Weekly Blog

By Robyn Smith

Stressful times call for stress-free measures: Captain Question shares her top tips for managing stress in the workplace

It's me again, with my instalment of your weekly blog.

I am hoping that you are all feeling lovely and refreshed after the long bank holiday! For me it felt very much needed, a little reboot after what was a very hectic week last week. And we also have the brucy bonus of at least one other long weekend, which is just bliss to the ears isn't it?!

Apart from the very welcomed bank holidays, May is also pretty special for me as it will be my I-year anniversary of being married to my hubby, James. We were one of the thousands of couples whose wedding plans got impacted by COVID, so when we finally managed to tie the knot last year and have the day we (maybe more, I haha) had always dreamed of we felt unbelievably grateful. Our first year of marriage has definitely had some very unexpected lows, some of the hardest times I think we will ever go through as a couple, which in turn meant that we did, sadly, lose a lot of that newly wed high. However, we have got to the I-year point and feel ready to take on anything. Hard times can really, genuinely, make you stronger and also make you realise what is important in life. We will, therefore, be going into our second year of marriage being even more grateful than the year before and I'm ready to take life by the horns!

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When life throws its curve balls at you, this can in turn, not only impact you in your personal life, but can then seep into your work life. This, as well as just general work pressures, can then result in the word we all know too well... stress. I am sure that at some point in every person's life they have experienced some sort of stress, and for many this will usually be because of a work-related matter, or like I have mentioned above, because the stresses of their personal life have had a ripple effect into everything else, including work. And if you are someone that hasn't ever experienced stress whilst at work, then please do tell me your secret.

Luckily when I was going through those hard times in my personal life, I was incredibly lucky to have an amazing support network here at work. Emma and Rob not only created an environment where I felt completely comfortable to speak to them about what was happening, but also allowed me the time that I needed, whilst also letting me know they were there for me. And they did that all and added no extra pressure on me- which for me, was absolutely key. The whole team rallied round, and I will forever be grateful. For me that reliability, reassurance and support helped ease any stress that I felt when I got back into the swing of things.

But it doesn't seem like every employer is as good as Rob and Emma. In fact, a survey in March 2023 showed that one third of employees believe their employer is not effective at managing stress at work. So, the above things are important for you as employer to get right, as they will be absolutely key when it comes to you having to support your employees through periods of stress.

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In response to these statistics, ACAS has published new advice for employers on managing work-related stress. I have had a gander at the advice and thought it would be useful for me to note some of their most important points down:

What sort of things can cause stress at work?

1. Too many conflicting demands
2. Poor working conditions
3. Lack of control
4. Lack of support
5. Bullying (which Emma touched upon in her blog last week)
6. Insufficient training
7. Lack of role clarity
8. Low trust
9. Personal circumstances, such as: bereavement, divorce, menopause, caring responsibilities, poor health, financial worries

Now, the advice does note, that although employees do not have to tell their employer about personal problems, in doing so, their employer may be able to support them in ways like- referring them to an employee assistance programme, granting time off or agreeing temporary changes to their role or working pattern. Not all employees are going to feel comfortable in talking to you about things going on in their life, but one thing that will help them feel like they can is ensuring you create a working environment whereby they feel supported enough to do so, where there is a good level of trust and there is no fear of repercussions. These elements will be very important if you want your employees to feel like they can speak with you.

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What sort of things can you be doing as the employer?

1. Look out for signs of stress among your employees
2. Have private, informal chats if you feel like your employee is showing signs of stress
3. Be sure to make time to listen, to ask questions and be open minded.
4. Work together with your employee on possible solutions- this could involve signposting any internal or external help or encouraging the employee to complete something like a 'wellness action plan'
5. Be sure to respect confidentiality- if there is a good reason to do so, be clear on who information will be shared with and why
6. If your employee is absent due to stress, then make sure you are in contact and ensure that a proper and sufficient return to work meeting takes place upon their return.
7. REMEMBER! Any employees who are classified as disabled are entitled to reasonable adjustments. Do note though, that you should still discuss this with non-disabled employees as there may be some things that can help them.
8. An action plan may be something worth preparing to assist with any steps that are agreed
9. You should consider having a policy on mental health and stress
10. Carry out risk assessments and staff surveys
11. Encourage your employees to look after themselves by increasing awareness of what causes them stress, taking regular breaks and making use of any support offered to them.

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The biggie here is to make sure you have instilled an environment where your employees not only feel encouraged to raise their concerns with you but also where you are promoting work-life balance. Open communication really is the recipe for a happy workplace. Remember- happy employees, means happy business.

Of course, we know that it's not always as clear cut as the snippets of advice above. Life is HARD and some people can go through some incredibly tough times. But as long as you are creating the right environment, that has the right support networks, then that is the best foundations to build from.

If you want to talk about what sort of things that you can put in place to support your employees or have specific cases that you want to talk through then you know where we are.

Speak soon ☺