who are doing them. You will get the best from people and prevent stress if you play to their strengths.

5. **Your behaviours.** This is about managing your behaviours such that they create commitment and trust, which in turn generates engagement rather than psychological distress. The first stage includes assessing and becoming more aware of your existing behaviours. Secondly, you need to get feedback from others, especially those you manage. And thirdly, where needed, it’s about making the necessary changes to your behaviours so that they generate commitment and trust. This is an area where some training, expert support and coaching can make a big difference.

6. **Flexibility, trust and control.** This is about being flexible and enabling control for those you manage where practicable. Control is a key issue in the management of wellbeing and prevention of stress. There are many ways as a manager that you can enable control. One way is by being flexible, which demonstrates to an employee that you trust them. It is very good to feel trusted and normally this is reciprocated, leading to substantial improvements in wellbeing and performance.
7. **Being responsive to individual vulnerability.** This is about being responsive and reacting appropriately when employees show signs of vulnerability and/or when stress problems occur. Important aspects of this are becoming more aware what increases vulnerability and the process to follow when you become aware that an employee is vulnerable. What can make an employee vulnerable is often linked to issues that are not work-related, but it is in your interest to be responsive and supportive as non-work issues and circumstances can and do affect an employee’s wellbeing and performance. This may sound reactive, but it is a critically important aspect of prevention, because early identification of problems enables prompt support and/or action to address issues. This stops the situation from escalating and reduces the risk of long-term absence and other costly problems.

8. **Pressure Profiling (Stress Risk Assessment).** This is about having a good idea about the kinds of things that can cause stress problems in your area, for your team, and for individual employees. Wherever possible, the key to this is to keep it simple, otherwise you won’t do it. You need to find out what people think and feel, as stress is based on individual perceptions. This involves using simple tools such as ‘pressure profiling’ to ask people about what they see as ‘pressures’ (negative aspects of work) and when they occur (‘pressure points’). The most important aspect of this is consulting and working with individuals. Usually a survey is not appropriate for this, although an anonymous, confidential survey can be helpful at the level of the organisation.

9. **Stress Risk Management.** This is simply about taking steps to tackle identified problems where practicable and providing/facilitating support as needed. This follows on naturally from pressure profiling (stress risk assessment) activities. This will have identified issues that need to be addressed. Here, you work with individuals and your team to develop and implement plans to tackle those issues.

10. **Stress Prevention.** This is about thinking ahead and planning strategically to prevent unnecessary stress in your area. Pressure profiling includes the identification of ‘pressure points’ the times or periods when there is the greatest risk of stress. If you know when the risk is going to be highest, you can plan ahead to minimise risk, for example by delegating or getting more support for individuals or the team at those times. You might also be able to reorganise, restructure, or reschedule tasks such that the problem is removed altogether.
11. **Your resilience.** This is about looking after yourself, managing your own stress and becoming more resilient. If you don’t manage stress well, it’s going to have a major impact on others’ wellbeing and performance, because stress will lead to negative behaviours and poor decision making. It will also make you more vulnerable to illness, which will obviously affect your ability to support others effectively.

12. **Promoting resilience in others.** This is about promoting wellbeing, resilience and good stress management amongst your staff team. Many of the actions listed above will help promote resilience. However, it is helpful to provide additional information, support or training to staff to improve their resilience.

Importantly, these 12 ‘secrets’ of managing wellbeing and preventing stress are all things that, as a manager, you have at least some control over, so you know you really can make a difference.

Appropriate training and coaching can provide much of what is required, such as awareness, assessments, skills, strategies, tools and techniques.

Then it will be down to you to make good decisions and take the steps required to improve wellbeing and performance where you work.

If you think this all sounds like touchy-feely nonsense, you couldn’t be more wrong!

**The point is that these are the things that are known to improve staff wellbeing. This in turn enhances both individual and organisational performance. Absence and staff turnover will both drop substantially, but the biggest impact of all will be on ‘presenteeism’, which is where people are at work but disengaged, unmotivated and ineffective.**

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