

# Good counselling can't hide bad management

**Andy Jarosz** identifies three organisational attitudes to employee wellbeing

**W**e won't need to worry about counselling for our staff,' our middle eastern hosts assured us, 'they have their families if bad things happen'.

As I explained in broken Russian to the shepherd, high up in the Tien Shen Mountains of Kyrgyzstan, how my company provides psychological support for those who suffer traumatic events, his wizened old face betrayed confusion as to how a total stranger could possibly help someone with a personal matter. 'That's what the community elders are for' was his reply (I think).

These are two of the many recent examples that I have encountered of how the emotional needs of the individual in a crisis are best perceived to be met. I don't have to travel so far to encounter these disparate opinions. Many companies we meet in the UK are equally unconvinced of the need to provide emotional support for their staff; lack of knowledge, lack of control of outcome, fear of opening themselves up to litigation are all objections that we hear. Are they neglecting their employees by denying them this support? We encounter a myriad of opinions from companies, from those who want to provide help for the employee who may have witnessed a road traffic accident on the way to work, to those where the managing director feels that their 'open door' is the only access to support that their employees require (even when they are clearly the problem).

At docleaf we often ask ourselves, 'Why does this divergence of opinion exist, and does it matter?' In this article, I try to explore these differences in care provision for employees and the correlation that these appear to have in relation to the underlying culture within an organisation. I will explore this from my non-clinical standpoint, and argue that the standard of care (professional or not) given to employees is more important than the availability of outsourced specialist services. I will emphasise that for the provision of organisational care services to be taken seriously, the providers must demonstrate clear and tangible benefits, something that traditionally has been very difficult to do.

Emotional support in organisations is not confined to that provided by mental health professionals. While there will come a time in every organisation where professional support is needed, there is a more routine emotional engagement that occurs on a day-to-day basis. This is part and parcel of good management practice, and involves the concern of the individual employee's physical and emotional wellbeing. I make this point to stress that everyone has a role to play in the psychological care of a workforce, and equally that this consideration cannot be outsourced and thus negated by management. The provision of the best employee assistance programme (EAP) service for example, will not counteract bad management in a company.

There appear to be three different strategies that we observe in organisations. At one end, the employer does not provide any mechanism by which their staff can gain support. A 'head in the sand' approach exists in many firms, where there is a belief that people go to work to act within the scope of their job description, and that they must leave their personal life, and indeed their personality, outside the factory gates. Anything that impacts on their ability to perform their duties should be dealt with away from work and should not impact on the productivity of the business. Such attitudes, although archaic to many, are still prevalent in many UK businesses, even if the company external profile suggests otherwise. They appear to involve an ignorance of the consequences of poor physical and psychological health on the individual's ability to contribute fully in the workplace. More fundamental still, perhaps, there is a fear that addressing a person's wellbeing will open a can of worms that the employer is not able to deal with.

Others will provide support services through outsourcing, such as an EAP service or a stress helpline. One of the key intentions behind such offerings is to allow employees access to a listening and advice service in a safe and (crucially) anonymous environment. The employer should get a report periodically stating the level of usage of the telephone-based service, with no information that

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could identify the users. This appears to many observers a tool by which to tick the box of caring for the workforce, and by extension of protecting the organisation from tribunal claims. In other words it is seen as a cheap way of avoiding a caring approach to employees. For anyone who adopts this philosophy, the ruling in the 2006 *Daw vs Intel*<sup>1</sup> case should make them think again. In this case the judge made it clear that the provision of an EAP service in itself did not constitute the discharge of a duty of care. In our own experience, where an EAP service is in place the awareness of the scheme is often low among the workforce (and even the management!) and there is a suspicion among many employees of the motives of the scheme's provision. There is rarely a coordinated effort to make employees aware of the help available. The reported low uptake rates of these programmes are therefore not surprising.

The most proactive and many would argue successful approach is that of a holistic employee wellbeing strategy. Such an approach is built on the philosophy that a happy and healthy employee is also a productive one, and that any time and money invested in creating the right work environment will be rewarded many times over. How does such a strategy look? Some examples of a wellbeing programme might include the following:

- health and nutrition awareness campaigns
- fitness promotion initiatives (such as provision of gym facilities or membership)
- community involvement programmes
- regular listening groups with senior management
- emotional intelligence training

- organisational stress audits
- fit-to-work programme to assist those on long-term absence
- confidential support helpline.

I have included a support helpline in this list despite my earlier scepticism, as I would argue that there is a place for such a service, as long as it is not provided in isolation but rather as part of an overall wellbeing programme.

The challenge with the provision of so many of the above elements is the intangible nature of their expected outcomes. For example it is very difficult to objectively measure the success of a community involvement programme, from the employer's perspective. Criteria such as retention rates, satisfaction surveys or absence rates can point to a healthy work environment. There are so many known and unknown variables that can impact on these criteria, however, that attributing one particular activity to any outcome is difficult to substantiate.

There is some hope on this front. Providers of various programmes are developing wellbeing monitoring tools, often under duress from corporates who do not want to understand the detail of what is being done but just want to be shown that their money is being well spent. We have seen HR directors become quite excited at the sight of a 'human dashboard' where the outcome of our audit programme has been the clear identification of pressure points superimposed on their organisational structure. It illustrates to us again that in so many organisations management want answers to their 'people issues' without getting their hands dirty in actually managing the very factors that create these issues in the first place.

And this for me is the paradox. There is a willingness or an accepted need among the bulk of employers that something needs to be in place to provide emotional support for staff when needed. And yet there is also a reluctance or fear in understanding the root causes of the problems that create the need. Without knowing why their people suffer from emotional stress, how can the employer hope to remove the causes and prevent the problem from perpetuating itself? I challenge all employers who want to create a healthy and happy work environment to make it a priority to try to understand the causes of stress within their business, and then build their strategy from these findings. Only in this way can they produce a tangibly and sustainably positive outcome. ■

### Reference

1 *Mrs D vs Intel Corporation (UK) Ltd.* See: [www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2006/1097.html](http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/QB/2006/1097.html)

