



Line management behaviour and stress at work Updated advice for HR



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What is stress?

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as ‘the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed upon them’.

There is a clear distinction between pressure, which can be a motivating factor, and stress, which can occur when this pressure becomes excessive.

Why does stress need to be tackled?

- About one in six people say they find their work either very or extremely stressful.
- Work-related stress accounts for over a third of all new incidents of ill health.
- The CIPD 2008 Absence Management survey found stress to be the leading cause of long-term absence in non-manual workers.
- Each case of stress, anxiety or depression leads to an average of 30.2 working days lost.
- In 2007–08, a total of 13.5 million working days were lost to stress, depression and anxiety.
- Nearly a third of organisations responding to the CIPD 2008 Absence Management survey reported an increase in stress-related absence in the last 12 months.

What is already being done about stress at work?

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published national Management Standards for work-related stress which provide guidance on best practice for employers. The overall aim of these standards is to bring about a reduction in the number of employees who go off sick or who cannot perform well at work because of stress.

The Management Standards and supporting processes are designed to:

- help simplify risk assessments for stress
- encourage employers, employees and their representatives to work in partnership to address work-related stress throughout the organisation
- provide a yardstick by which organisations can gauge their performance in tackling the key causes of stress.

Full details of the Management Standards can be found at www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards

Why are line managers important in the context of stress management?

The Management Standards initiative is driven from Health and Safety; however, much of the responsibility for its implementation will fall on HR professionals and line managers. This means HR professionals and line managers need to understand

- what stress is and what constitutes a ‘healthy’ workplace
- what skills, abilities and behaviours are needed to manage employees in a way that minimises work-related stress.

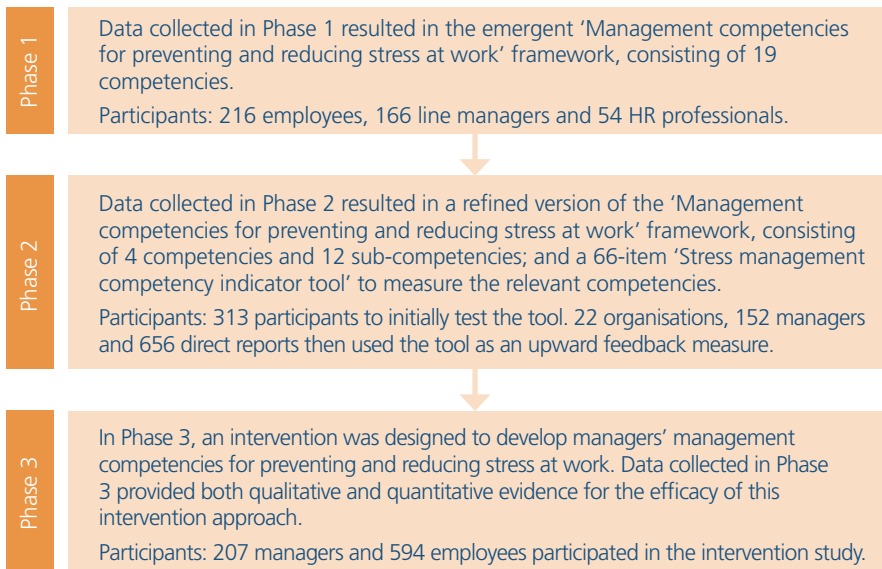
Managers can have a significant impact on employee stress. In fact, the recent CIPD Absence Management survey found that respondents cited management style in the top three causes of work-related stress overall. This impact can occur in a number of ways:

- Managers can cause (or prevent) stress by the way they behave towards their employees.
- Managers can act as the ‘gatekeepers’ to the presence or absence of hazardous working conditions for employees – for instance preventing an unfair workload being placed on an individual.
- Managers can help ensure that stress is identified early if it occurs in their team.
- If an individual suffers from stress, the manager needs to be involved in the solution.
- Managers are responsible for the uptake and roll-out of risk assessments for work stress within their team/department.

If managers are vital to managing stress in the workplace, it is important that we understand exactly what a manager should (and should not) be doing to prevent and reduce workplace stress.

What do line managers need to do to prevent and reduce stress?

Supported by the CIPD, the HSE and Investors in People, a team of occupational psychologists from Goldsmiths, University of London and Affinity Health at Work have been conducting research into what behaviours managers need to show in order to prevent and reduce stress in their team. The following flow diagram shows the phases of research that have been carried out. The framework of manager behaviours identified is shown on the next two pages of this leaflet.



Management competencies for preventing and reducing stress at work: refined framework following phase 2 of the research

Competency	Sub-competency	Do (✓) Don't (X)	Examples of manager behaviour
Respectful and responsible: managing emotions and having integrity	Integrity	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is a good role model • treats team members with respect • is honest
		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • says one thing, then does something different • speaks about team members behind their backs
	Managing emotions	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acts calmly in pressured situations • takes a consistent approach to managing
		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is unpredictable in mood • passes on stress to employees • panics about deadlines • takes suggestions for improvement as a personal criticism
	Considerate approach	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • makes short-term demands rather than allowing planning • creates unrealistic deadlines • gives more negative than positive feedback • relies on others to deal with problems • imposes 'my way is the only way' • shows a lack of consideration for work-life balance
Managing and communicating existing and future work	Proactive work management	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clearly communicates employee job objectives • develops action plans • monitors team workload on an ongoing basis • encourages team to review how they organise work • stops additional work being taken on when necessary • works proactively • sees projects/tasks through to delivery • reviews processes to see if work can be improved • prioritises future workloads
		✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deals rationally with problems • follows up problems on team's behalf • deals with problems as soon as they arise
	Participative/empowering	X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is indecisive at decision-making
		✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gives employees the right level of responsibility • correctly judges when to consult and when to make a decision • keeps employees informed of what is happening in the organisation • acts as a mentor • delegates work equally • helps team members develop in their role • encourages team participation • provides regular team meetings
		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gives too little direction to employees

Management competencies for preventing and reducing stress at work: refined framework following phase 2 of the research (continued)

Competency	Sub-competency	Do (✓) Don't (X)	Examples of manager behaviour
Reasoning/managing difficult situations	Managing conflict	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> acts as mediator in conflict situations deals with squabbles before they become arguments deals objectively with conflicts deals with conflicts head on
		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> acts to keep the peace rather than resolve issues
	Use of organisation resources	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> seeks advice from other managers when necessary uses HR as a resource to help deal with problems seeks help from occupational health when necessary
	Taking responsibility for resolving issues	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> follows up conflicts after resolution supports employees through incidents of abuse makes it clear they will take ultimate responsibility if things go wrong
		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> doesn't address bullying
Managing the individual within the team	Personally accessible	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> speaks personally rather than uses email provides regular opportunities to speak one to one returns calls/emails promptly is available to talk to when needed
	Sociable	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> brings in treats socialises with the team is willing to have a laugh at work
	Empathetic engagement	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> encourages employee input in discussions listens when employees ask for help makes an effort to find out what motivates employees at work tries to see team member's point of view takes an interest in team's life outside work regularly asks 'how are you?' treats all team members with equal importance
		X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> assumes rather than checks that employees are okay

How do these competencies differ from general management competencies?

It is clear from looking at the above framework that the competencies listed reflect general management skills. However, our research has shown that many general management frameworks used by organisations include only a subset of the management competencies/behaviours identified as being key to effective stress management. In practice, this means that competencies relevant to preventing and reducing stress at work may not be included in your competency frameworks and people management activities. Therefore they may not be assessed, trained or developed at line manager level in your organisation.

How will the refined framework and the indicator tool be useful to me as an HR professional?

The revised framework and the indicator tool will enable you to support managers better. Using the framework and the tool in a developmental and supportive way, you can help managers to be more effective stress managers, by enabling them to prevent and reduce stress in their teams – without actually increasing the workload and therefore the stress upon the line managers themselves.

The refined 'Management competencies for preventing and reducing stress at work' framework and the 'Stress management competency indicator tool' can be useful to enable the integration of stress management behaviours into existing people management processes (see point 1 below) to complement stress management activities (see point 2 below).

1 Using the framework and tool within people management processes

The competency framework (or elements of it) and the indicator tool can be integrated into people management processes in a number of ways:

- dovetailing with existing leadership and management training programmes
- embedding in induction programmes to promote the behaviours to new joiners
- providing structure to training packages focusing on people management such as communication or delegation skills
- promoting manager self-awareness
- as an assessment component within a wider development programme
- to aid managers in the identification of key development areas.

The usability research has suggested that the tool and the framework would be best suited in a performance management and development context rather than a selection context. It is also important that the tool is used developmentally within an overall programme of feedback, support and coaching, rather than as an assessment process for selection and promotion.

2 Using the framework and tool within stress management processes

The competency framework (or elements of it) and the indicator tool can also be integrated into stress management processes in a number of ways:

- using the framework to review and update existing policies
- to aid the development of action plans following stress audits or risk assessment
- to inform the development of other HR policies, such as managing absence, welfare and equal opportunities
- using the tool as an individual diagnostic, enabling stress management to be focused at the local level
- as a mechanism for tackling specific organisational situations or areas where stress is a problem
- as a mechanism for tackling specific psychosocial hazards, such as low job control or high demands
- to 'tie in' and engage the manager in stress management processes.

How can we support managers to show positive manager behaviour?

Phase 3 of the research shows that, through provision of upward feedback and an interactive workshop, it is possible to help managers show the behaviours required to prevent and reduce stress in their staff. This particularly applies to managers who have development needs in this area. The research shows that there are a number of ways that employers can ensure the success of this kind of learning and development intervention. These include the following:

Importance of upward feedback

It would appear that giving managers upward feedback from their direct reports is an important element for helping them achieve behaviour change: while completing a self-report questionnaire will help managers reflect on the relevant behaviours, it will not help them understand how they are perceived by others, and managers often have a different perception of their own behaviour to that of their staff. Employers should therefore ideally provide an upward (or 360-degree) feedback system to help managers to adjust their behaviour.

Further support

The research suggests that provision of case studies and opportunities to share experience with peers (provided during a workshop) are also important for helping managers change their behaviour. It also shows that managers will probably need further support, such as:

- further training in specific skill areas, such as leadership and conflict management
- support from their own managers, peers and team
- ongoing feedback on their behaviour and performance
- time in their schedule to focus on people management.

The research suggests that many managers do not find their employer supportive and feel they lack the resources to make behavioural

changes. To ensure that managers receive the support they need, the research suggests employers need to take a strategic approach to the provision of support to managers when rolling out this kind of learning and development. For example:

- Establish a strategy for support that covers the whole intervention process, clarifying the support needed/to be provided at each stage.
- Gain managers' trust and establish good communication from the start of the process.
- Take a strategic approach to choosing participants for the learning and development intervention.

Help with overcoming barriers

There are a number of potential barriers to managers showing positive behaviour. These include:

- aspects of the job itself, such as workload, deadlines and conflicting priorities
- organisational issues such as bureaucracy and processes
- team issues such as capability and problem behaviours
- personal issues, including lack of confidence and managers' own stress levels.

Where possible, employers need to help managers identify and overcome these barriers to encourage them to show the behaviours that prevent and reduce stress at work.

Successful learning and development programmes for managers

For maximum effectiveness, these kinds of learning and development interventions need to be embedded into organisational practices. There is a range of ways in which this integration can be achieved, for example:

- establish a steering group to oversee the process
- ensure that different professionals, particularly HR, Health and Safety, and Occupational Health, work together to drive the process forward

- find the 'brand' for the process that is most appropriate for your organisation
- integrate the process with existing initiatives and policies.

Achieving buy-in

In many cases, getting managers to participate in and buy into management development of this kind will need some effort, in particular:

- good communication about the process and its benefits
- senior management endorsement and role-modelling of the relevant behaviour
- integrating the process with other initiatives, such as management development and performance management.

To get senior management to buy into these kinds of interventions and to role-model positive manager behaviours, the research suggests that the following may be helpful:

- Establish a clear business case and a link between positive manager behaviour and positive business outcomes.
- Link it to national goals/initiatives.
- Link positive manager behaviour to business planning and objectives.
- Communicate the relevant legislation and/or risk of litigation.
- Create specific senior-level responsibilities for this domain.
- Present the initiative as a joint HR/ Occupational Health/Health and Safety activity.

Online tools available to support managers

During 2009, we will be developing packages of online materials a) to help managers show the behaviours set out in the framework above and b) to help those who are supporting managers to show these behaviours (that is, trainers, coaches, consultants, HR professionals and so on). These will be available for free download through the HSE website at www.hse.gov.uk/stress

More information on the research

The full scientific research reports relating to this project can be downloaded from:

www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr633.htm

www.hse.gov.uk/research/rrhtm/rr553.htm

www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/health/stress/_preventing_stress

For further details about the research project, please contact Rachel Lewis, Affinity Health at Work, at rachel@affinityhealthatwork.com



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