Laying the foundations for preventing stress in the workplace

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Introduction

Forget quick fixes.

Stress is a serious condition that we experience, to a certain level, sometime in our lives.

Stress is at the wrong end of a continuum that includes stimulants, such as pressure and tension, that are generally good for us. they are beneficial because they aid concentration and help focus our energies on what we want to focus on. We can often feel extra doses of energy when under pressure.

Pressure and tension are OK as long as we remain in control of the situation. If we cannot keep control because of events happening around us we may find ourselves moving to the wrong end of the continuum.

The wrong end includes strain and stress.

This is when the mind is hijacked by events which may happen inside our bodies as well as outside. Internal events are most commonly associated with ill health because it's a threat to our survival, or our success and happiness. External events can be anything we think is threatening us.

This hijacking stops us from concentrating on what we want to focus our attention on. We have, effectively, lost control of our mind.

This is when stress gets serious. Not only have we lost mental control, but our bodies find it more difficult to restore themselves back to normal health and will need help to do so.

Stress that is triggered by events in the workplace is largely preventable.

Why aren't organisations interested in preventing stress?

It's a puzzling aspect of being human.

As human beings we have the unique characteristic of being able to work out the consequences of actions. We can predict the future. Our lives are based on this ability. We educate ourselves to achieve future success. We go on diets to achieve good health or a competitive appearance. We drive on the left to prevent future accidents.

We don't try to prevent stress even though we know it causes huge barriers to performance and productivity.

Instead of preventing stress we wait until it turns up, then try to find ways of getting rid of it. This process exacerbates our under performance and productivity.

Performance relies on us being able to concentrate and focus on tasks. We can have every possible skill, knowledge and experience but if we cannot concentrate, they are redundant.

We cannot apply those skills because we cannot concentrate effectively enough to use our skills appropriately. Our mind is all over the place, or it may be dominated by the cause of our stressful feelings.

The puzzle is knowing that certain events cause stressful reactions, and knowing that stressful reactions cause under performance, why do organisations, teams and their leaders and managers constantly ignore how to prevent the adverse events in the first place?

This paper lays the foundations for preventing stress in the workplace.

Implementing the steps that follow is a matter of attitude and a desire for high level performance.

The challenges people are facing.

There seems to be one perfect storm after another.

The aftermath of the pandemic continues.

Now have a cost of living crisis.

And a climate change crisis.

And loads of people not wanting to work.

And lots of people working on a hybrid basis which is wobbly.

And lots of remote working causing loneliness and isolation.

And loss of trust in those who govern us.

And turmoil around the world that affects us in different but direct ways.

The workplace

The workplace should be the oasis. It should be a safe place; somewhere we go that provides us with all the triggers for a happy and fulfilling life. It should be somewhere we run to because we love it and shields us against the challenges of the outside world.

Everything about the workplace could and should be stimulating the features that make our lives seem wonderful.

The workplace is a controlled community. There is nothing the prevent the workplace from being a 'fabulous place to work'.

This paper provides the foundation steps to achieve this aim.

Details will vary in each organisation, but the basics are the same.

A systemic approach.

Forget quick fixes (again!)

There is no quick fix for preventing stress.

There is a systemic approach; one that requires organisations to adopt features and characteristics that achieve the aim of a 'fabulous place to work'.

If only one feature is implemented, it won't achieve the aim. If all features are implemented appropriately, they will achieve the aim.

Laying the foundations for preventing stress in the workplace

Raising awareness of the total process –

As a preliminary to commencing the processes of change, it may be sensible to introduce the whole process to those most involved with the changes.

A 'raising awareness' session, conducted by Derek Mowbra,y is available from MAS.

The session covers each of the steps to be adopted. These steps are described in the following part of this paper.

Preliminary conditions

Strategy of change

The strategy of change to be used in this process is the strategy of conviction. This strategy uses argument as the means of persuading those involved that a different way of doing things will prevent stress and improve performance and productivity as a result.

Power

The form of power that will be used in the organisation going forward and as a result of the proposed changes will be status power, power based on the use of argument as the form of persuasion. This has the foundations in acknowledging that everyone who works in the organisation is of equal value to the success of the organisation. Everyone, therefore, has equal status.

Status power uses behaviours of persuasion based on the argument for change.

The argument for change

Stress in the workplace is largely caused by the behaviour of managers towards their employees.

The culture that arises from adverse behaviours based on coercion create an atmosphere of distrust. This reduced the potential of people to perform at their peak as they are constantly on alert for adverse behaviours that are threatening.

Conversely, using the power of persuasion based on the knowledge that the combined intelligence of the workforce is far greater than that of its leaders and managers, results in greater engagement by employees in achieving success for the organisation if that intelligence is positively used. There is greater commitment, trust and engagement when the environment stimulates the psychological wellbeing of individuals, so they feel psychologi9cally safe and can fully participate in making the organisation a success.

Success breeds success. Once employees feel successful they want to repeat the sensation and continue to feel successful. This happens when individuals have the sensation of psychological

'flow', when they derive energy from the activitiy they are engaged in. The workplace needs to generate this kind of environment to achieve great success.

Step 1 – develop your leaders to step up to the plate.

Most organisations are managed rather than being led.

Managers deal with certainty – procedures, protocols and processes – in a very structured manner. They are not leading people.

Leaders deal with uncertainty – set up, strategy, vision, people – in an unstructured way based on principles and practises.

Managers should transform into leaders for the workforce to achieve the levels of commitment, trust and engagement that are needed for great success.

The MAS programme – Leader development – is available for aspiring leaders. Contact MAS for details.

Step 2 – leaders agree a common approach to leadership.

The approach that is required is 'Adaptive Leadership'.

This is based on the principle of 'sharing responsibility for the future success of the organisation' amongst all the workforce.

This principle is further developed later as a key influence on behaviour and actions.

The MAS programme – Leader development – is available for aspiring leaders. Contact MAS for details.

Step 3 – Create a culture that is values driven and outcome focused.

Culture has a massively strong impact on the behaviour of people.

We all try to work out what the culture is like whenever we join a group of people, whether it's a party or a meeting. We do this to try and match our behaviour to the environment as the majority of us don't wish to stick out from the crowd.

Of course, not everyone wishes to comply with the prevailing culture. If the culture is toxic, for example, most people will seek to become invisible in that culture rather than behave according to the culture. This has the effect of under-performance as few employees are interested or willing to offer themselves completely to help the organisation achieve its aims.

On the other hand, if the culture is aligned with personal values, and has the aim of achieving outcomes that accord with personal interest, this enhances commitment, trust and engagement, and provides the environment in which individuals can thrive and the organisation can achieve great success.

The MAS programme – creating a positive working culture – is available. Contact MAS for details.

Step 4 – adopt the principle of sharing responsibility.

This principle is aligned with the approach to leadership.

Sharing responsibility means giving control to the workforce to achieve success of the organisation through its various teams. Leaders don't take control; they facilitate the processes of control through their teams by giving control away. This enhances the feeling of ownership of the organisation amongst its employees. This, in turns, strengthens commitment, trust and engagement which results in high performance and productivity.

This principle enables the workforce to create an atmosphere is creative challenge, creative critique, offering new ideas and better ways to achieve success.

All ideas are good; all failures are successes waiting to happen.

This principle encourages everyone to focus on the success of the organisation and not the success of individuals.

The MAS programme – sharing responsibility – is available. Contact MAS for details.

Step 5 – adopt the principle of Psychological Responsibility.

Psychological Responsibility is an obligation placed on everyone in the organisation to look after their own psychological wellbeing and those of everyone they work with.

The consequence of this principle is that the organisation is a psychologically safe environment in which anyone can say that are feeling unwell and receive the support they need. This amounts to the elimination of stigma against those with mental ill health.

Psychological Responsibility results in a regular enquiry about how people are feeling in the workplace, as well as encouraging everyone to make observations that enhances psychological wellbeing.

When looking after the psychological wellbeing of others, everyone is expected to behave in ways that removes the risk of others feeling the adverse aspects of stress.

The use of status power, based on everyone being of equal value to each other, results in behaviours that provoke people to feel well, and when anyone is feeling unwell, they are instantly supported to help them return to their normal self.

The MAS programme – Psychological Responsibility – is available. Contact MAS for details.

Step 6 – adopt Intelligent Management.

Intelligent Management is the adoption of the principles described in earlier steps and applying them to every day management activities.

As an illustration of this, meetings are commonly quite boring for many, and there are often too many meetings which squeeze out opportunities to do some work!

Adopting the principles described earlier results in meetings only being held when there is a question to be answered or a problem to be solved. Only those who can help answer the question or solve the problem need contribute to the meeting. A maximum of two questions or problems should be on the agenda, so all agenda have question marks at the end of each agenda item.

This has the effect of making meeting relevant and value for money. Only those who have something to contribute need break into the working routine to attend the meeting, so the meeting is regarded as a vital part of their working routine.

Of course, meetings should be fun too. They provide the rare opportunity for people to come together socially, so time should be set aside for everyone to spend a little time socialising. This can, also, be seen to help embed the principle of sharing responsibility as part of implementing this principle is based on people knowing what each other does in their work. Meeting socially can help each other understand more clearly what each person does in their daily work.

The MAS programme – Intelligent Management – is available. Contact MAS for more details.

Step 7 – Resilience

Resilience is the ability to rise up to and overcome potentially stressful situations without experiencing stress.

This applies to the organisation, team and individuals.

The process of adopting these steps involves creating a resilient organisation, team and individuals.

Resilience is a choice; the choice is based on whether the person or organisation perceives the adversity as a threat or a challenge.

If the adversity is perceived as a threat and cannot be changed into a challenge, then the individual or organisation goes into coping mode, lives with the threat, tries to tolerate it, and hopes it will go away.

If the adversity is perceived as a challenge, this stimulates the energy required to focus on how to overcome the adversity, leave it behind and carry on going forward without diminution of performance.

Adversity is more likely to be perceived as a challenge if the working environment is a positive one that the workforce wishes to preserve because it feeds individuals with what they need out of working life.

Adversity is more likely to be perceived as a threat if the environment is not supportive and not helpful to individuals working in the organisation. If there is dis-engagement between the workforce and the organisation, performance is lower, and the organisation is in danger of not being able to respond effectively to adversity and may be in danger of not surviving.

Organisational and Individual resilience is based on enhancing the four pillars of resilience and psychological wellbeing – self-esteem, self-efficacy, motivation and mental control.

The organisation needs to feed the individual with triggers that enhance each of the pillars. These steps do that.

The individual, in addition to being fed triggers for the four pillars, can enhance the foundations of their resilience, so their own efforts help to enhance the four pillars. This means that when an individual is confronted by adversity, their decision to turn the adversity into a challenge is more likely to happen because of the environment and because of their own self-belief they can rise to the challenge and overcome it.

MAS programmes – personal resilience, team resilience and the role of leaders in resilience – are available. Contact MAS for mor details.

Conclusion

By following the 7 steps organisations and teams will have implemented the triggers to create a fabulous place to work, which reduces the risks of stress in the workplace.

By encouraging and influencing everyone to work positively and behave well towards each other to achieve great success, the behaviour that may trigger adverse reactions is largely eliminated in favour of behaviours that enhance individual psychological wellbeing.

The MAS programme – implementing a positive working environment – is available as a change programme applied over time. The programme includes workshops, action learning sets and mentoring, together with all necessary supporting material. Contact MAS for more details.

MAS also has on-line versions of some of these programmes to help reinforce the key triggers for change. Ask MAS for details.