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How to create a resilient workforce

Christine Harrington

Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to help HR professionals to create a resilience workforce and increase productivity.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Viewpoint article.*

Findings – *While becoming more resilient is a personal journey and the individual is responsible for focussing on their thoughts and feelings and examining their actions and responses during stressful periods, employers and HR professionals can also support the individual at an organisational level to help them become happier and perform better.*

Originality/value – *With over 40 years' experience, Cardinal Clinic is dedicated to helping people struggling with mental health issues by providing treatment plans tailored to each patient's needs to help them on their road to recovery. Cardinal Corporate was launched to help businesses support staff members dealing with mental health issues and implement strategies to ensure the overall well-being of their teams.*

Keywords *Change management, Employee engagement, Resilience, Mental health, Wellness, Employee performance*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

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The Benefits and Trends Survey 2018 from AON showed a sharp increase in the number of employers reporting employee stress and mental health-related illnesses – from 55 per cent in 2017 to 68 per cent in 2018. With mental health problems in the UK workforce costing employers almost £35bn past year, it is vital that HR and employers take steps to build an emotionally resilient workforce boosting overall mental well-being.

Resilience has been a buzzword in the workplace for some time, but what does it actually mean, and how can it help businesses and HR professionals to boost employee productivity and happiness? Resilience has been defined as "the personal process of actively and creatively developing survival capacities, learning to repair from harm and being strengthened by facing the adversities of life". The term "bouncing back" is used to describe resilience, but it belies the struggles that an individual has to make to emerge stronger from a stressful situation and the growth that is part of resilience. We need to remember that resilience is not just about personal strength, it is also about having the ability to adapt.

A great way to visualise resilience is to think about the difference between an oak and a palm tree. They are both strong and deeply rooted; however, an oak tree is inflexible, while a palm tree is flexible, adapting to its circumstances meaning that it is more likely to survive in adverse conditions in its environment.

While becoming more resilient is a personal journey and the individual is responsible for focusing on their thoughts and feelings and examining their actions and responses during stressful periods, employers and HR professionals can also support the individual at an organisational level to help them become happier and perform better. To be able to support employees, HR and employers first need to understand the different factors that can cause

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worry and stress among staff. These factors can include both personal and organisational issues. For example, an employee going through a tough time at home is less likely to be focussed on the task at hand at work. At the same time, organisational change can also cause employees stress if it impacts on their role or threatens their job security.

HR professionals need to implement processes as part of the HR strategy which improves employees' skills and behaviours which relate to mindset, workplace environment, group dynamics and creativity. This involves managing the transition from struggle to release, thus allowing individuals to perform at their best and support their recovery following any adverse conditions. This will lead to benefits including fewer absences from work, increased motivation, greater ability to tolerate pressure, more confidence, less use of unhelpful coping habits and increased engagement to name just a few.

So what steps can organisations take to foster resilience among employees?

In terms of employee support, many organisations offer employees the opportunity to give feedback and raise concerns whether that is through regular review meetings, anonymous employee feedback forms or unofficial chats. When it comes to corporate wellness, however, many organisations tend to focus solely on diet and exercise, but it is important to intentionally address broader health issues and have a better understanding of employees' thoughts and emotions. The first thing HR and managers need to understand is that the human thinking system is uncontrollable and judgemental, and we cannot turn it off; hence, it is not easy for employees to think differently or avoid negative thoughts while at work. The human mind is amazingly powerful; we think at about 250 words per minute. Our mind can travel to the past, the future and to places that we could never go ourselves, and we can form mental representations of things we have never seen. The problem is that where there is power there are also potential problems. For example, if a non-resilient employee is running behind with a project, they could start catastrophising meaning that their negative thoughts will start snowballing: they may think that they will get fired because of not completing a task in time, and they will probably never get another job because they will get a bad reference from their current employer.

To change these negative thought patterns, organisations need to understand how they are developed and the thinking bias they are subjected to, e.g. catastrophising, filtering out positives and making assumptions by "mind-reading" others. To build a programme of resilience training within a workplace, employers need to pay attention to the organisational culture in general and how it impinges on an individual's ability to be psychologically strong and flexible. Coping is part of resilience, but if the environment restricts the mechanisms that allow for coping then the individual will become increasingly frustrated. This is a call for organisations to think strategically and turn this into an opportunity to review their overall culture to create a feeling of openness. This will encourage employees to voice their thoughts and will make them feel more comfortable to be honest about revealing any negative thoughts to their managers.

The key to building a culture of resilience is to build it at senior management level. Starting from the top means the resilient attitude can filter down as senior leaders and HR managers will be motivated to extend resilience to their teams, they will also have a deep

understanding of what it is all about and how it can be developed. Organisations need to design high-impact, resilience-focused training sessions including seminars and workshops that will fit in with the busy schedules of the company's top leaders. During these sessions, leaders should share personal experiences about past challenges, and how they demonstrated or failed to demonstrate resilience. This will help them relate to their teams and understand that they might be experiencing similar situations. These are just first steps; leaders need to realise that they can encourage resilience by not only cascading what they learned among their workforce but also by creating accountability partners, facilitating discussions, following up and measuring their impact.

Following training at the top levels of the organisation, leaders need to work closely with the HR team to promote a healthy psychological environment and make the workplace a pleasant and happy environment for everyone even through challenging times. In the past, employees used to be taught to check their feelings at the door to focus on their work. Being able to compartmentalise their personal and professional selves was considered a strength but often resulted in stressed members of staff and burnout. It is impossible to leave our emotions and personalities at home, so by promoting an open and trusting management style and atmosphere where employees feel safe to express their feelings, HR and managers can create teams that are more productive, satisfied and high-performing, and it can also help reduce absenteeism. One simple way to create that shift is to implement regular team meetings, and every time a working group or division comes together, the meeting leader should encourage attendees to share their thoughts and feelings relating to simple questions regarding ongoing projects and lessons learnt. They should encourage employees to rate their attitudes and emotions on a scale as this way they are more likely to be honest about how they feel, both emotionally and physically. This "get it on the table" approach will build and maintain supportive and positive relationships among all members of staff across different levels and will enrich their communication skills.

Another important aspect of building a resilient workforce is to ensure that jobs are varied and interesting, and there is a balance between psychologically nourishing tasks and psychologically depleting. Every job includes tasks which may not be stimulating or interesting, and it is important not to let these affect staff negatively. It is important that they understand that even though sometimes they cannot change the task at hand, they can change how they respond to it and how it affects them. Employers need to help employees set goals that can be measured and are realistic and help them identify how all tasks can help further their goals. This way, employees are more likely to adopt a positive mindset and become more motivated to complete their work.

As part of setting goals and completing tasks, HR and management also need to establish a reward system. The need to feel valued is one of the most intrinsic needs; however, it is often one of the least acknowledged issues in organisations, so it is vital to reward good work. This can be done through an official reward system with perks or appraisals or by regularly letting the employees know that their work is valued and has a positive impact on the company. Empowerment is key to a resilient organisational culture and it can come in many forms, from allowing autonomy and letting individuals do their jobs in the way they choose to and allowing them to take regular breaks. Some companies encourage

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employees to combine business and pleasure by engaging in "walking meetings" which can be a great way to foster social interactions among colleagues. The main thing for HR and management is to empower employees to manage their work and their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being by offering a flexible working environment.

In some cases, organisations could consider providing specialist support to help staff maintain good physical and mental health. Sometimes people require help with physical or mental health issues and may need to be referred on for more support. Creating partnerships with external organisations which specialise in those areas can help employees develop the skills they need to become resilient and resolve any underlying issues. This may range from training workshops to getting individual psychological sessions.

Today's business world is associated with rapid change, an influx of new technologies and a tough economy. To counter this, organisations need leaders and employees who are agile, adaptable and flexible. HR and managers can help by creating resilient organisational cultures, which move away from squeezing the most productivity from employees and towards enabling employees to take care of their physical, mental and emotional needs by giving them the confidence and skills they need to build resilience.

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