POWERING IMPROVEMENT

Commitment 4 – Management of Stress

1. Introduction

This guidance outlines approaches that organisations can take in the management of stress and how they can identify opportunities for improvement.

2. What is 'Stress'?

It is well recognised that work is generally good for you. It helps provide structure, routine, promotes socialising and motivation.

Considered, organised and well designed work helps maintain and promote individual good health and wellbeing. However in situations where there has been insufficient attention paid to role design and workload organisation the benefits associated with 'good work' could be lost.

Of course a certain level of pressure in a business environment is desirable and necessary. Pressure helps motivate people and will boost their energy and productivity levels – a benefit to both the individual and the organisation. However when this pressure exceeds the individual's ability to cope, it can have a negative impact rather than a positive one.

The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them'.

Stress itself is not a medical condition, but research shows that prolonged exposure to stress is linked to psychological conditions such as anxiety and depression as well as physical conditions such as heart disease, back pain and headaches.

3. Legislative Case for Managing Stress

Employers have a duty under health and safety legislation to identify and manage stress at work as part of their duty of care to their employees.

Under section 2(1) of the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 employers have a duty to ensure 'so far as is reasonably practical, the health, safety and welfare at work of all...employees.'

This duty to ensure the health of their employees covers their mental as well as their physical health.
Regulation 3 of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 requires all employers to make a suitable and sufficient risk assessment of the 'risks to the health and safety of his employees to which they are exposed whilst they are at work'.

Under regulation 5(1) 'every employer shall make and give effect to such arrangements as are appropriate, having regard to the nature of his activities and the size of his undertaking, for the effective planning, organisation, control, monitoring and review of the preventive and protective measures'

In November 2004 The Health and Safety Executive introduced its Management Standards for Stress. The Management Standards are based on the six causes of stress outlined in the HSE's 2001 guide *Tackling Work Related Stress*. The HSE states that the standards are guidance, but emphasise that employers have a duty to assess the risk of stress related ill health arising from work activities and take measures to control those risks.

4. Moral Case for Managing Stress

Along with the legislative case towards managing stress at work there is indeed a moral case. There is evidence that prolonged exposure to periods of excessive stress can result in a negative impact on an individual's health. Research has proven strong links between stress and physical effects such as heart disease, back pain, headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, and psychological ill health such as anxiety and depression.

Poor coping strategies as a result of stress can also lead to unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, increased alcohol intake, skipping meals, increasing caffeine intake and poor sleep patterns.

In organisations where Corporate Social Responsibility is a guiding value, it could be argued that an employer's first responsibility is to its staff and as such health and wellbeing could therefore be considered a priority in the organisation's CSR agenda.

5. Business Case for Managing Stress

Stress has numerous implications for organisational performance and reputation. When considering these impacts the most obvious impact and the most easily calculated cost that can be considered is sickness absence.

While sickness absence is perhaps the most obvious cost associated with stress, recent research (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2007) suggested that the cost of reduced productivity at work due to mental distress and ill health is actually much higher - the report suggesting that the overall cost to employers of mental ill health is the equivalent of £1,035 per employee per year.

Costs relating to stress also include staff leaving the organisation for stress related reasons. Although the costs of this may be difficult to calculate as often individuals would not specify stress as a reason for leaving, citing 'change of career' or 'promotional opportunities outside of the organisation', but for whom stress or working conditions contributes to their reasons for leaving.

Other business impacts relating to stress which can result in costly implications include; higher rates of accidents, increase in workplace conflict and reduced morale, damage to external reputation, reduced impact of employer brand and negative impact on investor relations.

6. Managing Stress

Traditionally the management of stress has been classified into three categories:

- Primary Intervention – designed to prevent stress, including activities such as risk assessment
- Secondary Intervention – designed to help manage situations in order to support coping and reduce harm. These include things like stress management training.
- Tertiary Intervention – These deal with the impact of stress and include helping individuals with recovery and rehabilitation, and include activities such as counselling and occupational health support.

The Health and Safety Executive website has a number of useful tools and documents to help you through the process of promoting organisation and individual wellbeing and preventing ill health from stress. Their website can be found by following this link.
http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm

7. The HSE Management Standards

The Health & Safety Executive have developed an approach to help you identify and manage stress in your organisation. The HSE Management Standards define the characteristics, or culture, of an organisation where the risks from work related stress are being effectively managed and controlled.

The Management Standards cover six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and wellbeing, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. In other words the six Management Standards cover the primary sources of stress at work. These are:

Demands – this includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.

Control – how much say the person has in the way they do their work.

Support – this includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

Relationships – this includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

Role – whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.

Change – how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

Further information on the HSE Management Standards can be found by following this link: http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm

Further Information / reading:

- Management competencies for preventing and reducing stress at work
  - http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrpdf/rr553.pdf

- HSE –Management Standards
  - http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/
    http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/downloads.htm

- BOHRF Workplace interventions for people with common mental health problems
  http://www.bohrf.org.uk/downloads/cmh_rev.pdf

- SHIFT Line Managers Resource http://www.shift.org.uk/employers/lmr

- Time to Change Campaign Resources http://www.time-to-change.org.uk

- Trade Union Congress – Representing and supporting members with mental health problems at work: Guidance for trade union representatives
    - http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/mentalhealth.pdf

- MIND Taking Care of Business, Mental Health at Work http://www.mind.org.uk/employment

- TUC guidance for reps on HSE Management Standards http://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace/tuc-10147-f0.cfm

- Centre for Mental Health www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk

- OHAG Guidance Note 2.1 Stress

- SAFELEC 2010 reports (ENA website)

- ENA Member Case Studies http://2010.energynetworks.org