Preventing Stress at Work (Managers Guide)

What is a line Managers role in managing stress?

As Line managers you are crucial to the successful prevention and management of work-related stress within your team. You tend to be the first port of call when there is a problem and you are in an ideal position to be able to prevent, identify and manage stress. But first you need to have an understanding of what stress is, how individuals can manage their own stress levels and what resources there are within E.ON to help them with this. Please refer to the employee section on 'Are you feeling stressed? '

What is work-related stress and what causes it?

Stress is something we all encounter at sometime in our life; it means different things to different people. A definition of stress provided by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is, it is: "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them." Pressure is not all bad we need it to motivate us to succeed in our day to day activities otherwise we would decline into apathy. One persons challenge is another one's stress.

People can also experience stress when too few demands are made on them. People can feel stressed when they are bored, under-valued or under-stimulated. Stress can also be caused by factors at work and at home, with the latter being the more frequent cause. Stress is not an illness but if it becomes excessive and prolonged making it difficult to function as normal, symptoms of physical or mental ill health may develop or become aggravated.

How to identify potential causes of stress at work before they become a problem

In any one person the effect of pressure resulting in stress will be influenced by a variety of factors including support systems at home and work, personality and coping mechanisms. The following addresses how you as Managers can impact on the pressure levels of your team whilst undertaking their role at work. By undertaking a risk assessment and looking at work design prior to putting people to work we can identify where the risks are from work-related stress and how to effectively manage and control these risks.

The HSE Management Standards is a good source of information to use when undertaking such a risk assessment. It covers six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and well-being, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. The six key areas and standards are:

1. **Demands**– this includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.
2. **Control –** how much say has a person in the way they do their work.
3. **Support** – this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
4. **Relationships** – this includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behavior
5. **Role** – whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.
6. **Change** – how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

Key messages

As a line manager you play a critical role in specifying task and job requirements and allocating individual job roles for those in your immediate team. This is a key part of job design, so your actions and behaviour could have a very important impact on the quality of working life of your team.

- You play a pivotal role in communicating – for example about change – fostering both 'upward' and 'downward' communication flows.
- You are critical in ensuring interventions specified in action planning are promptly and properly implemented.
- You can encourage your team members to respond to calls for participation in surveys, data collection, focus groups and other activities linked to the Management Standards process.
- As a line manager your self-awareness and knowledge about the make-up of team members, is critical to the success of team interaction and performance – you can play to people's strengths and preferences.
- You will often be the first port of call for employees with problems.

The recognition of the early signs of stress

The early recognition of the signs and symptoms of stress and Knowledge of the support systems available within E.ON will provide you with some resources to which you can refer to assist you on impacting on pressures at home and work. See attached PDF regarding support networks within E.ON.

The earlier you notice that an employee is experiencing symptoms of stress the better for all concerned. Some of the key things to look out for are;

- Changes in a person's usual behaviour
- Poor performance
- Tiredness

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- Increased sickness absence
- You might notice or colleagues might comment on an increased use of alcohol, or smoking.
- A normally punctual employee might start turning up late
- There may be an increase in problems with colleagues.

Other signs of stress might be tearfulness, headaches, loss of humour and changes in emotional mood. Do not ignore the above behaviour changes as the longer you leave a situation like this the harder it is to solve the problem. If an employee is already off sick it is more likely lack of contact or involvement from you might mean they feel unable to return. Your involvement and reassurance at an early stage will minimise risks of people not returning to work and any associated problems being difficult to solve.

If an employee is having frequent short bursts of sickness absence with a variety of reasons such as stress, back pain or there is no reason given, this may be a indicator that they are feeling symptoms of stress and as such return to work discussions are essential to identify or eliminate this concern. For frequent short term sickness absence or long term sickness absence you should refer the employee to Occupational Health for further support .Refer to E.ON's Attendance Management Policy.

How to engage and communicate with staff about stress on an individual basis

Using ordinary management tools to identify problems and needs such as regular work planning sessions, appraisals or informal chats about progress are good management processes which provide opportunities to find out about any problems an employee may be having. These are also good opportunities to discuss work life balance e.g. are they frequently working late, taking work home with them not taking their annual leave?

For some admitting that they are feeling stressed and finding it difficult to cope whether at home or work can be difficult. Planning general work reviews or return to work interviews is therefore important in being successful in engaging with someone who is reluctant to talk .The following should be considered when planning such events;

- Arrange to meet the person in a private confidential setting.
- Make it clear that the discussion will be absolutely confidential.
- Consider from the employee's point of view why he or she might be reluctant to talk. Is it really safe for them to be open with you? Will any disclosures be treated sympathetically and positively?
- You should reassure them your door is open to talk later if it is too difficult for them now.
- Before the meeting, if appropriate, ask if the person wants to bring an advocate, friend or family member to support them in a meeting.
- Also consider some people might find it easier to talk to someone who is not their line manager. If they are perceived the problem. Guidance from HR can assist with this.
- Agree with the employee how problems will be monitored. If adjustments are being made, ask the person how they wish this to be communicated to other staff. You need to ensure that any hurtful gossip or bullying is dealt with promptly and effectively. Plan review dates if needed.

When talking to an employee there are three points to remember: don't assume stress affects everyone equally, make adjustments if a person is stressed and 'chats' should be positive and supportive.