

Managers should inspect their contribution to office stress

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Workplace



Joan Lloyd

Do your vacation days pile up because you don't have time to take them? Have you lost track of how long it's been since you did something social with a friend? Do you have magazines and newspapers that are more than a month old that you still haven't read? In the last two months, have you been able to have dinner with your family only once or twice a week? Is there an activity that you would love to do but can't because of work pressures?

Feeling a little stressed? Surveys and research over the past decade reveal that 43% of all adults suffer adverse health effects due to stress. Stress-related complaints or disorders represent 75% to 90% of all visits to primary care physicians. An estimated 1 million workers are absent on an average workday because of stress-related complaints, according to The American Institute of Stress in Yonkers, N.Y.

How are you coping? Are you recognizing any symptoms? Typical initial symptoms usually get ignored until they build up into a real problem. Here are some early warning signs, according to "The High Cost of Workplace Stress" by B.L. Anschuetz:

- Shallow breathing
- Trouble sleeping
- Muscle tension
- Grinding teeth in your sleep
- Depression
- Boredom
- Frequent headaches/colds
- Irritability/frustration
- More use of alcohol, nicotine or drugs

Most of us are aware of the personal steps we can take to ease stress. We know the benefits of eating right, exercise, relaxation techniques and a good mental attitude. But when the cause of the stress is coming from your job, treating symptoms can only have a temporary effect.

Workplace stress isn't going away, but managers and organizations can do specific things to ease the strain. Here are a few tips:

How much of your employees' workload problem are you contributing to? Jobs should be demanding but not based on sheer endurance. Every time you ask an employee to take on another project, mentally ask yourself if you are willing to let them give up something else or postpone it. Have an honest conversation with your employees and help them manage their priorities. Never say, "Everything is a priority."

Do you feel the need to do everything to a high level of perfection? Start doing 80% well and let the other 20% go. Look around for other people who might be able to pitch in. If you're a manager, there is a good chance you've been hoarding work that could develop your employees.

Do your employees have control over their own work? Every job should have some area of decision-making that someone can call his or her own. Involve employees in making decisions that will affect them.

Have you asked people, "What part of your job adds the least value?" Start seeking out work that people could stop doing or do in a better way, such as outsourcing it.

Do your employees have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities? If they don't know what's expected, wear too many hats, or are on the receiving end of too many changes, they will feel like they are driving a car with the emergency brake on. Provide clear direction and training.

Are you willing to be creative when employees request more flexibility? Balancing personal and work life is becoming a key issue for employees. Employers who offer more options will have more productive employees and fewer turnovers.

Are you taking steps to correct physical work conditions such as air quality, noise levels, lighting, safety, shift and ergonomic issues?

Do you encourage physical exercise such as stretch breaks or lunchtime walks? Even some small companies have taken proactive steps such as installing workout rooms and hiring massage therapists to do chair-side sessions.

Do you provide support and recognition? Do you pay attention to your employees daily and thank them and recognize their efforts? A complimentary note and pat on the back can go a long way. Fun rewards (pizza brought in, a cookout, etc.) can also sustain a group that is working toward an accomplishment.

Do you care about your employees' careers and take steps to make sure their job is leading to a desirable future? Have conversations at least annually about your employees' personal and career goals and take steps to help them make progress. Look for opportunities for job rotations and job redesign.

When was the last time you did a team-building activity? Get together off-site if possible, and take time to reflect on where you've been and where you're going. Throw in some fun, social activities.

Don't be a stress "carrier." Stay calm and manage your body language and verbal responses. Employees will take cues from you. Too many managers sweep through their work areas like tornadoes, leaving wreckage behind.

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Creating a healthy workplace for today's Stressed-out employees

How healthy is it to spend eight hours or more each working day in an environment where there is no trust, no understanding and no optimism? Where most employees are left feeling unsatisfied. And where the work pace keeps accelerating while the hours on the job continue to expand.

That's the discouraging "climate" described by more than 900 *ISHN* (Industrial Safety & Hygiene News) readers in our 17th annual White Paper survey on safety and health issues and trends, conducted last year. Consider these statistics:

- Only 33 percent of readers say managers and employees trust each other in their companies;

- Less than half say managers express genuine interest in employees and understand the organization's safety problems;

- Just 38 percent report that employees feel optimistic about their company's future.

Meanwhile, 73 percent of readers report that the pace of work is increasing, and 47 percent say employees are working longer hours and more overtime.

There's also a jaded sense that modern management tactics aren't working. Less than one-third of all survey respondents say quality programs and worker involvement initiatives are succeeding in their facilities.

No wonder only 38 percent of those polled feel a rewarding sense of job satisfaction. And no wonder 51 percent say job stress is the health risk that concerns them most in 2001.

Employees are too busy to "eat right, sleep enough and exercise," according to one safety pro.

Supporting evidence

"People used to live in their homes, now they sleep in their houses," is how a *Fortune* magazine article described today's working lifestyles.

It's clear that the lines between work and home are blurring. Fifty percent of employees on vacation will call in to work or check email while they're away, according to AT&T.

Here's another reason for today's tense, unhealthy workplaces: Many organizations expect more out of employees, but don't give them what they want in return. The consulting firm Watson Wyatt Worldwide conducted a survey of 7,500 workers in 1999 and ranked seven factors that will make employees committed to their employers:

- Trust in senior leaders;
- The chance to use skills;
- Job security;
- Financial compensation;
- Quality of the company's products;
- Absence of stress;
- Honesty and integrity of business conduct.

The survey found that almost half of those workers surveyed (45 percent) say they are not committed to their employers. One out of every two - 50 percent - say they do not have confidence in their senior managers.

How healthy is an organization's culture - and in the long run its bottom line - when about half of the workforce is not committed, and about half of the workforce is not confident in its leadership?

No quick fix

So how do you "fix" an unhealthy organization?

One professional says employers are much more likely to try to manage employee stress than prevent it. "Are our companies looking into the wrong end of the work telescope?" she asks.

But it's hard to convince companies to do otherwise. Bottom line costs of unhealthy organizations are delayed, taking years to surface if they ever can be captured. One reason it's hard to document the impact is that costs are spread over workers' compensation, health care, disability and sick day payouts.

Plus, there are no "job stress" standards for employers to comply with. No engineering solutions for cynical perceptions and negative feelings. To slow production lines, reduce hours or add to headcount runs counter to these ultra-competitive times.

So many companies find it easier to try to "fix" the employee than the organization. Focus on employees' unhealthy behaviors - poor diets, smoking, lack of exercise. Promote self-management of health. That's today's typical "control strategy," but it does nothing to address the deeper organizational ills reported in *ISHN's* White Paper survey.

Who "gets it"?

Psychologist Scott Geller says there is a growing gap between the few companies that "get it" and the majority of companies that don't know what to do about sagging morale and the unhealthy lack of trust, understanding, commitment and confidence.

Let's examine some of those organizations that "get it." Companies investing considerable time, money and manpower to address broad cultural issues. This is where you find the antidotes, the emerging "control strategies" for today's stressed-out workplaces. We can draw lessons from:

- Fortune magazine's list of "100 Best Companies to Work for in America";
- OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program work sites;
- The best of behavior-based safety implementations; and
- NIOSH research.

Injury and fatality rates in the nation's workplaces are at an all-time low, but only 33 percent of ISHN readers say managers and employees trust each other; only 38 percent report employees feel optimistic.

Best places to work

What bonds *Fortune's* best companies to work for are their attempts to help workers balance home and work.

In 1984, only one of the top 100 companies had onsite day care. In 2000, 24 offered it. More

than 50 offered onsite university courses, and more than 90 provided tuition reimbursement. Forty-six provided take-home meals, and 26 actually had personal concierge services that outsource time-consuming errands like dropping clothes off at the dry cleaners.

Many of these companies organize clubs for employees - chess, gardening, karate, scuba diving, and public speaking. *Fortune* calls it "the new company town."

Other traits:

- Constant employee training;
- Open communication regarding the company's financial performance;
- Listening to input; and
- Flexible work schedules.

Managers in these work cultures see a connection between helping employees, caring about employees and having undistracted, productive employees.

OSHA's VPP

OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program is no more for every company than behavior-based safety. But it's clear from the growth of VPP participation that the program delivers results that go beyond exemption from routine OSHA inspections.

In 1982, 11 work sites were enrolled in VPP. Today the number approaches 700. Most of that growth has come in the past five years. Why? Organizations use VPP and its ISO-like focus on systems and documentation to:

- Engage workers and instill a sense of pride, recognition and trust;
- Standardize operations to be consistent across multiple locations;
- Define, monitor and evaluate responsibilities and encourage feedback;
- Improve internal communications through formalized, regular inspections, investigations and hazard reporting;
- Increase training at all levels of the organization; and
- Use management-employee guidelines to improve morale, quality and productivity.

VPP is a tool for building the kind of work culture desired by many CEOs. A 1998 Louis Harris survey of 308 CEOs revealed these priorities:

- Improve the knowledge of the workforce (cited by 88 percent of the CEOs);
- Develop new employee relationships (69 percent);
- Improve human resources (68 percent);
- Measure and analyze organizational processes (60 percent); and
- Develop a consistent global corporate culture (56 percent).

VPP demonstrates how some companies use safety and health as a bridge to reach top management business objectives.

Behavior-based safety

The same can be said for behavior-based safety. Obviously, much has been said about behavior-based safety in recent years - good and bad - and it's clear the strategies and tactics are not a panacea for all organizations. But it's not a coincidence that VPP and BBS have experienced their greatest growth concurrently in the past five years - after being available to companies since the early 1980s. Both have the potential to give today's CEOs what they are looking for. The attraction of BBS is similar to VPP:

It provides a structured, formal framework for potentially improving management-employee communication and relationships.

It addresses issues such as, "How can we improve the culture?" "How do we change attitudes?"

It provides training in how to provide feedback, how to listen and ask questions - developing good communication skills in general.

It promotes teamwork and problem-solving skills that can be used beyond safety.

Behavior-based safety methods confront issues of human nature and individual performance - so-called "soft" organizational issues that have been around forever but warrant more attention in today's knowledge-based economy. Dr. Edmund O. Wilson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "On Human Nature," says employees will always value and respond to status, recognition and self-esteem.

To this list, management guru Peter Drucker adds respect. Drucker says employees want to be asked what should be done, rather than told what to do: "How do we handle this best?" "What are your ideas?"

Employees also need feedback, standards, goals and challenges, says Mihali Csikszentmihalyi, author of "Flow: The Psychology of Optimum Experience." You can see how the strategies and tactics of behavior-based safety, the Voluntary Protection Program and *Fortune's* best companies to work for connect to these needs.

NIOSH research

In 1975, NIOSH researchers studied five plants honored by the National Safety Council for outstanding workplace safety. Their findings from more than a quarter of a century ago show that there is nothing new about the control strategies, the antidotes for today's unhealthy work cultures.

All five were publicly owned companies with large workforces - between 500 and 2,000 employees. All were "old economy" manufacturing operations. All were located in small, rural towns, and researchers said there was a strong employee sense of community, belonging and loyalty.

So what were the common traits of these five workplaces with excellent safety and health records?

Strong, active and visible management commitment.

Strong training programs and opportunities for advancement and promotion.

Managers communicated with employees in positive, "humanistic" ways, according to researchers. Most relationships were on a first-name basis.

Communication was open and informal.

Employees received immediate feedback on their efforts.

Workers were involved in planning and implementation of projects. They were given significant decision-making responsibilities.

Companies offered individual counseling services. Three had community service programs.

The payoff

NIOSH researchers reported that all five award-winning companies had low turnover and absenteeism. All five were highly profitable.

Shares of *Fortune's* 100 "best companies to work for" in 2000 rose 37 percent in the previous three years.

In Watson Wyatt Worldwide survey, companies with highly committed workers achieved a 112 percent three-year return to shareholders versus 76 percent for companies with low employee commitment. Companies with high trust and confidence levels had three-year returns of 108 percent versus 66 percent for companies with low trust and confidence.

What NIOSH, *Fortune* and Watson Wyatt tell us makes intuitive sense: take unhealthy stress and tension out of the workplace and everyone wins.

This is the challenge facing the safety and health profession in the years ahead - delivering on the promise of what healthy work cultures can bring to the bottom line. Traditional training, technical expertise and OSHA standards or guidelines won't be of much help. Barriers include management turnover, mergers and acquisitions, uncertainty and instability.

But you really don't have to go far, especially in this Internet age, to benchmark best practices and learn about companies that are trying to control, prevent and eliminate unhealthy organizational issues - and to discover the positive results they are getting.

SIDEBAR: Best Practices

The best safety and health programs meet the needs of employees and managers by delivering:

- A structured framework for communication & relationships
- Strong management commitment
- Strong training programs
- Positive, humanistic communication
- Listening and feedback skills
- Workers involved in decision-making
- Teamwork & problem-solving skills
- Standardized measurement & analysis systems

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