It is now widely accepted that workplace stress can result in high levels of absenteeism and staff turnover, low productivity and increased insurance premiums. For the individual, stress can diminish confidence and the ability to make decisions, or work efficiently, and can lead to depression and other mental health problems. Employers are becoming increasingly aware of the need to implement strategies to reduce stress in their workplaces.

While there is no specific legislation on workplace stress in Tasmania, the general responsibilities that employers and workers have under the Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995 can be applied. The employer has a duty to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to health, including where stress levels do not present a risk of illness or injury.

Reducing workplace stress is also a human rights issue and can improve organisational culture, which in turn has a positive effect on recruitment and staff retention. Councils, as major employers in their area, can model good practice and maintain an efficient and healthy workplace. Examples of initiatives that could be implemented include:

- A stress management action plan in the form of a template to enable managers to assess the risks of stress and identify areas for action. Models and templates can be found online by searching terms such as ‘wellness templates’ or ‘workplace stress’;
- Providing access to a counselling service;
- Offering men’s health programs, especially targeting outdoor workers or those engaged in physical work;
- Offering health programs which include physical activity and exercise, relaxation and information on topics to improve health and wellbeing;
- Offering flexible working arrangements;
- Setting realistic goals and priorities and encouraging employees to be part of the priority-setting process;
- Providing opportunities for social interaction among employees;
- Making it clear that harassment is not tolerated;
- Giving workers opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their jobs; and
- Demonstrating that individual workers and diversity in the workplace are valued.

This approach of working towards reducing workplace stress by the implementation of health and wellbeing programs rather than implementing specific stress management programs is not uncommon. Staff wellbeing is a complex concept and focusing on ‘stress’ alone does not address the gamut of potential stressors, and can create an unclear picture of the situation. Health and stress factors are interconnected and interdependent, and any process or programs implemented to reduce stress require this broader and more holistic approach to employee wellbeing.

One example of a holistic approach is that implemented by the City of Sydney, which introduced corporate health assessments for all staff around 2006. Close to 50% of staff took up the offer to have health checks and to discuss their exercise and eating habits. The implementation of a range of health and wellbeing programs followed, including exercise programs, workshops and seminars on health-related topics, neck and shoulder massages, the introduction of a ‘health mates agreement’ in which employees work together to achieve health goals, and participation in the 10,000 steps global corporate challenge. According to Vanessa Bourke, HR advisor at City of Sydney, “Although we don’t run a specific stress management program, we do look at how we can reduce the amount of stress felt by making people healthier and making them more conscious of their own health and wellbeing.”

**Identifying the Problem**

How do you know if you, or a colleague, or someone who reports to you is suffering from stress or burnout (chronic stress)?
Here are some early warning signs

• Exhausted, tired and physically run down;
• Feel annoyed or irritated towards clients and co-workers;
• Cynical and negative towards work;
• Increased incidence of minor accidents;
• Frequent headaches or gastrointestinal disturbances;
• Difficulty sleeping;
• Difficulty thinking logically and making decisions;
• Unable to relax and concentrate at home or work; and
• Feeling weepy or tearful.

If you recognise three or more of these symptoms, then you or your colleague or staff member may be at risk of stress, and potentially burnout.

Taking Action

As an employer or manager you have an important role to play in:

• Assessing and controlling workplace factors associated with work-related stress;
• Identifying and encouraging employees to report concerns at an early stage; and
• Providing a supportive environment that allows employees to seek help.

Remember, some workplace stress factors are simply beyond our control. Rather than focus on the things we can’t change, employers and managers should focus on areas where we can have a positive impact.

The Causes of Workplace Stress - what you can do about them?

Employees often become overloaded if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do. Pay attention to the way the job is designed, training needs and whether it is possible for employees to work more flexible hours. Employees can feel disaffected and perform poorly if they have no say over how and when they do their work. Work with employees to reduce the impact by making adjustments to the work role or place of work, or providing additional training or resources.

Levels of sick leave and absenteeism often rise if employees feel they cannot talk to managers about issues that are troubling them. Give employees the opportunity to talk about the issues causing stress, provide a sympathetic ear and keep them informed.

A failure to build relationships based on good behaviour and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying. Review the organisation’s policies for handling grievances, unsatisfactory performance, poor attendance, misconduct and for tackling bullying and harassment.

Employees will feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don’t know what is expected of them. Review the induction process, work out an accurate job description - provide the appropriate information and training necessary for all employees to undertake their role with confidence. Change needs to be managed effectively or it can lead to huge uncertainty and insecurity. Plan ahead so change doesn’t come out of the blue. Consult with employees so they have a real input and work together to solve problems.

Workplace stress creates emotional, financial (staff turnover and retention issues) and safety concerns for employers and managers. Workplace stress management and reduction makes sense and it is the right thing to do.

This article is partly based on the Community Sector Workforce Toolkit, available on the TasCOSS website at www.tascoss.org.au. Select the ‘Industry Development’ menu, then ‘Workforce Development’.
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Disagree at Your Peril

DR IAN PLOWMAN PhD
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Imagine the following. You are in a meeting and have just made a suggestion, based on your experience and on your perspective. Someone else responds with “I disagree”, and then proceeds to tell you why you are wrong. At this moment, how do you feel?

Having asked this question of many people, their response is often about feeling belittled, defensive, or aggressive. It is common in our conversations and meetings for people to disagree with comments made by another. It is almost as common for that disagreement to be expressed. “I disagree with that” – followed by the expression of an alternative point of view. Or the disagreement is less direct and proceeded by the word “but”. Responding to someone else, beginning with the word “but”, signals to the gathering that the earlier statement is about to be devalued.

So how might the originator respond? Generally there are two possible responses. One is to withdraw from the attack. Another is to argue back, believing that one needs to stand one’s ground. Yet here is the message: if I want someone to stop listening to me, I’ll argue with them or disagree with them. Think about that for a moment. When someone else disagrees with you, or “buts” you, the normal psychological response is to stop listening to them, and find ways to protect yourself psychologically, either through withdrawal or counter-attack.

Now this is counterintuitive. When we disagree with someone, it is generally because we want them to listen to our point of view. Yet all we achieve is the exact opposite.

Consider this metaphor. When two boxers are in the middle of a boxing ring, they can dance. When one of them is forced into a corner, their only option is to fight like fury.

No, I’m not proposing that people should pretend to agree with the statements of others, even when they hold another opinion. Agreeing or disagreeing are not the only options. A third option is to express an opinion that differs from a previous one, without belittling that previous statement. If I follow your comment with the conjunction “and”, I can then express my opinion. Further, the conjunction “and” is likely to trigger the interest of the originator, rather than trigger their defensiveness.

Remember, every person’s opinion is valid for them at that moment, even when it differs from yours. Further, your own experience will tell you that people are more inclined to shift their opinion when they have not been forced earlier to defend it.

Our meetings are often about seeking to reach agreement on an issue so that we can move forward. If we are going to alienate, through “butting” or disagreement, the very people whose cooperation and goodwill we need, we unconsciously lower the productivity considerably. And once an adversarial culture is established, it is very difficult to return to neutrality. Ask Palestine and Israel.

So, if you would like your meetings and conversations to be more productive, and more creative, shift the culture by banishing disagreements of any type, and also by banning the use of the word “but”.

The ideas expressed in this article are part of a much larger suite of skills and tools known as Meetings Without Discussion. Their application will halve the length of your meetings whilst doubling their effectiveness and fun.

For more information, email Ian Plowman at ian@plowman.com.au, or visit www.plowman.com.au.
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