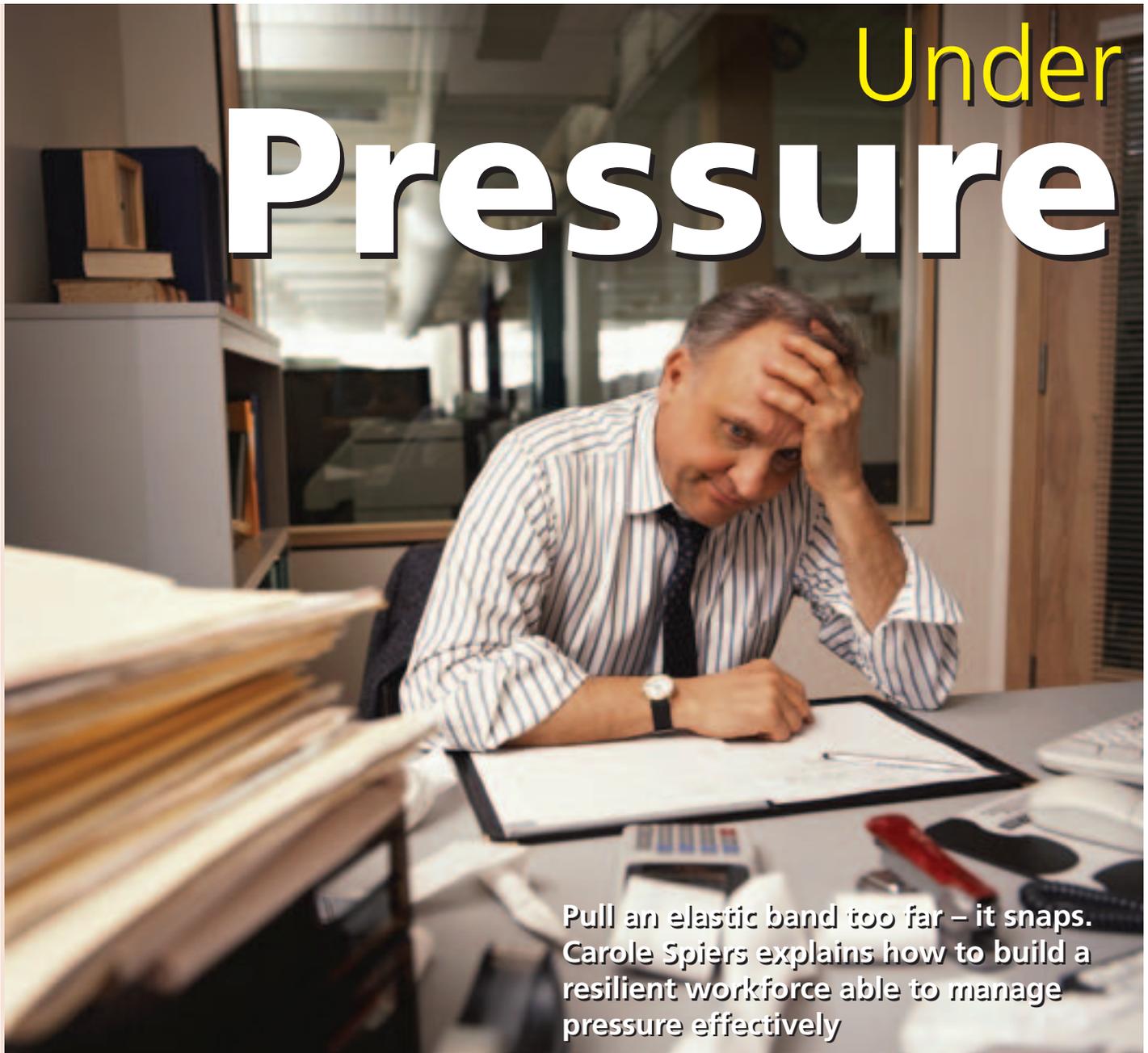


Under Pressure



Pull an elastic band too far – it snaps. Carole Spiers explains how to build a resilient workforce able to manage pressure effectively

Resilience is the new buzzword for the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or other 'stressors'. It's how we bounce back from difficult situations. And fortunately resilience isn't a characteristic that we either do or don't have. It involves behaviours, thoughts and actions that can be learned and developed.

Studies have shown that the most important factors in building resilience include:

- Having caring and supportive relationships;
- The ability to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out;
- Possessing a positive self-view;
- Confidence in your strengths and abilities;
- Good communication skills;

- Being able to manage strong feelings and impulses;
- Strong problem-solving abilities.

So if these are the qualities we need to increase our resilience as individuals, what lessons can we learn in terms of the characteristics and culture required to build a resilient organisation?

Building resilience by reducing stress

Because our working lives are becoming increasingly stressful, the Health and Safety Executive has announced its new management standards for work-related stress. They are designed to help ensure that organisations address key aspects of workplace stress (or 'risk factors') including demands, control, support, relationships, role and change. For each risk factor, the

management standards include a description of what should be happening in an organisation (or 'states to be achieved') in order for the standard to be met. 'Demands', for example, includes issues like workload, work patterns and the work environment. States to be achieved are that:

- The organisation provides employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work;
- People's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands;
- Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees;
- Employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.

The guidance centres around carrying out a risk assessment for



stress (this is also a legal requirement), the results of which should highlight problem areas that need to be addressed in order to reduce (or ideally remove the causes of) stress.

But while the management standards provide a foundation for stress reduction, there are many other actions that your organisation should consider in order to increase its resilience, some of the most important of which are highlighted below.

Commitment to stress management

A stress policy should be implemented in conjunction with staff liaison groups. Commitment should begin at the most senior level and be cascaded downwards. There's little point in introducing stress management training for line managers, for example, if senior managers have little or no commitment to minimising or eliminating excessive pressure within the organisation.

Recruitment and selection

When recruiting, it's important that both the organisation and applicant understand the requirements of the post and the potential pressures involved. One conclusion of a landmark Court of Appeal case in February 2002 was that 'there are no

occupations that should be regarded as intrinsically dangerous to mental health'. It's therefore essential to combine an appropriate selection policy with sufficient job-specific and practical training – to enable individuals to carry out their jobs within their capabilities and with the minimum of stress.

It's important that both the organisation and applicant understand the potential pressures

Management style

Effective communication is often neglected in management training, yet it's essential to good management – by reducing misunderstanding and the opportunity for discontent.

Effective communication includes active listening skills – engaging with the person you're listening to and responding appropriately. Good communication at all levels will help ensure that everyone in the organisation can work with confidence – reducing the opportunities for stress to develop.

Work-related training

Many organisations face deadline pressures or sudden changes in work demands, and employees need the necessary training and experience to meet the ever-increasing demands made on them. Examples include training in resilience, time management, communication skills, etc. Training in communication (and particularly active listening) skills is essential to help ensure that managers are aware of their team members' problems and are in a position to offer early interventions to resolve these.

Stress awareness and stress management training

For stress management to become integral to corporate culture, initiatives must be introduced that will raise awareness of work-related stress. In particular, recognising the early warning signs and symptoms should become integral to management strategy. This can be achieved by monitoring sickness absence (especially short-term), carrying out confidential staff surveys, observing working relationships (especially team dynamics), and questioning changes in attitude and behaviour.

Stress management training can then build on this by teaching employees about the nature and sources of stress, its effects on health, and the personal skills needed to reduce it. Training may also help reduce stress symptoms such as anxiety and sleep disturbances, and has the added advantage of being relatively inexpensive.

Employees also need to know how to raise concerns about work pressure (informally and formally), for example, by speaking to their supervisor or manager, through an existing grievance procedure, or under a dedicated stress policy. The key is that employees should find it as easy and unthreatening as possible to speak up about stress at work, and should be able to do so without fear of recrimination or any other negative outcomes.

Mediation and negotiation

In mediation, the parties in a dispute express their views on a contentious matter, establish common ground, and move towards a solution that's acceptable to all. In negotiation, the aim is to reach agreement on a course of action that satisfies at least some of the claims of both sides. Access to mediation and negotiation are therefore vital in enabling



workplace disputes to be resolved before they escalate into stress-inducing or bullying behaviours which can be much more difficult to resolve.

Getting back to work

Where employees have been forced to take time away from work as a result of stress, their rehabilitation back to work needs to be carefully managed. For those employees who require specialist support, Employee Assistance Programmes and counselling services are a vital component in employee well being.

In February 2002, the Court of Appeal ruled, *inter alia*, that 'any employer who offered a confidential counselling service was unlikely to be found in breach of duty of care, by the courts'. Counselling should therefore be regarded as an intervention to be included alongside other supportive services available to employees.

First contact counselling teams are made up of volunteers (from the organisation) who are trained in basic counselling skills, and receive ongoing

training and supervision. They're often used as a 'first contact' for employees, for whom they can provide an active listening service and help to deal with work-related problems such as stress, bullying, change and mediation.

An employee assistance programme offers employees access to a confidential counselling and information service, and to be effective must have the backing of senior management. However, although it can play an important role in helping to deal with stress-related problems, it should not detract from the importance of line managers actively listening to their staff. Nor must an application to the EAP be misinterpreted by managers as suggesting a lack of confidence in their own ability to deal with stress-related issues.

What shouldn't you do?

Depending on the nature of your organisation, concierge services, or complementary therapies such as reflexology, yoga, massage, etc, may

also be of benefit. Typically, however, they should be incorporated within an holistic approach to reducing work-related stress and increasing resilience – rather than being expected to resolve underlying problems on their own.

If an organisation introduces these types of 'stress-busting' initiatives without a solid foundation of stress management training and employee counselling support, they risk adding to problems of work-related stress – through frustration, disillusion, and a belief amongst employees that the true causes of stress aren't being taken seriously, and the organisation is simply paying lip service to the problem.

Ultimately, reducing workplace stress and building resilience is largely a matter of common sense and good management practice, and simply requires employers and employees to work together for the common good. Both share a joint responsibility for reducing stress – which, when this is successful, can help employees to enjoy their work more, and businesses to thrive as a result.

For this to become a reality, organisations need to work towards the creation of a 'healthy', resilient work culture – one where there is an intelligent two-way dialogue between managers and employees; where concerns can be raised in the confidence that actions will be taken; and where everyone in the organisation recognises stress as an unnecessary and unacceptable drain on creativity and resources. Or to put it another way, a culture where healthy ways of working have become so ingrained that the need for the HSE's management standards will no longer exist.



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Special offer for readers

For informed advice on the HSE's new management standards for work-related stress, or to receive a FREE special report explaining their implications, '*HSE management standards on stress – made simple*', please email sb@carolespiersgroup.com.