



MANAGING TEAMS DURING TIMES OF STRESS

The recently published CIPD's Absence Management Survey shows that stress now tops the list of long-term causes of absence at work. There is no denying that the levels of stress are rising in many organisations as the threat of large scale job cuts continues to spread throughout both the public and private sectors, and the fear of being the next head to fall is coupled with the challenge of having to do the work of those already axed.

One of the greatest challenges for corporate staff today is constant and unwanted change; there are mergers, acquisitions and de-mergers, chief executives moving on every few years or less, new systems to contend with which may change the demographic of whole departments and similar situations which employees can feel are inflicted upon them.

In multi-national organisations there is an increasing tendency to encourage staff to move around the world every year or two. Whole families are uprooted to strange cities where schools must be found by partners who are unable to go out to work and have lost the support of family and friends. Executives are working in an environment where English, the common business language, is a second tongue to almost all of the managers, who may share a dozen different nationalities between them.

The GROW model below, and fully describe in my article on <http://www.coachingcultureatwork.com/coaching-for-performance-free-articles/>, provides a robust underlying structure for planning change, and handling the stress that people suffer during changes at work:



People are shocked and frightened when faced with large scale redundancies. Leaders flounder and often fail to deal with the reactions altogether. It is essential at these times for leaders to be as open as possible. If there is information which cannot be shared with the team, leaders must tell all they are allowed to. It is important at times like this that people feel listened to, that their reactions are respected and allowed to be expressed.

The process cannot be rushed; people need to sleep on unwelcome changes, discuss them with partners and find out what they need to know. When delivering bad news, it is wise to immediately set up another meeting so that people have a milestone to pin their doubts, questions and complaints to. Ideally, leaders announcing widespread changes should ensure that no-one is left wondering what will happen to them. If it is impossible to share information, staff should at least receive a timetable of what they will be told and when.

If changes are occurring across the whole organisation, performance is likely to be affected until they are complete. There is often a sharp drop in motivation for all concerned, with an accompanying reduction in loyalty and diligence. Unfortunately, in today's world, change can be a process without an end in sight. Understanding and empathy with the fact that people find it difficult to work under such circumstances will help their performance more than chastising them.

At the same time, while empathizing with the dilemma and being sensitive to people's uncertainty and fear, it is important to hold people responsible for their reactions; work must not be allowed to slip and a clear expectation of professional standards should be demonstrated. Leaders should point out that even while jobs are being lost, nothing is to be gained by a dip in performance. It is key at this time that leaders model the behaviour they wish to see in others.

The CIPD Report notes that there is also a rise in 'presenteeism' in some organisations, representing a fear that if their performance falls, they may find themselves at the top of the redundancy list. Again, the quality of work will increase where leaders are listening to their staff and empathizing with their discomfort.

A further source of stress can be the new responsibilities that those who are left have to face, often with less support staff than before. There may be nowhere to turn for advice as the old hands have all gone. The most effective tack here is to build confidence; there may be many ways of undertaking a task, but the most efficient way is usually the method that the person who has to do the job chooses. We all have different learning and performance styles; some people prefer files to be set out as icons on their laptops, others lists. Einstein said *"Everybody is a genius; but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its whole life believing it is stupid."* It is better to let small mistakes go while recognizing achievements and encouraging initiative; a sense of satisfaction of a job well done can be a great boost to morale, even in depressing times.

Losing old habits and developing new ones can be the most stressful part of change, because habits are powerful regulators and want everything to stay as it is, unchallenged and within the comfort zone. Time spent listening to people and supporting them will be well invested now. Leaders should not underestimate the discomfort they are experiencing, even if they might not share it; people's individual reactions and values must be honoured.

Given support from a leader who is role-modelling how to make the best of the situation, people will step forward and are bound to find some advantages in their new situations,

sooner or later. This is not a time for seeing things done exactly as the leader wishes them to be - there will be more advantage in being flexible. The fact that people want to take action at all in an uncertain situation is a major advantage. Survivors should be rewarded and their efforts recognised.

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