Vitality!

In today's fast-paced and ever-changing business environment, organizations must be resilient – able to confidently face challenges, embrace change and recover from disappointments and defeats. A resilient organization relies on a resilient workforce and managers play a vital role in fostering this essential trait within their teams.

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Facilitating Resilience in the Workplace

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESILIENCE, STRESS AND PRODUCTIVITY MAKES IT IMPERATIVE THAT MANAGERS UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING RESILIENT TEAMS.

Today's workers are coping with longer hours, increased workloads, pressure to do more with less and constant change – which is taking its toll. In 2010, one in four Canadian workers described their day-to-day lives as highly stressful. Six in 10 of these highly stressed individuals identified work as their main source of stress.

Persistently high levels of workplace stress present a challenge to organizations of all sizes. A stressed workforce means reduced productivity through absenteeism, errors, poor customer service, low morale, and increased short-term disability claims. Mental health problems (including depression and anxiety) alone are estimated to cost employers about $20 billion annually and account for more than three-quarters of short-term disability claims in Canada. This is why fostering resilience in the workplace has become an increasingly important business strategy – and managers are a vital component.

What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from, or deal effectively with, adversity, adapt to sudden change, and remain optimistic about life. Being resilient doesn't mean never experiencing stress or pain, it's about our ability to cope with emotional upheavals.

Resilience is not something that we're born with – it develops over time as we acquire knowledge, perspective and self-management skills.

Factors that contribute to resilience include: close relationships with family and friends; a positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities; the ability to manage strong feelings and impulses; good problem-solving and communication skills; feeling in control; seeking help and resources; seeing yourself as resilient (rather than as a victim); coping with stress in healthy ways and avoiding harmful coping strategies, such as substance abuse; helping others; and finding positive meaning in your life despite difficult or traumatic events.

Managing for resilience

A resilient workforce is one that performs well under pressure and deals quickly and effectively with change. Employees don't dwell on failures or roadblocks. Instead they move on and look to the future. They are able to deal with uncertainty and maintain their productivity and good humour despite the frustrations of everyday work life.

Any manager would prefer employees who respond to daily demands with enthusiasm and determination rather than fear, anger or resistance. As a manager, you might not have control over adverse economic events or planned organizational changes, but you do have an important role to play in building a resilient team ready for whatever challenges come its way.

There are many ways to facilitate resilience among your team members, but some of the most effective are the following:

1. Clarity of Purpose

Clearly communicating the purpose and objectives of the team and providing role clarity is the foundation upon which resilience is built. Reinforce the links between people's work and the objectives of the organization. Teams that understand how their efforts contribute to organizational objectives can see meaning and value to their work. Without a clear purpose, it is difficult for the team to work as a cohesive unit and be autonomous and productive.

2. Nurture trust

This is perhaps the most important ingredient to creating a resilient team. When trust is present, employees will feel comfortable: admitting their weaknesses and mistakes; asking for help or advice; taking risks; giving each other the benefit of the doubt before jumping to negative conclusions; focusing on objectives and customers instead of politics and gossip; offering and receiving constructive criticism; sharing ideas; and working collaboratively.

Building trust takes time. Employees who feel that you value, respect, and trust in their abilities are more likely to feel the same way about you.

3. Understand workload

Most organizations are trying to do more with less, but unmanageable workloads that require employees to consistently work long hours and endure unrelenting stress can completely undermine any efforts to nurture resilience and hurt the organization through poor productivity and reduced creativity and innovation.

Managing workload isn't easy for managers as they're often caught between achieving organizational objectives and supporting their teams. But there are ways to meet both senior management and employee needs. The first thing to consider is if you need more staff? If your department is being asked to do more and more, then that may justify additional staff. However, needing more staff does not necessarily mean you'll get more staff. In the meantime, your team still has to operate effectively.

To help manage workload:

- **Involve your team** in identifying causes of excessive workload, inefficiencies and developing solutions within the team's control.

- **Help your team manage workload** by setting clear

priorities. Then help people stay focused on what is most important.

- **Encourage flexible ways of working** to meet business and personal priorities. Providing employees with flexibility in where, when, and how they work gives them more control over their work and their lives, reducing stress and building resilience.

- **Often workload is driven by a concern for doing things the way they've always been done.** Focus on the results that you want to achieve and encourage creative thinking in your team about how to achieve those results.

Skeptics may say that the focus on building resiliency is just a way for employers to get more out of their workers? But the opposite is in fact the case. Resilient employees feel confident in questioning excessive workloads and ineffectual processes while bringing new ideas forward.

4. Encourage autonomy

A 2006 Cornell University study looked at how autonomy or lack thereof affected 320 small businesses. Half demonstrated old fashioned command and control management practices, while the other half gave employees autonomy. Those businesses that gave employees autonomy grew four times faster than the businesses using command and control management and experienced only one third the turnover.

Furthermore, research conducted by Blessing/White and published in *A Study of Voluntary Effort in the Work Force* in 1996 revealed that command and control environments that do not allow employees to think for themselves, make their own decisions, and try new things produce "Learned Helplessness." Employees learn that thinking for themselves and acting on their own is pointless, so they don't even try. Instead, they passively await orders. In contrast, when employees have autonomy, they develop greater confidence in their abilities and resourcefulness. They know they can handle whatever comes their way. In addition, the Blessing/White study found that "Responsibility for one's work" was the number one driver of discretionary effort.

How can you give your team members more autonomy?

- **Ask your employees** if they have the tools, training, knowledge and resources to "run with it."

- **If you tend to micromanage – stop.** Again, it's about trust. Let them do what they were hired to do. When you give an assignment, whenever possible let employees decide on the "how."

- **Give employees the opportunity to explore new ways of doing things,** both within and outside their department.

- **If an employee tries something and it fails, treat as learning experience.** Be positive in debriefing the employee; ask him questions about what he learned and how he can use this experience in the future – and don't criticize or rebuke. The last thing you want is for your employees to fear failure.

- **Recognize employees** who experiment and initiative.

5. Encourage team cohesion

A resilient team is one in which people have a shared sense of purpose and connectedness. They work effectively together without displaying anger or negative behaviours and support each other during tough periods. Team cohesion can be built through social activities, group trainings, celebrating individual and group achievements, regular informal team get-togethers and creating a culture of mutual trust and respect.

As the manager, your staff are expected to come to you for advice and support. While you want to encourage this, you can also encourage your team to ask each other for assistance. This not only helps create a positive, cooperative environment, but also helps build resilience. Teams that support each other can better resolve problems and overcome setbacks.

In addition, don't allow disagreements or conflicts to fester. While different personalities can sometimes clash, you can't let disagreements or conflicts affect the team. Address issues quickly and make it clear that while you don't expect people to always get along, you do expect them to work together effectively.

6. Promote health and wellness

Resilience is also good for our health. More and more research suggests that the positive emotions (happiness, optimism, positivity) are associated with immune system functioning and our overall ability to cope with stress. We are more resilient when we are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy.

You can help everyone on your team optimize their health by supporting work-life balance, healthy lifestyles and good stress management techniques. If your department has a health and safety committee, offer to work with them to help them achieve their goals.

- **Encourage exercise.** Implement and promote a lunch hour walking club. Encourage people to use the stairs. If you have the space, consider bringing in a yoga or tai chi instructor for lunchtime classes.

- **Workshops, lunch 'n' learn seminars,** and health fairs are great ways to help employees learn more about healthy lifestyles, health risks, and stress management. Your EFAP can help you arrange speakers and provide tip sheets and other information.

- **Challenge other departments** to fun health challenges (most steps walked as a team in a week, most pounds lost in six months, etc.)

Modelling resilience

And finally, you can't build a resilient team if you're not resilient yourself. Your team takes its cues from you so you must model resilience on a daily basis. This isn't always easy but the rewards will be worth your efforts. Your ability to rise to the occasion, be positive and optimistic and calmly react to stressful situations will help create an unshakable foundation upon which to build personal and organizational success.

About *Vitality!*

Comments

We'd like to know what you think about *Vitality!*. Send comments and suggestions to:

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