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Stressed Management

Stress in the workplace continues to be associated with weakness. ***Gwen Ventris****, Managing Director of consultancy More Than One, talks to Criticaleye about why boards need to be braver in tackling and de-stigmatising burnout*

Why is stress a taboo subject for executives?

Workplace stress can often be viewed differently depending on a business's culture and the level at which an individual may operate. It is less acceptable to experience or discuss stress openly in business cultures which are male dominated or testosterone fuelled. This includes parts of the financial services sector, for example, or highly competitive sales-led organisations. Stress is more commonly acknowledged in the middle and lower levels of organisations and those which have a bias towards welfare, for example the public sector.

It is unusual for stress to be openly acknowledged at the executive level as, in my experience, it is still regarded as a sign of weakness. Executives appear to feel that acknowledging they may be suffering from stress is likely to cause concern about whether they are able to perform their job effectively and are able to cope with high levels of pressure.

Questions of this kind can give rise to board colleagues and subordinates losing confidence in an executive's ability to perform and deliver the right results.

What do you see as the main causes of stress?

They're commonly related to workload and conflicting demands; creating unrealistic performance expectations; internal competitiveness and politically motivated behaviour; expectations that executives need to be 'on' and accessible twenty four hours a day. Ironically, technology designed to make it easier to communicate effectively whilst on the move has now been shown to contribute significantly to the creation of a stressful environment.

There are a range of other factors which also contribute, such as: organisational structures which undermine accountability and effective leadership behaviour; badly managed change; cultures which lack clarity about performance metrics; and cultures which major on consensus at the expense of performance outcomes. On the latter point, the issue is that individuals and teams pay more attention to playing corporate games and less attention to delivering quality performance.

It is said that 'leaders get the culture they deserve'. More often than not, however, the issue is that leaders have not appreciated the extent to which they actually contribute to creating this culture.

Much of this boils down to degrees of emotional intelligence at an individual level, handling relationships and communicating decisions. At a tactical level, 24-hour email, constant meetings and a corporate culture that encourages long hours and indiscriminate urgency, inevitably creates a highly stressful environment where many individuals, even the most senior executives, are likely to sometimes feel out of control – one of the primary stress drivers.

Isn't competitive tension a useful tool to maximise performance?

This is a huge topic in its own right. In simple terms, transparent competitive tension can indeed create an environment in which many individuals are able to exceed performance expectations but, for such an environment to be sustained, it needs to be carefully managed. The reward systems are critical in this context and the associated values which accompany recognition of excellent performance. In many cases internal competitiveness is mismanaged and the subsequent tension can be counterproductive, creating aggressive and unpleasant environments with silo structures, a lack of transparency and reluctance to share knowledge.

> *"Executives appear to feel that acknowledging they may be suffering from stress is likely to cause concern"*

Should a leader demonstrate calmness and control?

There are many different leadership styles that have proven to be successful over the years and these can reflect a business or industry and its challenges at a certain point in time

We know that the late Apple boss Steve Jobs was not exactly known for his calmness and control. It's also been shown that many of the characteristics of the classic psychopath are to be found in some of the world's most successful CEOs. Exhibiting calmness and control in the

face of adversity is clearly a powerful way to instil confidence in others who are looking for guidance, but it may not be the appropriate style for a highly charged motivational speech to the faithful – *see Steve Ballmer's performance, Microsoft's CEO, on YouTube*.

In general leaders set a tone and a standard to which others are expected to aspire, being calm and in control are characteristics more likely to draw out the best in others and create circumstances in which effective listening can take place and clarity of message is more likely to occur.

How should a board address burnout in a business?

Around two-fifths of work related illness in 2012 was attributed to stress. While the HSE state that this has remained steady in recent years, it is clear that boards need to take this issue seriously and acknowledge that workplace stress can be addressed as part of a wider view on the health of an organisation.

Critical success factors will include having a holistic view of culture and how health and wellbeing fits in with the organisation's values, and how that connects with policies on holiday, employee benefits, training and development and structure. This also plays into the reward systems and leadership characteristics which are perceived to be valued.

Going beyond the normal interventions – such as employee surveys, training in stress management and flexible working arrangements – I have found that it is useful to have a relatively small but strong and capable HR team, who not only have the skills to take the heat out of daily hot spots in the organisation but are also capable of counselling, advising and guiding managers at all levels.

Those organisations that have this capability tend to handle stress within their business culture far more effectively. It is also very often effective to support developing executives with an external / independent coach to provide safe psychological support as well as development guidance. There are many other potential intervention points but where there are concerns I recommend starting with a stress test to gauge the depth and breadth of the issue within a company or specific department.

What does this mean in practice?

When I have worked with boards and executives on this topic it can often be very effective to workshop the issues, enabling participants to discuss and address specific areas whilst remaining in control of responsibilities and outcomes. For example, a telecoms organisation recently experienced a spike in sickness absence rates and when analysed, it became clear that it was associated with two specific projects, led by the same programme director, both dealing with complex technical challenges and a demanding customer.

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Using workshop techniques, solutions were created for specific problems and the technical experts who had been absent suffering from stress were successfully reintegrated. The board of directors took responsibility too and helped shift the focus of the customer contact strategy, thereby improving the relationship between the project teams and the customer which proved very successful. ■

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Stress: 5 Key Questions

- Is the organisational structure right?
- What's the tone at the top and how does it affect company culture?
- How is change communicated?
- Where can problems be discussed?
- Are employees assets or disposable commodities?

Gwen Ventris
Managing Director
More Than One

Gwen is Managing Director of More Than One, a change management consulting firm. Formerly Chief Operating Officer, Global Enterprise Director and Plc Board Executive of AEA Group, Gwen is an experienced executive and senior consultant with a combination of strategic and operational leadership skills in professional services, consulting, infrastructure, IT and technical/scientific businesses.

Contact Gwen through:
www.criticaleye.net