The challenge of stress in turbulent times

The fallout of the economic crisis is being felt in the workplace. But how should individuals and organisations respond? **Ashley Weinberg** and **Cary Cooper** report

'Change may well be inevitable, but a failure to communicate and manage it, is not'

By now the causes of where we are, economically speaking, are fairly well known. Somewhere between the 'death of capitalism' and the 'springing to life' of new economic opportunity feels pretty wide-ranging, but it also provides the motivation for an array of human emotions. It also means we are conscious there is no 'quick fix' and that whether or not we believe political messages – such as, 'We are all in this together' – it is widely assumed that the world of work is an uncertain place for many.

Widespread unemployment, failing enterprises and limited market confidence have been fuelled by fears about insurmountable debt, cuts to public services and even regular organisational scandals. On our emotional balance sheet, determination, resilience, a sense of perspective and 'bounce-backability' all mean that 'we do not go empty-handed into the darker hours'[1]. Yet individuals, organisations and nations are facing an uphill struggle to come to terms with what has gone wrong and the consequences for each.

This article examines the nature of the challenges that turbulent times have promoted and what individuals and organisations may hold in their emotional armouries to help tackle them.

A new 'psychological contract'
One seed for unhappiness in the current climate is our perception of the 'psychological contract'. This describes an unwritten set of expectations existing between the individual and the employer[2] and provides a powerful medium for our understanding of both potential and threat at work, as well as shaping outcomes ranging from contentment and engagement on the one hand, to dissatisfaction and poorer psychological health on the other. The latter often accompany job uncertainty, cutbacks, experiences of injustice and deteriorating relationships in the workplace. 'Unfortunately the mismatch in expectations and what is on offer has led to a grim battle for personal economic survival for increasing numbers of employed and unemployed people…This is a psychological contract which we never signed, but instead have to get used to: one we have shaped and most likely shared with family, friends, colleagues, neighbours and even internet acquaintances[1].'

One potential strategy for regaining some sense of control is to renegotiate the psychological contract. For example, the idea of keeping one's job may replace the goal of career promotion within six to 12 months – pragmatic although not necessarily exciting. This version of stoicism, with its inbuilt safeguard against disillusionment, can be

described as a modern 'psychological Plan B'[1] and in light of this, perhaps the rise of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is not surprising. However, it should not mean we are too willing to compromise on all fronts, as abuses of 'the right to…favourable conditions of work'[3] should not go unnoticed or unchallenged.

The cost of presenteeism
The symptoms of strain are likely to be more pronounced in challenging times and witnessed at both organisational and individual levels. As well as the tendency for employees to work while ill, the resulting 'impaired work efficiency'[4] is manifest as presenteeism. It is estimated that the costs of presenteeism are greater than those caused by absenteeism[5] and can involve errors, miscommunications and poorer quality of work. Even before the economic crash of 2007-8, it was reported that 40 per cent of all sickness absence is attributable to psychological health problems, at a yearly cost to the UK of £8.4bn[6], with presenteeism estimated at costing £15.1bn annually[6].

Choosing to focus on lost working hours, rather than days taken as sick leave, a large US study has also found that employees suffering psychological strain will actually tend to make up for any time lost to protect their job[7]. However, where this serves to further prolong working hours it has the potential to make matters worse for those employees. Staff turnover due to mental ill health at work represents a further source of an organisation's costs due to poor employee mental health[5]. Cost estimates for organisations employing 1,000 staff suggest that £835,000 per year may be lost due to employees suffering with poor psychological health[5]. Taking these figures into account, the business case for public and private enterprises to ensure they maintain their duty of care and address the issues raised, could not be more convincing.

The impact of job insecurity
The tandem demands of organisational survival and maintaining trust in a workforce exposed to threat are thrown into stark relief by the finding that, among employees who kept their jobs following downsizing in the Finnish public sector, deaths due to coronary heart disease increased fivefold in the following four years[8]. Other studies of restructuring in organisations have identified mixed emotions, as initial relief at staying in work is replaced by feeling 'let down, angry, uncertain about the future and a distinct lack of control'[9]. It has been suggested that from a psychological standpoint, the news of redundancy and resulting unemployment provide clarity of outcome which

is lacking in a situation characterised by job insecurity. Clearly, neither situation is desirable, but after six months, those losing jobs have had opportunities to adapt and develop coping strategies[10]. A Europe-wide study of 23,245 workers found ill health almost doubled where threats to jobs existed[11].

Such findings highlight the importance for organisations of taking steps to communicate carefully and effectively with employees during periods of unsettling change. Organisations can help to renegotiate that psychological contract, paying attention to the issue of fairness so that what individuals perceive as economically dire, is not also clouded with injustice. Evidence is also mixed about the impact on wellbeing of being exposed to repeated reorganisation at work, which challenges the idea that continued exposure to change confers some form of inoculative effect. If we take notice of this, there is no need to replicate the mistakes of 20 years ago, when it was asserted that business leaders, 'have shattered the old psychological contract and failed to negotiate a new one'[12]. Change may well be inevitable, but a failure to communicate and manage it, is not.

Potential for destructive behaviours
In considering the balance of emotions at work and the challenges to the psychological contract, it is important to recognise the expression of extreme behaviours too. Alarmingly, there are not only increased risks to employee safety and wellbeing during times of organisational downsizing, but there is also a greater prevalence of bullying and violence at work[13]. At the non-violent end of this continuum, this may manifest as micromanaging or undermining individuals, withholding important information and undue consultation over change[14]. As part of a way of 'getting even' with one's employer[12], employees may well be tempted to indulge in their own destructive behaviours towards the organisation or simply withdraw behaviours which would otherwise contribute to desirable work outcomes[15]. Under almost 'warlike' working conditions, casualties are inevitably taken by both individuals and organisations, amid a culture of blame, rising numbers of complaints, and accidents.

Having a survival plan
So which steps would help form a workable survival plan? For the individual it is clear that job insecurity confounds a challenging situation in a number of ways. One reason for this is that organisations in uncertain times naturally

struggle to give guarantees about the future and in turn this can undermine beliefs that we are 'worth the job' and 'doing things well under difficult circumstances'.

Recognise your competence
It is important for self-esteem and for maintaining wellbeing that employees recognise their competence at work, even if control is in relatively short supply. In carrying out a brief audit of what we can and are able to do, we not only make explicit those 'taken for granted' skills, but also prepare the ground for making our own case to new potential employers. Without taking care to recognise our own worth, it is not uncommon for candidates to fail to mention the value of what they did for their previous organisation, which clearly has the potential to be useful to a new employer[16]. This sense of 'commitment' to our own value is just one part of the hardiness concept[17], which underpins what is commonly conceptualised as resilience.

Developing resilience
Resilience provides us with a psychological buffer against the challenges of life, whether inside or out of work. It is not surprising that perceptions of 'control' form an important pillar of resilience too and there are many favourable findings for the positive impact of an internal locus of control – where we see a key role for ourselves in determining events rather than events dictating to us[18]. In turbulent times, it is important to wrest back what autonomy we can. One aspect of this takes the form of renegotiating the psychological contract at work as discussed earlier, while we might also change our perspective on how integral a current employer is to our future happiness after all.

Learning optimism
Another component of this approach to resilience is a sense of 'challenge', where change is viewed as something positive and a route towards fulfilling our potential. In difficult times this may seem a step too far, but by attempting an objective evaluation of the possible advantages as well as disadvantages of a given situation, we create opportunities to feel the positive, as well as the negative emotions which accompany such assessments. Developing or maintaining a positive view can be hard, particularly if those around us are expressing negativity. After all, 'emotions can be caught by others'[19], but the importance of optimism as a component of an effective emotional coping strategy is considerable[20].

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'Where organisations engage their employees at a psychological level, they are rewarded by better attendance, performance and commitment'

What happens when the therapist identifies with the client's adversity? **Mandy Rutter**, who led a conference workshop, reports on the research

Sharing the pain

An organisational response

Organisations can play a significant role in helping to generate a positive emotional climate. The World Health Organisation emphasises the potential for employers to foster a positive culture and the annual surveys which determine the 'Best Companies to Work For' illustrate that employees value a leader who 'runs the organisation on sound moral principles'[21]. The potential benefits for the performance of a business are underlined by the outstanding financial returns of those companies viewed as the best to work for[4], with a positive relationship found between the satisfaction of employees and market share value[22]. Where organisations engage their employees at a psychological level, they are rewarded by better attendance, performance and commitment[23]. Viewed in this light, steps which promote employee wellbeing can be helpful in securing the future of any organisation.

Conclusion

Promoting mental wellbeing at work should be part of any strategy for organisational survival, underpinned by effective and well considered communications with employees in times of change. Demonstrating care for employees through valuing their work and by offering flexible working conditions need not be a costly enterprise. Supportive leadership styles and management practices often form the basis for success in this regard[5]. A survival strategy which integrates positive social support in its many forms not only promotes the idea, 'We are in this together', but also that 'We can get out of this together, too'.

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