De-stress your workplace

Anuradha Sriram[1] & Preeti Chandrashekhar[2]

Workplace stress is a silent killer that is plaguing India Inc. Stress in the context of a workplace is anything that stretches an individual's ability to cope. But not all stress is bad. A balanced stress does drive exceptional performance. Dis-stress is when the intensity of stress is so high that an individual exhausts their coping potential. Dis-stress is the number one lifestyle risk factor among Indian workers. As per a recent study by Towers Watson, it ranks above physical inactivity and obesity at the workplace. More than 10 out of 25 people feel that excessive workload is the biggest cause while 2 out of 5 attribute it to inadequate staffing. That is not all. There are other factors like unclear job expectations, overwhelming work demands, technology that expands availability beyond normal work hours, which are identified as top reasons for stress at workplace.

Having stressed employees is expensive for the company too. Towers Watson research indicates that stress costs employers heavily and impacts all other wellness behaviours. Dis-stressed workers incur health care costs 50 per cent higher than the norm. Further, dis-stress drives and sustains lifestyle behaviours such as eating disorders, inactivity and smoking.

Employers in India are recognising the need for supporting employees. Many companies have education and awareness campaigns as well as interventions like yoga, tai-chi, etc. Some companies also have an EAP (employee assistance programme) in place to help employees who need professional advice.

However, it is interesting to note that employee and employer perspectives are not aligned on causes of stress. For instance, Towers Watson research reveals that employers think a lack of 'work life balance' is the primary source of stress whereas employees feel that inadequate support and unclear job expectations are among the top reasons. Lack of 'work-life balance' ranks number No. 5 from employees' viewpoint. Another interesting disconnect relates to the

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[1] Director, Benefits, Towers Watson
[2] Consulting leader, Benefits, India (South), Towers Watson

availability of technology during non-working hours. While employers rank it at No. 3 as a source of stress, employees rank it at No. 10.

Clearly, alignment of employer and employee perspectives is the first step towards looking at a holistic programme that garners that right kind of participation and employee engagement for company initiatives. Else, companies run the risk of diverting precious resources towards programmes that do not address the key requirements from an employee perspective.

Employers have to understand the 'stress universe' at three levels:

- Minimise stress and try to eliminate sources of stress. This is done through a right work environment and culture. All levels of leadership should be trained to recognise employee stress. Organisations can put an accountability mechanism in place through which they can make immediate managers accountable for the happiness quotient of their teams, instead of just focusing on their productivity.

- Build resilience to enable converting the negative energies to positive energies. EVP (Employee Value Proposition) represents the employment deal and analysing it to identify aspects that have a positive or negative impact on stress helps build resilience to stress. Organisations can strengthen their teams by teaching resilience skills at the individual level and creating a culture of resilience. Stress management programs, weight-loss and nutrition education and smoking cessation programmes are useful tools.

- Support de-stressing mechanism: Understanding various ways in which employees deal with stress gives useful insights to help develop effective stress management programmes. While short-term programmes like yoga, relaxation, meditation, etc. help in coping with stress, long term programmes on aspects relating to role clarity and personal control/autonomy help build resilience from a long term perspective.

The employer needs to adopt a mix of resilience building and stress management. In sum, companies need to look at a comprehensive approach that uses 'identifying stress drivers' as the building blocks. Minimising stress needs to be engineered into the organisation's DNA.

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