Supervisor's guide to monitoring stress

This guide intended to provide further information to supervisors on the causes and avoidance of stress in the workplace and possible steps that can be taken to avoid stress in the workplace.

Recognizing signs of stress

Employees have a duty to look after their own Health and Safety at work, and to draw problems to the attention of their managers, at an early stage. However, managers should also be alert for signs of stress amongst their staff.

The key indicators of stress may be;

- Change in an employee's normal behavior – e.g. irritability/ withdrawn/unpredictability, uncharacteristic behaviors.
- Change in their appearance.
- Sudden Lack of concentration/commitment e.g. lateness.
- Absenteeism.

Identifying the signs of stress at an early stage increases the possibility that action can be taken to deal with the symptoms and the underlying causes, thus minimizing the risk to the individual's health and well-being and the effects on the department.

Common causes of workplace stress

There are several causes of work place stress some of which may be work-related or some originating from an individual's personal life, either way it is a managers responsibility to identify stressors within their department and put actions in place either departmental wide or individually.

The management of stress should be integrated into everyday management.

Triggers of stress and management behaviors which impact:

1. Demand: Employees indicate they are able to cope with the demands of their job.

Triggers which could cause stress;

- Work overload.
- Boring/Repetitive duties.
- Inadequate resources.
- Physical environment i.e. lighting, space, temperature, disruptions etc.
- Psychological working environment: Verbal abuse, inappropriate behaviors.
- Working long hours – not taking lunch breaks/annual leave.
- People management issues.
- Inadequate allocation of work.

Positive management behaviors	Negative management behaviors
• Identifying if additional resources can be brought in. • Awareness of team members abilities and provide training where appropriate. • Monitoring workload and refusing additional work when the team are under pressure / setting realistic deadlines. • Following through problems on behalf of employees/foster a problem solving approach. • Developing action plans and plan/forecast workloads. • Review processes to identify improvements. • Promote task rotation/job enrichment.	• Delegating work unequally. • Creating unrealistic deadlines. • Listening but not taking action. • Lack of consistency in approach / being indecisive. • Panicking and not forward planning workflow and deadlines. • Not being aware of team pressures. •

2. Control: Employee indicates that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work; and systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

Triggers which could cause stress;

- Not being able to manage the demands of the job and life outside work.
- Rigid working patterns and deadlines imposed with no autonomy or control allowed.
- Conflicting work demands – from different managers or aspects of the job.
- Two way conversation and discussion not actively encouraged to discuss issues.

Positive management behaviors	Negative management behaviors
• Trusting employees to do their work/empowerment . • Steering employees in a direction rather than imposing. • Knows when to consult employees and when to make a decision. • Provides opportunity for employees to air views and holds regular meetings. • Encourages staff to develop and reviews development.	• Micro management. • Imposing 'it's my way or no way'. • Not listening to employee's and making decisions without consultation. • Not allowing time off for employee's development and to attend training courses. • Not listening to new ideas or allowing employee's to suggest and try improved ways of working.

3. Role: Employees indicate they understand their role and responsibilities.

Triggers which could cause stress;

- Lack of clarity of job role – no job descriptions/objective setting.
- Employees unaware of policies and procedures in place to support them and to be used.
- Lack of one-one communication/meetings/feedback.

Positive management behaviors	Negative management behaviors
- Keeps teams in formed of what is happening with the department and the organization. - Communicates clear goals and objectives. - Clearly defines roles, expectations and lines of communication. - Regular meetings and two way communication.	- Keeps people in the dark. - Often makes decisions and holds meeting behind closed doors with no consultation in situations where consolation would have been appropriate. - Does not update and have regular meetings to communicate changes. - Talks to others about actions not completed without approaching the employee concerned.

4. Support: Employees indicate they receive adequate support and information from colleagues and managers

Triggers which could cause stress;

- Lack of support and encouragement from managers and colleagues.
- Lack of development/career progression opportunities.
- Lack of information sharing/withholding information.
- A working culture of encouraging long or unsociable hours i.e. seeing colleagues as weak if they don't consistently work long hours.

Positive management behaviors	Negative management behaviors
- Ensuring all health and safety requirements are met. Eg Working time directive. - Praising work/acknowledging employee efforts. - Providing supportive/constructive criticism. - Operating a no blame culture and problem solving approach. - Flexibility to support employee's if needing time off.	- Not taking H&S issues seriously and questioning the ability of an employee who raises a H&S issue. - Not giving credit when jobs done well/deadlines met. - Views feedback as 'one way' or giving feedback that employees are wrong just because their way of working is different. - Assuming everyone is ok.

- Having an awareness of the employees pressures outside work.
- Encouraging development and training having regular 1-1 meetings.
- Leading from the front and taking responsibility 'buck stops with me.'
- Seeks help and advice from Occupational Health/HR.

- Not having knowledge and understanding of your teams tasks/workloads.
- No consideration of work life balance.
- Badgering an employee as to what is wrong.
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5. Relationships: Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviors.

Triggers which could cause stress under this category;

- Poor working relationships with managers/teams
- Combative or confrontational communication styles
- Poor communication and information sharing
- Not dealing with complaints/disputes at an early stage

Positive management behaviors	Negative management behaviors
• Listening objectively to both sides of conflict. • Supporting and investigating complaints. • Dealing with conflict at an early stage and flowing up on actions. • Having a positive approach and staying calm when under pressure. • Keeps employees issues private and confidential. • Admits when wrong. • Treats all employees equally.	• Not dealing with complaints/issues and hoping it will resolve itself • Taking sides • Passing on their pressures to employees/being unpredictable and losing temper • Talks about employee's issues with others staff members/making personal issues public • Makes promises and does not deliver •

6. Change: Employees indicate that the Organization engages frequently with them when undergoing Organizational change.

Triggers which could cause stress;

- Poor communication – uncertainty about what is happening
- Fears about job security
- Ineffective time planning of change
- Insufficient training or knowledge transfer on new systems/processes
- No consultation/engagement.

Positive management behaviors	Negative management behaviors
• Keep team informed with regular meeting and communication updates – 2 way communication. • Communicates clear goals and objectives and expectations. • Provides timely information and consult • Provides adequate support e.g. training. • Considers group dynamics and physical working environment/positioning.	• Leave team members in the dark about changes. • Communicating at the last minute. • Allowing people to hear messaged through the grape vine. • Not allowing 2 way communication on matters of change. •

Dealing with individual cases of stress:

Stress should not be a reason for managers to be afraid to manage. If a stress related illness is reported it should be treated as any other sickness absence. Below are some steps that should be taken.

- Treat stressed employees in the same way as those with a physical health problem.
- Discuss the issue with the employee and demonstrate that you are concerned with their health.
- If work is affected, discuss the problems with Human Resources and explore the option of a referral to the EAP.
- Ask if there is anything as a manager you can do to help and identify the stressors.
- Seek advice from the individual on any action that could be taken to alleviate the stress e.g. simple modifications to work for a short period, increase communication etc.
- Advise the individual about sources of help within or outside the company.
- Document agreed actions and actively follow up to ensure stress levels have been reduced.
- Review and if necessary modify the work tasks and responsibilities of individuals who have had sickness absence due to stress as a result of their work.
- Be aware of the impact of stressed employees on other members of staff.

Managing stress in other people

Stress can affect different people in different ways, and the things that cause stress in one person might be completely different in another.

However, no matter what an individual's reaction might be, you and members of your senior team should often consider how your workers are managing and coping with their work and working environment.

Never try to work out whether a worker is suffering from stress or another psychological issue by asking their colleagues, without first asking the person in question.

If you believe a worker might be overwhelmed by their workload, you may be able to implement programs designed to help them better deal with stressful situations – helping them to focus on what they can control and setting smaller goals to make it easier to see progress.

If stress-related issues can be detected early, there is a much greater chance of both controlling the hazard and improving the employee's work situation.