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### White Paper - Combating Stress in the Workplace

Dr Kenneth Ilowick examines methods of dealing with stress from different organisational viewpoints, covering what employees, employers and leaders can do to relieve stress in the workplace.

#### Relieving stress...What Employees can do

- There is no one-size-fits-all approach for how individuals manage stress. Different strokes work for different individuals. Experiment. Pick and choose what is right for you.
- Identify what truly gives you satisfaction. What do you find absolutely engaging and absorbing? Make a conscious effort to carve out time and put that in your schedule.
- Try to maintain balance in your life. Put work in perspective. If circumstances force your life to be temporarily out of balance, accept it, but commit to reorienting and rebalancing at a defined later point.
- Practice positive lifestyle and health habits on an ongoing basis: regular exercise, eating well, meditation, relaxation, restful sleep, and social support.
- Find humour even in difficult circumstances. Seek out people with positive attitudes who make you laugh. Treasure those relationships.
- Know when you have had enough of a bad situation. Realize you have options. Try to maintain a sense of hope and perspective. Without denying the reality of a negative situation, try to find the challenge or "gift" in it.
- Intersperse mini-stress reducers throughout your day. (Stretch, focus on your breathing, yawn deeply, take a short walk, strike Yoga pose, call a friend at an appointed time for a non-work conversation). Take time to relax when you eat lunch.
- Deal with unpleasant relationships in ways that are best for you. Accept that some interpersonal stress is inevitable. Know when to walk, when to ask for help or advice, and when to give it your assertive best.
- Space out your stressors. Most of us can deal with a certain amount of stress and do just fine. The problem is not having a chance to recover from one before the next one hits. If possible, give yourself a chance to recuperate before jumping into the next likely stressful situation.
- Try a holiday without bringing along work -- physically or mentally. Also, schedule frequent mini-vacations. Make it a point to use your holiday as a restorative time and minimize the "let-down effect" by practicing mental and physical relaxation exercises before and after your break.

#### How Employers can Combat Stress in the Workplace

Employers can do quite a bit to help alleviate employee stress. Of course, there are constraints based on culture, economics, the industry one is in, and a host of other factors. Nevertheless, here are some general recommendations for helping reduce employee stress:

- Invest in talent management. Send the message to managers throughout the organisation that bad behaviour is unacceptable. Encourage and reward healthy management practices.
- Share information generously. Even under adverse circumstances, employees want to know what's going on. Yes, people will grumble and complain when they hear bad news. However, that is nothing compared to the resentment they will feel if they have been kept in the dark. Over-communicate!
- Manage the pace of change. Whenever possible, allow people a breather after a major change hits. Give them a chance to recuperate before the next one comes along.
- Establish a climate of openness and honesty. Make it safe for people to express themselves. Tell it like it is. Make sure people don't fear retaliation if they speak out.
- Get the right person - job fit. Steer employees into jobs they can succeed at and where they demonstrate a passion. Productive employees usually are the happiest (however, the opposite - that happy employees are productive - is an outdated myth). Give people jobs that challenge them but where success is attainable.
- Provide services employees can use for themselves and their families. Wellbeing programmes, gyms, childcare centres, and other services mean a lot, especially when employees are encouraged to use them and there is no stigma attached.
- Have "family friendly" policies. Balance short term productivity costs with a longer term investment in people. Having generous flex time and maternity/paternity policies can help employees manage the stresses of work and home. Make it OK to use these services. Don't just have them on the books, but informally discourage their use.
- Employ "fatigue counter-measures" to ensure that employee fatigue does not result in accidents and injuries. Review and control working hours, rotating shifts and policies surrounding work and travel schedules.
- Make sure employees know the organisation cares about their wellbeing. Provide appropriate avenues for people when they feel wronged. Let them know there is recourse beyond their immediate boss if their legitimate rights have been violated.

#### Developing a Psychologically Healthy Workplace: What Leaders Can Do

Leadership appears to be one key contributor to the development of a psychologically healthy workplace. Leaders can directly influence morale, retention, commitment, satisfaction and perceptions of stress. A variety of approaches exist for leaders to consider employing in the development of a healthy workplace. These include:

- Gather feedback about strengths/development areas from other senior team leaders, direct reports and internal/external stakeholders by using a multi-rater feedback instrument
- Conduct a senior leadership team analysis of strengths/development areas using interviews or team based multi-rater feedback tools
- Conduct annual employee engagement surveys to better understand how leaders can change policies, procedures, processes, systems and management practices to enhance satisfaction
- Employ a department wide "balanced scorecard" to measure and monitor internal customer satisfaction of talent within your department
- Constructively and consistently manage the performance of underperforming talent
- Create and utilize employee teams to increase participation of employees in problem solving, decision making and planning processes
- Analyse exit interviews for trends and develop strategies to increase retention of high potential talent
- Support and implement work balance and family friendly policies, procedures and programmes to enhance engagement (e.g., tele-commuting, child care, flex time, wellbeing/health promotion programmes)

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