

Liberate your employees or pay the price for stress

Humans have a need for autonomy and freedom at work and denying this can lead to a chain of physiological consequences, writes **Isaac Getz**.

In their studies of the stress levels of more than 10,000 British civil servants, psychologists Bosma, Stansfeld and Marmot found that men who feel they have little control over their jobs are 50% more likely to develop heart disease than those who feel in control. For women, the risk is 100% higher.

The root cause of this suffering is a universal human need for responsibility and freedom in work. In bureaucratic organisations only people with control – managers – can potentially escape procedures; most employees at the bottom of the hierarchy have their need for control over their tasks denied.

Heart disease is the last ring in a chain of physiological consequences of work stress and this is very costly.

The cost of stress

Lack of control over tasks and other stressors trigger employee anger or anxiety, and may be followed by

actions. Those can be constructive, like seeking a tool to cope with the situation, however often they are destructive: flight or fight. Fleeing work is also known as absenteeism and turnover. For example, in the early 2000s, absenteeism affected 10,000 of the Royal Mail's 170,000 staff, costing half a billion

pounds annually. Fighting tough leads to increased adrenaline, blood pressure, and heart-rate – causing stomach disorders, back pain, musculoskeletal problems, headaches, skin problems, loss of energy, and emotional distress.

Workplace stressors are recognised as a key contributor to 75% to 90% of all GP visits. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates the annual cost of stress at \$7,680 per employee. The bottom line of the costs due to the stress-induced absenteeism, lost productivity and health expenditures has been estimated by two separate studies for US businesses at between \$150bn and \$300bn per year. These are proportionally comparable for UK businesses.

Costs are hidden: absenteeism requires replacement and shows up in the costs of temporary employees; turnover may show up in headhunting fees. Studies estimate that replacing an employee costs from six to 24 months of salary before they become productive,

so every new hire is a burden on colleagues and managers for months before they learn the ropes.

Presenteeism extols an even bigger cost. Employees come to work but are 50% productive, prone to mistakes and chronically tired. There are also costs related to lost opportunities. Think of customers who don't have their needs followed up by stressed employees who simply don't care.

Give people real control

Leaders must start acting to eliminate work stress. Mindfulness, meditation and other programmes are helpful but do not treat the root cause: lack of control.

There is an alternative way that hidden stress-related costs can be eliminated – and for good. Give people real (even perceived)

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control over their work, and stress, absenteeism and hidden costs will reduce. Engagement will go up.

Of course, all this is hard to accomplish in command-and-control companies.

Corporate liberation

One way leaders are achieving this is through corporate liberation: employees are free to take actions they decide are the best for the company. The two key ingredients of performance – employee initiative and potential – which are stifled in a traditional command-and-control organisation, are freed up in liberated companies.

Hundreds of businesses across Europe, including Michelin, Airbus and Decathlon, have entered corporate liberation, providing a working environment where employees are willing to do their best. As one operator put it: "If they double my salary I will not go to work into command-and-control company". Instead of stress, employees find fulfilment.

Since they are willing to give their best, their company is outperforming its old-style competition. Fulfilled employees not only cost less, they are the key to outstanding performance. Freeing people to act eliminates the burden of hidden stress-related cost and dramatically boosts innovation and organic growth. ❁



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