WORKPLACE WELLBEING

The role of line managers in promoting positive mental health

Management Today

iosh

INTRODUCTION

Around 300,000 people with a long-term mental health condition lose their jobs each year according to the 2017 UK Government-commissioned Stevenson-Farmer review. This is an alarming figure. The human cost is woefully high, as is the financial burden on businesses: poor mental health is estimated to cost employers between £33bn and £42bn a year in sick pay and lost productivity. So how can organisations better support individuals with mental health problems to remain and thrive in work?

Employees are affected by a multitude of pressures, both at work and in their personal lives. Line managers, given their position within an organisation, are often best placed to spot the signs of poor mental health in the workplace and – if equipped with the right skill set – can manage issues effectively before they reach crisis point. Their actions and behaviour also have a direct impact on employee wellbeing: a good line manager will foster the kind of working environment that makes employees feel valued, respected and supported, and will act as a 'gatekeeper' protecting them from any working conditions that present risks to their mental wellbeing. Conversely, a bad line manager can aggravate and, in some cases, even be the cause of stress, anxiety and depression. >
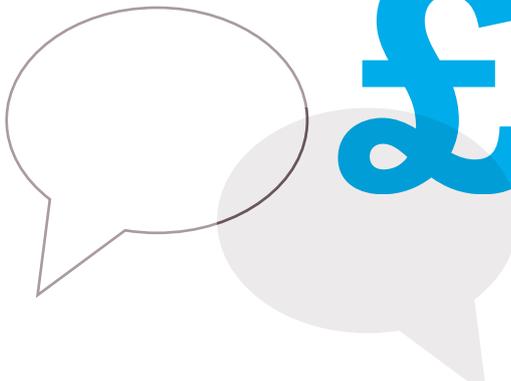
£42bn

estimated maximum cost to employers per year in sick pay and lost productivity

Management Today

(iosh)

Management Today and the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) set out to examine the role line managers play in promoting positive mental health in the workplace. We conducted a survey of more than 400 employees from a variety of businesses across the UK to get a clearer picture of what is being done in the workplace to support those with mental health problems. Our sample was split into two groups to enable us to evaluate the results from each group appropriately: one group comprised managers who have employees reporting directly to them, the other comprised managers without any direct reports.

Through our findings, this report explores:

- How well-equipped line managers are with the skills needed to safeguard the mental health of their direct reports

- What approach organisations are taking to create a work environment and work culture that promotes positive mental health and wellbeing

- The stigma surrounding mental health and how this affects the manager/ employee relationships

Management Today

iosh

KEY FINDING
Line managers lack support and training

Worryingly, 62% of line managers that took part in our survey say they don't get enough help from their organisation to support the mental wellbeing of their staff. If line managers are to be effective in promoting positive mental health in the workplace, it is vital they understand how to manage fluctuations in workers' mental health, what the causes of ill-health can be, how to recognise when employees may be unwell, and how to advise on where to access further support. Armed with this knowledge, they can shape the work environment to be conducive to positive mental health and wellbeing.

These are all things that can be achieved through proper training, but as our survey results show, many businesses are failing to adequately educate their line managers. Only 31% of respondents say they feel they have been sufficiently trained to recognise the signs of poor mental health in their direct reports. More than half (57%) say their organisation offers no mental health and wellbeing training and/or support for managerial staff. Those that do have >
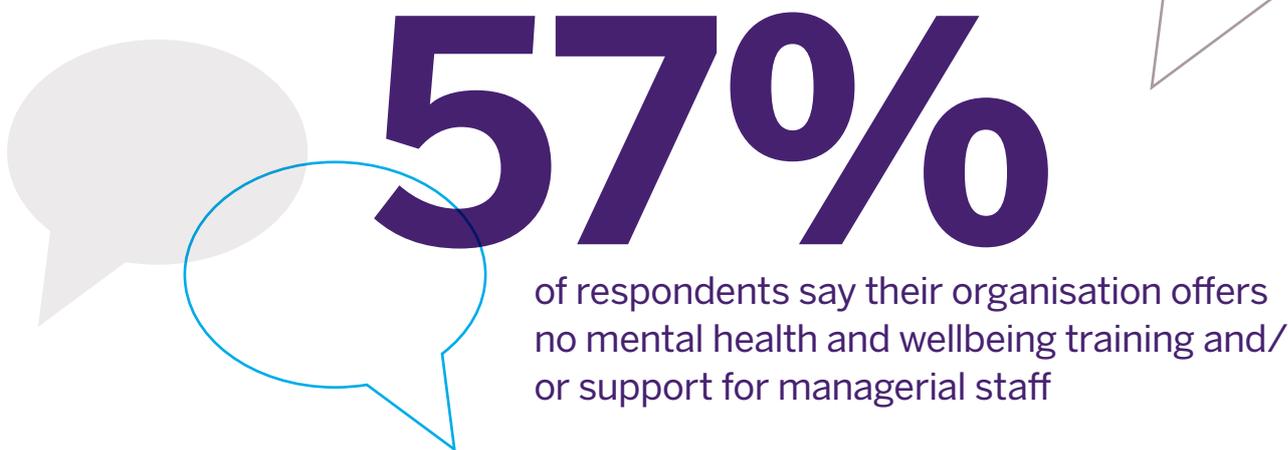
57%

of respondents say their organisation offers no mental health and wellbeing training and/or support for managerial staff

Management Today

iosh

training and support in place within their organisation report in most cases it is optional (79%) rather than mandatory (22%).

Taking into account that businesses have both a legal and moral duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees, training senior staff to deal with mental health issues should be a top priority. Employers are already required by law to provide proportionate advice or training on health and safety, and IOSH believes it is now a matter of time before regulators sharpen their focus on mental health. Line managers can be a key asset in creating healthier, happier and more productive workforces and helping their employers comply with the law, providing they are equipped with the relevant skills.

79%

of respondents report that in most cases, training and support within their organisation is optional

Management Today

iosh

KEY FINDING
A reactive approach

Our results indicate businesses are not being proactive enough when it comes to tackling poor mental health in the workplace. Less than half of managers in both sample groups (45% of line managers with direct reports and 49% of managers without) say their organisation is proactive in support of the mental health of its employees. When questioned on the types of services in place within their organisation to support staff, reactive measures such as counselling and Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) featured highly, with fewer participants referring to proactive measures such as stress risk assessments and mental resilience techniques.

While counselling and MHFA can offer a great deal to someone experiencing mental health problems, what they do not address is the need to create a culture which prevents physical or mental ill health from occurring in the first place. IOSH believes they should form part of a more comprehensive, prevention-first programme that empowers line managers to create the types of working environment that promote positive mental health and wellbeing. >

<50%

of line managers say their organisation is proactive in support of the mental health of its employees

Management Today

iosh

As with many workplace problems, a proactive approach is far more effective, and prevention is always better than cure. According to IOSH, all mental illness caused by work is avoidable and unnecessary.

Adopting a proactive approach also makes good business sense. Creating an environment where positive wellbeing is actively encouraged and behaviours and policies that inhibit positive mental health called out as unacceptable reduces the potential costs of mental-health-related sickness, absence and presenteeism – when staff turn up to work but are unproductive when they get there.

"Actively encouraging positive wellbeing reduces potential costs of mental-health-related sickness"

Management Today

KEY FINDING
Still a taboo

Much has been done to improve the stigma of mental health in the workplace in recent years. Many UK companies have taken positive steps to providing caring workplaces and changing negative attitudes and behaviours. However, our results show the pace of change is too slow. A staggering 80% of respondents say they would be reluctant to discuss their mental health with their line manager for fear of being seen as incapable in their role. A further 30% express concern it would lead to them being treated differently and receiving special treatment. One participant comments: "I have been diagnosed with anxiety and depression but never admitted to it at work for fear of being stigmatised."

Equally, managers can be reluctant to bring up the subject, often for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing – 33% of line managers in our survey say they 'rarely' (22%) or even 'never' (11%) discuss mental health and wellbeing with their direct reports, while 48% say they discuss the issue only 'occasionally'. In fact, our results highlight that more employees would feel comfortable discussing their own mental health with their colleagues (25%), a confidential support service (25%), or a independent service outside of work (24%), than with their line manager (18%). >

80%

of respondents say they would be reluctant to discuss their mental health with their line manager for fear of being seen as incapable in their role

Management Today

iosh

It is clear much more work still needs to be done on creating the kinds of workplace environments and company cultures where employees are able to divulge any issues they might have without fear of harming their career prospects or being stigmatised. With the right knowledge in how to deal with these types of scenarios, line managers can confidently address issues head on and have conversations with their staff to help them deal with their difficulties. Staying silent and doing nothing only makes things worse.

25%

of employees would feel more comfortable discussing their own mental health with their colleagues than with their line manager

Management Today

CONCLUSION

The results from our survey show line managers have a fundamental role to play in the promotion of positive mental health in the workplace. The positive impact they can have on the wellbeing of their direct reports is huge, therefore it is vital they receive the best possible support from their organisations to empower them to champion positive mental health within the workplace.

Our findings evidence that much more work needs to be done from the top. Organisations need to take a more proactive approach to building and maintaining a positive, supportive workplace culture – early action can make a vast amount of difference in helping avert any issues or nip them in the bud before they escalate. Businesses also need to work hard to break down the taboos surrounding mental health and create more open lines of communication. They need to support their managers to fulfil their role by equipping them with the skills and knowledge to promote positive mental health, but without placing unrealistic expectations on them. In return, they will reap the rewards of happier, healthier, more engaged and productive employees.

"Businesses need to work hard to break down taboos surrounding mental health and create more open lines of communication"

Management Today

iosh

CASE STUDY ONE
Selwood Housing Group

In August 2017, Selwood Housing had a dilemma: it was experiencing steadily rising levels of staff absence, with 154 days of work being lost across the company because of work-related and personal-related stress throughout the month. This motivated the company to review what was in place to support colleagues and identify how this could be improved.

It gathered feedback directly from the workforce through a pulse survey, which it then used to put together a plan highlighting the issues and suggesting ways in which they could be addressed. To better understand why staff were taking stress-related absences, the company spoke to them directly, learning about their own experiences to better support their requirements.

It found the best approach was to weave mental health awareness into the fabric of the organisation and its frameworks and incorporate stress management into its HR strategy. In a short period of time, it successfully managed to break down some of the barriers surrounding talking about and managing mental health, creating a more open work culture with a focus on wellbeing. "Two years ago, mental health and issues which can lead to or are impacted by poor mental health weren't really talked about," explains Fee Nunn, group head of health, safety and facilities at Selwood Housing. "Now, this isn't the case in our organisation. Mental health and stress are far more openly discussed and rather than being perceived as a sign of weakness, they are seen as part of everyday life." >

Management Today

iosh

After rolling out the new strategy, Selwood Housing recorded a 95% reduction in work-related stress-related absences and a 73% reduction in personal stress-related absences, over a one-year period. By August 2018, the company had successfully reduced cases of stress-related absence to 26 days, with only five people affected across the organisation.

The company now has several initiatives in place to promote positive mental health and wellbeing. Staff can sign up to work-related coaching and mindfulness exercises. They are encouraged to keep stress diaries to highlight the 'triggers' of stress and how they can be avoided.

Surveys, workshops and forums keep colleagues informed and up to date and help to create a culture of openness and transparency about mental health. Complementary to this is a three-tier system of counselling involving one-on-one counselling, ad hoc trauma support and mandatory quarterly support for roles identified as 'high risk' – including neighbourhood managers who may be exposed to challenging situations.

 "Creating a more open, inclusive and nurturing workplace is a relatively small investment for the potential benefits. There are fewer absences recorded and staff feel valued. You can really see the difference the past year has made in how our staff communicate and the increase to morale is noticeable," adds Nunn.

Management Today

iosh

CASE STUDY TWO
Bridges Electrical Engineers

For Bridges Electrical Engineers, making sure its employees are trained to safeguard their own and each other's physical and mental health became a critical part of their business planning. The company, which carries out design, manufacture and installation of mechanical and electrical equipment predominantly in the UK water industry, has won awards for how it manages its health, safety and wellbeing. Its website proudly presents data on health and safety audits 'carried out in order to ensure compliance of our sites with the highest industry and professional standards'. And for Bridges, mental health and wellbeing are as important as physical.

The construction industry is arguably one of the most dangerous industries to work in. Therefore it's important, says the Bath-based firm, that workers are highly trained and have enough information and instruction to enable them to maintain their mental health and wellbeing. "Often our people are faced with challenging construction programmes and working in demanding environments all whilst lodging away from home – so it is very important to maintain good physical and mental health," says Steve Spencer, HSEQ director at Bridges. >

"It's important that workers have enough information to enable them to maintain their wellbeing"

Management Today

iosh

The company recognised the importance of focusing on the health side of 'health and safety' as much as the safety side and, in 2018, this motivated it to enrol staff on IOSH's Managing Occupational Health and Wellbeing course. The content of the course helped Bridges staff understand how best to support individuals with mental health problems and improve mental wellbeing across an organisation, as part of a comprehensive health and safety programme that included preventative as well as remedial measures.

By undertaking further occupational health and wellbeing training, Bridges' HSEQ and HR teams were able to provide much needed additional information and support to their valued workforce. "By having better-trained safety and people teams, it has allowed us to review and improve our health and wellbeing management strategy and recognise early on where there may be a problem developing," says Spencer. "In doing this, we are able to provide early intervention both via trained individuals within the business and also with support from our external employee assistance programme (EAP) partner," he adds.

This focus on the long-term health and wellbeing of workers is applauded by leaders in health and safety such as IOSH, because it is advocating a prevention-first programme that empowers line managers to create healthy working environments, which encourage positive discussions around mental health and wellbeing. Getting a modern company culture right, says IOSH, can help in the retention of workers and enhances the image of a business as a caring employer. For Bridges and its employees, this approach has been both beneficial and successful.

Management Today
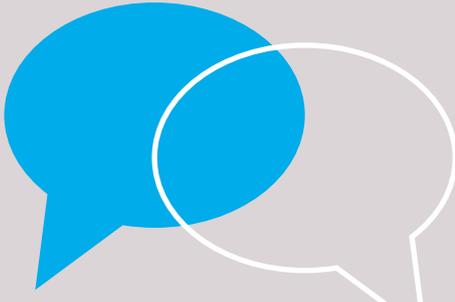
About IOSH

IOSH is not only the world's leading professional body for people responsible for safety and health in the workplace, it is also the only chartered body for health and safety professionals. It acts as a champion, supporter, adviser, advocate and trainer for people working in organisations of all sizes.

Get in touch

Call us: 0116 257 3100
or visit: www.iosh.com

Management Today

iosh