helping your team cope with stress and change

As the whole world seems to be seeking to make efficiency savings, finance teams will be under pressure to deliver both advice and costs savings to colleagues across the NHS. Peter English offers some timely advice on how to cope with the pressures this will bring.

■ **Even before the global financial meltdown, stress levels in organisations were rising. A 2008 survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development revealed that:**

- **46% of public sector organisations reported an increase in employees' stress levels**
- **the top three causes of work-related stress were workload, management style and relationships at work.**

Sometimes there's not much you can do about the workload. However, there's a lot you can do to ensure that your management style is helping your team cope with the challenges that they face.

Encourage the team to focus on what they can control and influence

Stephen Covey's bestselling book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* tells us that successful people spend less time worrying about things they can't influence and pay more attention to what is within their control.

The message during times of organisational change is: help your team focus on things they can control, and encourage them not to ruminate on things that they can't do anything about.

It has been said that 'if you don't have a plan you'll become part of someone else's plan'. For many staff, the most unsettling aspect of organisational change is the feeling that they are pawns in someone else's game – they are not in control of their own destinies.

To counteract this feeling of powerlessness, help the team establish one 'high-priority change management objective' for the next six months. For example, the objective might be to maintain a good service, or to improve the team's reputation and profile. Use a team meeting to agree the change management objective and the tasks that will need to be undertaken to achieve it.

Have one-to-one meetings with staff

Discuss work priorities, development needs, and how the team will support one another during the period of uncertainty. Again, the focus should be on helping individual team members identify aspects of the change that are within their control or influence.

Watch out for trip wires. Set up alarm calls

Trip wires occur when we are more stressed than we had realised and something happens that provokes an unpleasant reaction in us. For example, we may have had a sleepless night and a difficult journey to work. If we arrive at work feeling on edge we may find ourselves snapping at colleagues – this is a trip wire. Alarm calls are when we notice signs that we are getting stressed before we find ourselves acting in a way that we want to avoid (for example, losing our temper).

We can give ourselves an alarm call, or we can do it for someone else. One example of giving yourself an alarm call would be noticing that whenever you are becoming stressed your

neck and shoulders start to tense up. If you occasionally monitor the tension in your neck and shoulders throughout the day you can get an early warning of your stress levels rising. An example of giving someone else an alarm call would be noticing that whenever a particular team member gets stressed they become much quieter. If you notice that the team member is being quiet, you can offer them some support.

Let people moan

There are three types of moaning:

- **Constructive:** we get worked up as we moan about something, and this gives us the motivation to take action to address the problem
- **Cathartic:** we have a good old moan with our friends and feel better afterwards
- **Chronic:** we fall into a habit of constantly moaning about change, the organisation, life in general.

Constructive and cathartic moaning can be helpful. Chronic moaning generally makes people feel worse, and doesn't lead to action. It is important to let team members engage in constructive and cathartic moaning (if you try to clamp down on it they will do it anyway when you're not around).

For example, at the start of a team meeting you might give people the chance to talk about how they are feeling. Empathise, and listen out for moaning about things that you might be able to change. If your team is prone to chronic moaning you might like to challenge them to

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identify which type of moaning they are doing, and whether they are finding it helpful.

Challenge undue pessimism

In any situation, some people will catastrophise: they'll assume that the outcome is going to be the worst possible, and that there is nothing they can do to influence the future. For example, imagine that one of your team members has applied for an internal promotion but was unsuccessful at the interview. An example of catastrophising would be for the team member to say, 'It's hopeless. I'll never get promoted. It's not worth going for interviews'.

A good manager will help the team member to realise that there are other, equally valid, ways of viewing what happened – there may have been a really good alternative candidate, the team member may not have done themselves justice at that particular interview, they can treat it as a learning experience.

The bottom line

Managers who consistently using the approaches outlined in this article can make a real difference to how well their team copes with change. ■

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