Stressed at work? Maybe you're lacking control

by David Donaldson   03.07.2017

Being top dog isn't as bad as many believe — it's actually those at the bottom of the pyramid who experience the most stress. Thankfully there are steps organisations can take to make working life more bearable.

In popular culture it's the big boss who is always under pressure.

After all, as you move up the hierarchy, you're given ever-greater responsibility and have less time. More things can go wrong.

But the opposite appears to be true. Leaders typically have lower levels of stress than non-leaders, according to a 2012 study measuring levels of anxiety and cortisol, a stress hormone.

The research was undertaken mostly with people attending executive courses at the Harvard Kennedy School, which typically attracts mid- to senior-ranking American public servants and military leaders — the cohort being notable in itself, given how hard it normally is to convince such senior people to participate in research.

"The conventional wisdom is it is very stressful to be the top dog, the CEO or the military general. There are an increasing number of popular press books stemming from the idea that the top dog needs help managing stress," says lead researcher and Harvard Professor of Public Policy and Management Jennifer Lerner.

"Our results indicate that the top dog has less stress as measured by baseline cortisol. That is quite surprising to some people."

The reason is control. People with a stronger perception of control tend to have lower levels of

stress. This holds true both when comparing leaders with non-leaders and when comparing leaders with differing levels of control, the researchers found.

Looking at the results, they discovered that having a large number of subordinates and possessing substantial authority over those charges conferred increased perceptions of control.

"That these positions elevate one's psychological experience of control is not surprising; they are likely to be marked by prestige as well as objective power and influence," the paper notes.

working out where the problem lies.

"Managers in organisations can begin by assessing the degree of perceived control and decision authority their employees feel," Lerner told *The Mandarin.*

"Then they can design interventions to increase both, even for employees at the lowest level," she says.

She suggests that managers wanting to find out how their staff feel can employ the tool used in the Whitehall study to measure decision authority in their own workplace. Respondents answer on a scale of 1 (often) to 4 (never):

1 Do you have a choice in deciding how you do your job?

2 Do you have a choice in deciding what you do at work?

3 Others take decisions concerning my work.

4 I have a good deal of say in decisions about work.

5 I have a say in my own work speed.

6 My working time can be flexible.

7 I can decide when to take a break.

8 I have a say in choosing with whom I work.

9 I have a great deal of say in planning my work environment.

A higher level of decision authority will tend to give staff a stronger sense of power over their own work, and lead to less pressure. Lerner also suggests adapting this questionnaire to help measure perceived sense of control:

1. I can get him/her/them to listen to what I say.

2. My wishes do not carry much weight.

3. I can get him/her/them to do what I want.

4. Even if I voice them, my views have little sway.

5. I think I have a great deal of power.

6. My ideas and opinions are often ignored.

7. Even when I try, I am not able to get my way.

8. If I want to, I get to make the decisions.

Giving employees control

After diagnosing the problem, organisations can set to work implementing change.

Clearly, minor or superficial tweaks can't eliminate unpredictability or lack of power in the workplace, so how can this be achieved?

WorkCover NSW has a range of resources to help minimise stress in the workplace, including a tip sheet for enhancing employees' sense of control. Ideally, tasks need to be meaningful, varied and allow for an appropriate degree of self direction, says WorkCover.

It recommends the organisation let workers have a say in how their own work is organised, rather than imposing direction. Where possible:

- Allow staff to have input on how tasks are completed, how problems are tackled, and the pace of work.

- Ensure workers have the skills required to achieve most of their goals. Where skills are lacking, discuss opportunities for development.

- Use performance reviews as a positive opportunity for workers to have input into the way they do their work, rather than focusing only on inadequate performance.

- Provide opportunities for job rotation to enable skill development and job variation.

Everyone in the organisation should feel they have input into their work, not just those in senior

positions. Managers can ensure they encourage a participatory approach by holding regular team meetings so staff can contribute to decision making. The organisation should provide training to develop supportive leaders who delegate, encourage participation and welcome new ideas.

Consultation and communication are important elements in improving employees' sense of wellbeing, as communicating clearly with employees about how and why decisions are made helps keep build trust and keep things predictable. Know when it is appropriate to consult with workers — and ensure the outcomes of a consultation process are fed back to them.

WorkCover also notes the impact poor quality monitoring and supervising can have on staff. It suggests organisations:

- Ensure managers are competent supervisors.

- Consult with workers when developing performance monitoring systems.

- Provide a method through which workers can review and contribute to the output of monitoring systems.

- Develop team-based targets which assist in building effective teams and by measuring team performance against the organisational goals.

- When assigning work, negotiate objective and reasonable standards to increase workers' perceptions of ownership and fairness.

- Unless necessary, avoid asking workers to regularly stay after hours without prior consultation.

- If a decision is made to use performance monitoring systems, consult with workers when developing policies on the use of these systems.

And at the individual level, implement solutions to assist individuals to cope or build resilience. This could include corporate induction programs, access to employee assistance programs, as well as training about resilience, health and wellbeing programs and counselling or therapy for people experiencing distress.

So while it's obviously not possible to give everyone a place at the top of the hierarchy, increasing the amount of control each employee experiences within their own remit can help make your workplace a more pleasant and healthy place to be.