

Workplace Stress? Deal with It!

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The recession has erased the dividing line between tensions at home and stresses on the job.

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By Pamela Babcock

As the recession has deepened, employees increasingly have been bringing their worries to work.

Polls show that concerns about jobs and personal finances are paramount for many workers. For example, 47 percent of respondents to a recent Associated Press-GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media poll said they are worried about losing their jobs, 65 percent are at least somewhat worried about paying their bills, and 69 percent are worried that their stocks and retirement investments will drop in value.

Calls to employee assistance programs (EAPs) have been spiking. ComPsych Corp., a Chicago-based global provider of EAP services, says its call volume is about 30 percent above normal, and financial problems have replaced emotional problems as callers' top concern. The company has received a record number of requests for on-site counseling following layoffs, says ComPsych's Chief Executive Officer Dr. Richard A. Chaifetz, Psy.D.

In ordinary times, conventional stress-reduction tools such as EAP services, wellness and work/life balance programs, and more-accommodating flexible work schedules can be helpful. Stress management books and tapes, concierge services, yoga classes, and one-minute meditation are often helpful, at least marginally.

But today's stresses are not conventional. Today's workplace stress is generated in part by fear of the unknown, as opposed to the usual stress of deadlines or people conflict and so forth, Chaifetz says, adding that HR professionals play a role in communicating "what's happening, what's expected and reducing these fears."

Many experts say direct antidotes for economic anxiety include financial management education and clear communication about your organization's current state of affairs.

Leila Bulling Towne, a San Francisco-based executive coach and organizational development consultant, says employers' most common mistake in dealing with employees' stress is failure to acknowledge it. "Some leaders believe, falsely, that recognition of the pressures of the day will open up wounds the company is unable to heal, such as an inability to help someone who is losing his house through foreclosure," she says. "An executive thinks, 'There is nothing we can do, so why speak to a problem for which we have no solution? Best not to say anything.' "

Employees, however, view such inaction as indifference to the pressures they're under from the recession and may quickly assume "they don't care about us," may lose confidence in leaders and may question whether they "know what the heck to do to keep the



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business afloat."

When employees begin to question strategic and tactical direction, confidence in management diminishes and engagement decreases. In turn, Towne says, "voluntary turnover of top performers and workplace accidents go up, and customer satisfaction, customer retention and profits decrease."

Stress Gets Around

Employees' job-related anxieties such as deadline pressures and demanding bosses are now compounded by recession-induced financial worries and domestic tensions that many workers face at home. "Off- and on-the-job stresses feed into one another," says Sandra Naiman, a Denver-based career coach who worked with organizations on workplace tensions during the economic downturn in the early 1980s.

Stress can lead to decreased productivity, poorer work quality, distraction, apathy, illness and increased absenteeism, Naiman says. Stress can affect client relationships and hurt the bottom line. "It is contagious inside and outside the organization," she says. "Customers can sense stress and detect distraction, longer response times and poorer quality service. Happy employees create happy clients."

Stress can contribute to high-cost, chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, autoimmune and gastrointestinal disorders, and depression, says Sheryl Niebuhr, Ph.D., vice president of development and research for StayWell Health Management in St. Paul, Minn. "Stress exacerbates and complicates other health risks like alcohol and tobacco use and diet," she says. "Studies have shown that 18 percent of people under stress drink more, and half of people who are stressed tend to overeat. We also know that stress is a major cause of relapse for smoking and tobacco use."

Historically, stress management, weight control and exercise have been among the top three health risk factors for StayWell's company clients, Niebuhr says, and stress management is now a component "of almost every health management program that we offer." A company client's health risks are identified through aggregate data drawn from health assessments completed by employees; then StayWell and the client work together to decide what follow-up programs will be offered. Stress is one of the risk factors measured by the assessments.

To the extent that stress can cause distraction in the workplace, it can increase the risks of accidents. "High levels of stress can cause people to sleep less and perhaps even turn to drugs or alcohol, all of which are leading causes of workplace accidents," says Rich Paul, who has a master's degree in social work and is a vice president at ValueOptions Inc., a Reston, Va.-based behavioral health care company. He oversees the company's contracts to provide EAPs nationwide.

Although "stress to a certain level is a good motivator," spurring productivity, Paul says, it's important to "help people recognize when the stress they are experiencing has become unhealthy and [has] impacted different aspects of their personal and professional lives."

Stress and the Law

Rising levels of workplace stress can have serious legal implications for employers, including increased workers' compensation claims, disciplinary issues and the potential for workplace violence, according to Jennifer Gimler Brady, a partner and labor and employment law attorney with Potter Anderson & Corroon LLP in Wilmington, Del.

In many workplaces today, Brady says, "you have fewer people doing the same amount of work due to reductions in force, and you have the implications of managing the people left behind, who often experience guilt over the fact that they still have a job, as well as increased stress due to the fear of further layoffs."

Stress can manifest itself in a decline in performance or an employee "acting out," which may trigger an employer's discipline policy. It can aggravate existing health problems or create behavioral health issues. Sick time and leave issues, as covered under the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, may crop up if employees need accommodations.

Brady says employers should develop policies to manage stress-related issues, and train managers to recognize signs of stress and to address potential workplace violence threats.

"It's a recipe for a pretty tense situation," Brady says. "I highly recommend that clients evaluate their workplace violence potential."

Employers' Efforts

Some companies strive to help employees manage stress. Among them:

Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, based in San Francisco, offers stress management and self-care training designed to help employees manage work/life balance and understand how stress can affect family members, friends and co-workers. The company is hosting calls and meetings with 401(k) advisors who can discuss economic implications of the recession. "We believe in increased communication and the need to provide additional training tools that guide our employees through difficult situations, whether they are at work or home," says Alan Baer, Kimpton's senior vice president of people and information.

Primary Freight Services Inc., an international shipping company headquartered in Rancho Dominguez, Calif., introduced a three-month stress management program for its 70 employees in January, six weeks before shortening the workweek to four days and cutting everyone's pay 20 percent. The program is aimed at teaching employees how to take care of themselves physically, mentally and emotionally, and offers counseling on productive ways to use their extra day at home—whether spending more time with family, pursuing a hobby, or finding a second job or a work-from-home situation.

As a result of the program, the mood at Primary Freight's three offices in Southern California, Chicago and New Jersey remains "remarkably upbeat," reports Carl Schwarm, vice president of sales and marketing. "In our industry, so many companies are going through layoffs and furloughs that I think people are very happy to have a job and to know that they're working for a company that is looking forward and finding ways to make a bad situation a

manageable situation."

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina (BCBSNC), in Chapel Hill, conducts quarterly town hall meetings partly "to share our concerns and tell employees what BCBSNC is doing to maintain a solid and viable economic position," says Fara Palumbo, senior vice president of human resources. In January, the company launched an executive blog and encourages employee feedback. Recently, BCBSNC's President and CEO Bob Greczyn expressed thoughts on the company's financial position and invited employees to offer cost-cutting ideas. "Employees weren't shy about weighing in with a multitude of ideas," Palumbo says.

Telemundo Network, a Miami-based division of NBC Universal, recently began offering on-site financial planning and stress management sessions at headquarters and at stations throughout the country through EAPs and affinity groups. The company has been urging managers to "communicate, communicate, communicate," says Alexandra McCauley, senior vice president of human resources. The goal is to remind employees "that they should keep their focus on things they can control as well as recognize employees for good work and extraordinary efforts," she says.

At Alcoa in Evansville, Ind., Michael Jason Curry, PHR, a senior employee relations advocate, has been communicating with the division's 2,000 employees as much as possible about the status of the business, including "production goals and targets for the year and how those are changing depending on customer demand." The division uses e-mail, daily management notes, a biweekly employee publication and an internal television system to help communicate "in as real time as possible," Curry says. "There is more of a state of urgency to communicate now."

The EAP Approach

In the past year, New York City-based EAP Corporate Counseling Associates (CCA) has seen a 21 percent rise in counselor calls. Georgia Critsimilios, a licensed clinical social worker and vice president of the company, says the severity of work and personal problems is alarming.

Critsimilios says counselors are working with more suicidal, severely depressed and severely anxious clients seeking help for multifaceted, complex situations, including both financial and psychological issues.

In one case, a stockbroker suffering from extreme stress decided that his own company had helped cause the recession and that his financial situation, his family and their future had been upended. He described his situation to an EAP counselor as "fighting fires both at home and at work," Critsimilios says. "This once-successful individual now feels totally adrift. He has not only had his own financial collapse ... but he also has this strange feeling of blame. There are a lot of people who are now feeling, 'What have we done to create this?'"

Like other EAPs, CCA provides initial assessment, short-term counseling and referrals to psychiatrists, financial counselors and other professionals. CCA also provides on-site seminars on money, stress and change management, and it works with managers and

senior leaders on issues such as retention, disengagement, absenteeism and reduced productivity.

Observers say it's critical for employers to increase the visibility of their EAPs. A recent study found that while EAPs may be widely available, they are often ignored. A September 2008 study for CIGNA and its EAP, based in Eden Prairie, Minn., found that 67 percent of Americans said access to an EAP would improve their work/life balance, but only 35 percent knew whether their employer offered a program.

"Unfortunately, EAPs are vastly underused, which means many people who could use the help aren't getting it," says Mark Slitt, a CIGNA spokesman. "In some cases, employees may not know the help is there."

StayWell's Niebuhr says resources should be promoted in a way that mitigates stigma or potential negativity. While EAPs were once associated largely with behavioral health issues, which made many employees hesitant to access them, Niebuhr says HR managers need to reinforce the message that such resources can help "competent, capable people" and provide "a road map" for navigating challenges.

In the current economy, Niebuhr says, culture and climate can go a long way to help enhance an organization's reputation as an employer. "The more employers can reinforce through their managers a sense of caring and respect and concern for their employees, the better they'll be," Niebuhr continues. "What people will remember after the dust settles is how they felt and how they were treated."

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