

The challenge of change

AC Accredited Coach and Coach Supervisor Fiona Adamson considers the value of well functioning, resilient leadership in order to guide staff through tough times...

According to the Business Action on Health Campaign by Business in the Community (BITC), the number of FTSE100 companies who are actively monitoring and reporting the progress on health and wellbeing initiatives has risen significantly, with further research indicating that the introduction of a multi-component health promotion programme can result in a 10.4% improvement in work performance and an annual return on investment of £6.19 for every £1 spent.¹

The business community can hardly continue to ignore the ROI argument for investing in the wellbeing of its staff. How does the public sector fare in comparison? We are now in yet another period in history that brings cuts in funding so severe that there is a climate of fear while staff wait to see who will survive in post.

Loss and change are inevitable in the ebbs and flows of our lives, both at work and at home. Change can be sought and managed in many areas of life. Change in the public sector at this time means that many people at all levels in organisations face a challenge. Meeting this challenge asks for all to draw upon their capacity for resilience. For some the challenge will be met with excitement, for others anything from dread, to anxiety, or breakdown.

Leaders at all levels need to build their own confidence and resilience before they can support, mentor and guide staff to weather the storms of change that are blowing through the whole of the public sector.

Some will thrive on it and rise well to the opportunity for new tasks. Others will struggle and in more extreme situations become unable to function. How they manage their stress response is crucial to negotiating change successfully.

An adaptive response to stress is a defining characteristic of resilience. Resilience can be learned. It is the capacity to meet the inevitable ebbs and flows of life without breaking down – or as someone once said, to bounce rather than break.

The firmly rooted tree will be blown about in strong winds but with a flexible trunk that is held fast into the earth, it will remain upright. In order to be firmly rooted, people can learn to respond rather than react to challenge, to develop resilience.

A reactive response is one in which the change is seen as a threat to our very survival, and the threat will evoke one

of the following: flight, fight or freeze. Each of these responses is a sign that people are unable to handle the change and need this to be acknowledged before they can learn to manage their stress, and find their bounce. Without acknowledgment, some people either break down or become aggressive and difficult to manage. Performance levels decrease, sickness rates go up, and an atmosphere of fear of conflict can disable normally competent managers and their teams.

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On the other hand, responding to change with self-awareness and stress management skills, in particular, allows the process to be managed effectively, promotes and sustains energy for new tasks and roles, and above all improves mental and physical health.

Investing in a wellness programme that includes teaching simple-to-learn tools and techniques that build resilience brings many dividends. The quality of effective leadership at all levels in organisations can be enhanced and sustained by such programmes. Once leaders develop their own resilience capacities, they in turn can support their staff through many of the more challenging aspects of the change process.

Well functioning, resilient people are a most precious resource in all sectors, and right now, they are surely needed in the public sector.

¹ Leggy Webb: www.workingforhealth.gov.uk



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