

TAKING THE STRAIN

– whose responsibility is stress in the public sector?

As recognition grows that stress is more a matter of people management than of compliance, Professor Cary Cooper, of leading business psychologists Robertson Cooper, reviews the claim that there is an easy way to reduce work-related stress

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimates that stress costs the British economy an estimated £3.7bn per year, so it is not surprising that it is now a key health and safety issue. But times are changing as recognition grows that stress is actually more a matter of people management than compliance.

The HSE has led the push to encourage organisations to conduct psycho-social risk assessments and has increasingly emphasised the role of effective people management and leadership in managing stress effectively. It has been important because it begins to shift responsibility from health and safety professionals to line managers and leaders. This is a positive move, but it does have implications for those who may not yet be ready, willing or able to accept this new responsibility for managing workplace stress.

In 2004, the HSE launched the Management Standards and the then minister for work Jane Kennedy said: “This is a very practical example of

what can be done to demonstrate how easy it can be to reduce the causes of work-related stress.” Two years into the implementation of the Management Standards approach, the claim that there is an “easy” way to reduce work-related stress needs reviewing.

The standards specify “states to be achieved” in areas that to the ears of most managers would sound far from easy – for example, management of work demands, change, and work relationships. And when has change ever been easy in the public sector? When you add in the remaining standards – role, control, and support – it is clear that the power of the health and safety function to achieve these ideal states will only ever be severely limited. This is because these are complex organisational processes that require considerable skill, effort and leadership if they are to be improved or changed.

The HSE is to be applauded for highlighting that the causes of work-related stress frequently lie in poor people management and leadership – this is a change of mindset that was much needed. But, in trying to provide a new mechanism for stress management, they may be somewhat guilty of lifting best practice statements and setting them in stone as standards without recognising that achieving them is not simply a matter of procedural compliance.

For example, consider this state to be achieved from the Change Standard: “The organisation ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals.” This sounds laudable, but it makes assumptions that are unlikely to hold true right across the public sector. It assumes that change occurs in a planned, predictable way, that managers are fully aware of what is happening and are therefore able to consult staff in a systematic manner. Compare that with your own experience of change in the public sector!

Yes, there is probably scope for better staff consultation on change proposals, but there is often a lack of clarity about what change will mean in practice. Often this starts at ministerial level, leaving senior managers to work out the reality in a piecemeal, iterative manner. It then becomes very

difficult to offer staff meaningful opportunities for consultation and to provide them with confidence that they can influence a logical plan for change. If such a plan was in place staff would feel more secure, in control and less stressed!

We are not just talking about a broad people management challenge here, but also a major leadership challenge. In last month’s column, Ivan Robertson discussed the important distinction between management and leadership in terms of personal development. The same distinction applies to improving well-being. Effective leadership is about challenging staff effectively and appropriately and balancing this with support so that they are motivated and energised, but not burnt-out. It is about getting the balance right.

It is this balance that is critical in managing work-related stress, and achieving what David Cameron has been referring to as general well-being. Public sector staff are unlikely to feel healthy, happy and productive when leadership is weak and they are left to drift. They expect to be fairly challenged to bring out the best in them – they want a sense of direction. But when staff have unmanageable workloads, little control and no tangible support from their manager – the result is stress. When you think about the size of the challenge of embedding this culture throughout the public sector, one can see that it is neither realistic nor fair to leave the health and safety manager “to do stress” on behalf of the organisation.

The bottom line is that this is an issue for boards and organisational leaders. Those who truly believe that good health is good business can reap the benefits of encouraging leaders and managers to take responsibility for staff well-being. These benefits can range from reductions in sickness absence to improvements in retention and bottom-line productivity. If senior people really believed these benefits were in the realm of well-being, many more organisations would be seeing stress as a leadership issue and investing appropriately in the health of their staff.

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CARY COOPER: director of Robertson Cooper Ltd and pro vice-chancellor for external relations at Lancaster University

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