

Mental Health and Leadership

– Stress Reduction and Healthy Leadership

Work-related stress now represents one of the greatest occupational health problems in the European Union. With half of the 150 million or so employees in Europe now feeling exposed to substantial pressure at work the damage to companies and the economy is considerable. The EU estimates that the material costs alone which are caused by stress at the workplace equate to approximately € 20 billion annually in the Community. The international work organisation (ILO) estimates the total cost of psychological strain at work at 3 percent of the community's GDP.

However, what causes work-related stress and how can it be coped with? According to the European Commission, work-related stress is defined as “the emotional and psychophysiological reaction to unfavourable and detrimental aspects of work, the working environment and the work organisation. Stress is a condition which is characterised by high activity and workload levels and is often linked to the feeling that the situation cannot be overcome”.

Increasing work intensification, excessive work and pressure from deadlines mean that increasing numbers of employees no longer feel they can cope with the work assigned to them. Equally, too little work, monotony and a lack of communication and information also cause stress. Often workers feel there is no sense in their work and that they are not appropriately “rewarded” by their employer for their commitment.

Stress at work – a crucial factor in damage to health

In all industrialised countries there is now strong evidence that a large percentage of the working population is exposed to high levels of occupational stress. This is often attributed to high-pressure workloads combined with the individual employee's feeling of lack of control. Relentless – and sometimes conflicting – job demands, coupled with little influence over the pace or method of working, have an accumulative effect on employees. Other significant work stressors include a lack of support from co-workers or supervisors, job insecurity and the physical demands of some occupations.

These pressures are increasing with work intensification. Economic conditions are forcing more companies to adopt a range of measures to improve productivity, including staff reductions, the introduction of non-standard working hours and higher individual and team performance expectations.

If employees sense of “self efficacy” (self efficacy concept) is insufficient and if they have the feeling that they are not receiving the reward or gratification they believe they deserve for giving their utmost efforts in work, then serious consequences can arise.

EfH Guideline – Watchpoints

1

Work intensification has a considerable impact on levels of health in a company, and also on productivity and competitiveness. While the health consequences are already being discussed in depth in the public debate, the effects on innovation and learning have so far been neglected: People under great pressure from work are finding less and less time for learning and personal development. New and innovative ideas therefore fall by the wayside.

2

Political and company decision-makers have long since agreed that qualifications and knowledge have become the decisive competitive advantage worldwide. People are the bearers of this valuable capital. With their abilities and creativity “knowledge workers” represent a crucial competitive factor: adapting to unforeseen changes. If companies do not look after the health of their employees appropriately in view of the increasing work strains, they are exacerbating the vulnerability of their own economic basis – the quality of human potential.

3

A leadership declaration is necessary on the development, design and maintenance of health-promoting work which enables the workforce to meet the demands imposed on it by work and other areas of life and which will, at the same time, ensure ongoing and successful company development. Management and a leadership styles which are based on appropriate values, set the course for everyone in the company and create a common identity. Value-oriented companies are based on cost-efficiency as well as on trust and fairness. This successful combination is the cornerstone of all business relationships, whether internal as regards the employees, or external as regards the customers or shareholders. Trust and fairness are the key resources for sustainable success in the economy and society and are the mainstays for company health.

4

In the past, workplace health promotion often concentrated on the individual behaviour of the employees. Healthy companies are now going one step further: They are also looking after the ability of each individual not only to be and remain prepared for change in times of upheaval but also to be able to actively support such change. This approach combines work design and work organisation, supportive leadership, learning, innovation and health.



“The economies of companies – and ultimately countries – depend more and more on the contribution of ‘knowledge workers’. If organisations fail to recognise, or take appropriate steps to mitigate, the damaging effects of work intensification and other stressors on these and other employees, then it follows that the organisation’s future could be in jeopardy.”

Dr. Graham Lowe,
The Graham Lowe Group Inc., Canada

Stress makes people ill and prevents learning and innovation

The significance of psycho-social illnesses, which has long been underestimated, is no longer being denied. Up to 50 percent of absenteeism can be a result of mental disorders and since 1990, the number of people who have fallen ill at work due to stress has more than doubled. The effects on the physical and psychological health of these people differ, ranging from diseases of the heart, circulatory and digestive systems to psychological problems, and above all depressive moods.

However, not only health-related absenteeism is of significance for the success and business excellence of the organisations. When companies only concentrate on absenteeism, they neglect the fact that one of the causes of a drop in performance and productivity may be due to the fact that although employees are present they are not healthy and completely efficient (presenteeism).

Companies which are undergoing restructuring and downsizing processes now frequently display the trend of not only of risking their employees’ health and quality of life through increased performance demands, but are also limiting the capability of the organisation to develop and improve the competencies and knowledge base for their business activities. At the same time, potential for change is lost, which entails negative consequences for innovation and the overall performance of the company.

The only effective approach for organisations to counteract the negative effects of stress at work is to invest in healthy and health-promoting work design and create worker-friendly working methods and working environments.

How can work-related stress be reduced?

Companies nowadays not only support workers with stress management programmes but are also increasingly allowing for the working conditions, e.g. work organisation, equipment and the working environment to change in a supportive manner.

Strategies to reduce stress not only focus the spotlight on all work activities but also on the organisation as a whole. A workplace environment which is designed to include a participation-oriented and participative management, together with measures such as staff development and career planning, agreed targets, team building and appropriate reward/pay systems, can help to promote health and avoid mental stresses. In addition to a supportive climate in an organisation in the sense of a corporate culture based on partnership, specific jobs can allow for an individual’s personality and have a health-promoting and motivating effect if the following criteria are satisfied: completeness, performing a variety of tasks, creating the possibility of social interaction, individual autonomy, creating opportunities for learning and development and having a sense of purpose.

All in all, the support of individual resources and the healthy design of work are becoming key management tasks.

Leadership for health – how to create healthy organisations

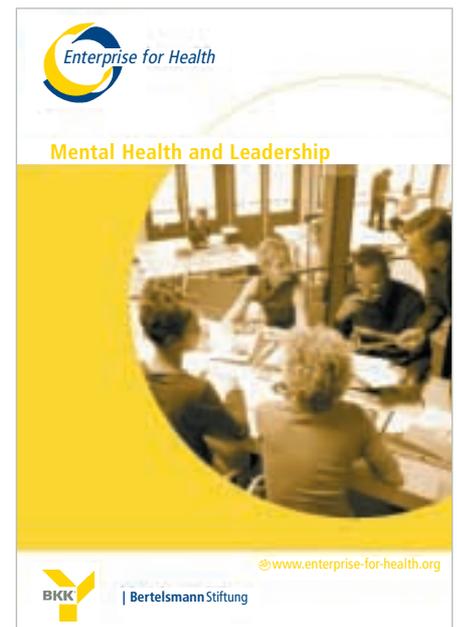
In times of increasing loss of purpose and control and the intensification of work, the prevention of stress is one of the elementary challenges to management. Investment in a corporate culture based on partnership and a company health policy ensure success on the road to better health.

Strong leadership is a fundamental prerequisite for developing healthy organisations. The critical question challenging business leaders is how to create the trust that the organisation needs to embark on change. Managers need to address the following questions: What is your vision of a healthy organisation? What values support this vision? How can you live these values? How can executives be a catalyst and an enabler for change?

It isn't only executives – often the designers of work – who assume a key role in this process. Supervisors exert a crucial influence on employees' experience of stress. It is important that they act as good examples and multipliers by adopting the principles of "healthy" leadership and thus reduce levels of stress.

“The feeling among an increasing number of workers nowadays is ‘In fact, I can’t produce anything!’ This feeling frequently leads to stress, which may not only entail depressive moods but is closely connected with cardiovascular illnesses.”

Prof. Dr. Eberhard Ulich,
Executive Project Co-Ordinator
of the EfH Network



The EfH brochure
Mental Health and Leadership

is available for downloading at
www.enterprise-for-health.org