

Dr. Peter Mills, Director & Founder - Glasslyn Health Solutions

opinion

Psychology misunderstood

Mention workplace psychology to most executives and you'll witness an immediate glazed look of indifference, and more than likely a just remembered urgent meeting to attend. Dr. Peter Mills, Director & Founder of Glasslyn Health Solutions says, ignore it at your peril.

Psychology and psychologists don't have the greatest of reputations within the corporate setting; images of dusty old professors completely detached from the real world, where real work gets done, spring to mind. But are we giving psychology a bad rap? Is there something we can take from the purveyors of "psycho-babble" that could be of some real use in managing a workforce? The answer, I believe, is an unequivocal "yes". Psychological health issues have a major impact upon individuals and organisations alike. Stress, the generally used popular term for psychological health complaints, consistently ranks in the top two reasons for long-term sickness absence and early retirement on medical grounds. And, according to the HSE, millions of working days are lost every year to largely avoidable mental health problems.

You could be forgiven for thinking that we should all give up work and closet ourselves away to protect our fragile minds from the ravages of modern society. This is not the case. Research (those psychologists again) has unequivocally shown that work is actually good for your mental health. Being in work has a sizeable impact upon self-esteem, outlook and life satisfaction, whilst being out of work has exactly the opposite effect. So much for giving up the day job and working on your allotment, but what can we practically do to make our time at work less stressful? To answer that question it's best to look at what aspects of a job can make it stressful, so back to the psychologists and their research again.



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The physical working environment has long been known to be a stressor. Uncomfortable and potentially dangerous surroundings are notorious for contributing to mental health issues. This is the reason the prevalence of psychological health problems is high amongst the police, the fire service and also the medical and nursing professions. Fortunately for the majority of us the biggest threat to our physical health is the office air conditioning not functioning as it should during the summer months, so let's look somewhere else for explanations.

Unsurprisingly excessive workloads and work hours are a major contributor to symptoms of stress, but interesting this is not a "linear" phenomenon. Undoubtedly some individuals have an innate resilience to pressure, but it is also clear that how you are expected to carry out your work tasks is equally, if not more important. By allowing employees a degree of freedom in deciding where, when and, to a certain extent, what they work on can dramatically reduce the chances of them developing psychological health issues, compared to individuals who do not benefit from this "control". The expression coined by the psychologists is "Demand-Control Balance", or imbalance when the demands on the individual outweigh the control of their work. One of the main examples of initiatives that can tilt the balance in favour of control are flexible working patterns, where organisations allow their employees to work from home, or come into the office late or leave early provided core hours are adhered to.

Another concept from the psychologist's research desk is that of "Effort-Reward Balance". Stress is far less likely to raise its ugly head if individuals feel they are being rewarded in line with the efforts they are putting in for the organisation. Your first thought may be "well there's no more money for anyone in the current economy", but actually monetary reward comes relatively low down the list in terms of what is important. Feeling appreciated, receiving praise, having status within the organisation, being listened to and having one's opinions sought are far more important rewards than cold hard cash. Making sure employees are clear about their role within the teams they work in as well as the organisation as a whole is also an important factor for optimising psychological health. Role ambiguity can lead to significant distress and confusion and ensuring there is role clarity as well and minimising role overload (giving individuals too many hats to wear) can go a long way to mitigating against stress.

Finally, giving individuals decision latitude can be extremely empowering. Providing employees with the tools and training needed to make decisions about what should be done and how it should be done is a critical element in driving both loyalty and customer centric outcomes, something we could probably all do with a bit more of in the current economic climate that we find ourselves in.



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