

Based on a critical review of theory and research, what advice would you give managers regarding how to reduce employee stress?

Stress is a major issue for modern businesses and managers in the contemporary working environment. Not only do stress related illnesses have a cost for organisations in terms of lost working hours and productivity, but higher levels of stress have also been associated with lower level of satisfaction, poorer quality service delivery, and higher levels of turnover (George and Zakkariya, 2015). This essay will thus look to carry out a critical review of theory and research into the various options and approaches which can be used to manage employee stress and ensure it does not reach an excessive level which could harm organisational performance and outcomes.

One of the main themes in the literature is the important role that an employee's immediate managers, and particularly line managers, can play in the management of stress. According to Donaldson-Feilder et al (2008), as line managers are responsible for organising employees and directly supervising their work, they are ideally positioned to address their psychological needs and manage work related stress. This indicates that line managers need to ensure they have developed and are able to apply the necessary skills to the management of employee stress in order to maintain levels of morale and performance. At the same time, research indicates that senior managers need to focus on empowering line managers and giving them the necessary support and delegated authority to manage stress among their teams, in order to help employees "manage their stress proactively through planning, prioritizing and delegating work" (Moyle, 2006, p. 48). This is an important issue, given recent findings that many line managers are themselves too stressed to help their employees deal with work related stress (Crawford, 2013). This indicates that the management of stress is an issue which requires managerial involvement at all levels, as build ups of excessive stress in any layer of an organisational hierarchy can trigger additional issues and performance problems.

In addition to the direct management of stress, it is also important to recognise the role of leadership styles in creating an organisational environment in which the causes of stress are minimised. As noted by Huczynski and Buchanan (2010), many managers continue to follow traditional supervisory leadership theories, through which they look to encourage and reward good performance and reprimand employees who fail to perform. However, there is a risk of this type of leadership resulting in an overly autocratic approach to the management of employees. A research study by Castledine (2004) showed that this style of leadership is associated with higher levels of stress, leading to a lack of commitment and risk of employee burn-out. This thus indicates one of the primary paradoxes in the management of stress, namely that a degree of stress is required in the form of pressure to perform and penalties for failure if employees are to be motivated to work hard, but above a certain level this stress can become destructive.

As such, one of the core options for managing stress without eliminating it is to use transformational and participative leadership styles which will motivate employees to perform whilst providing them with support and motivation to avoid any issues of excess stress, and preventing a long term accumulation of stress which can cause damage to employee outcomes (Northhouse, 2011).

In addition to the specific style of leadership, it is also important to recognise the role of individual employee factors, both inside and outside the organisation, in influencing levels of stress and the negative impacts which can result. This is particularly important in light of recent developments in the nature of work, including flexible labour markets and the rise in knowledge work. According to Robbins et al (2010), this has resulted in a growth in employee expectations around the rights and the obligations of organisations and employees, and a demand for organisations to also recognise these rights. This can cause conflict between organisational and employee priorities, particularly in the area of work life balance, and the extent to which demands placed on employees by organisations are fair and reasonable (Sturges and Guest, 2004). This is of importance in the context of employee stress, given that research has shown that a positive work life balance is one of the major factors in preventing the build up of stress and helping support healthier lifestyles for employees (Gregory and Milner, 2009). Ensuring a positive work life balance, which does not place excessive demands on employees, is thus also key to managing levels of employee stress.

The role of work life balance in controlling organisational stress is also linked to the general literature around the growing importance of the psychological contract. Evidence from the literature indicates that the formation of a strong psychological contract between an employee and their manager and organisation can help to boost levels of motivation and thus drive higher levels of performance (Watson, 2001). However, the psychological contract is also based on a strong recognition of the role of the organisation in supporting the employee with any specific issues or circumstances, in order to make them feel more valued (Abendroth et al, 2012). A failure to manage the psychological contract can result in perceptions by employees that the organisation and its managers have broken the contract, which can increase levels of stress and the negative impacts of stress on organisational outcome (Houston et al, 2006). This indicates that managers must be attuned to the implied promises in the psychological contracts they have developed with their employees and must honour these promises or risk high levels of employee stress and associated dissatisfaction.

The ability of managers to identify and address these issues is also linked strongly to the level of managerial understanding around stress as an emotional issue. This in turn leads to the argument that managers who are able to deal better with stress and other

emotional issues will be better at controlling them and reducing any associated negative impacts, causing Goleman et al (2002) to argue that emotional intelligence is now a vital competence for modern leaders. This argument is supported by Hughes et al (2005), who use theory to argue that emotional intelligence will help leaders to improve their level of understanding of the emotional behaviours and needs of employees, and thus allow them to respond to these issues in a supportive manner, building a more genuine relationship. This will thus improve the ability of managers to understand and address the causes of stress, helping to pre-empt the emergence of stress in the workplace. Managers can thus look to develop their emotional intelligence in order to improve their management of stress.

Unfortunately, whilst emotional intelligence is one of the areas of management competence which is seen as amongst the most prominent in the management of stress, it is also one of the most controversial. On the one hand, Sadri (2012, p. 535) states that "the components of emotional intelligence integrate with contemporary leadership development practices", which supports the argument that emotional intelligence is key to the development of effective leadership which can help manage stress. However, research and arguments by both Antonakis et al (2009) and Lindebaum (2009) indicate that whilst there are strong theoretical arguments for emotional intelligence, there is very limited statistical evidence to support these arguments. In particular, Lindebaum (2009) argues that the value of emotional intelligence is generally supported through the use of hyperbolic claims around the value of this competence in the management of stress and achievement of positive employee outcomes, however the empirical support for these arguments is very limited. As such, whilst the management of emotional issues and their potential negative impacts is widely supported in the literature as a method of managing employee stress, the existence of a single competence or capability which can ensure effective management of these complex issues is less clear.

In conclusion, the literature indicates that there are a number of methods, techniques and approaches which can be used to ensure the effective management of stress. These include ensuring that line managers are empowered and trained in dealing with stress and are themselves protected from stress, and also ensuring that leadership styles are participative and transformational to ensure pressure to perform does not turn into high levels of stress. In addition to this, the organisation and its managers must support positive individual level factors such as work life balance and a psychological contract which establishes clear expectations and meets said expectations. There is also a strong argument that leaders and managers need to develop higher levels of emotional intelligence if they are to understand employee needs and emotional requirements and thus develop appropriate responses to address these needs and the stress they may cause. However, this argument is not well supported in the empirical literature, which

indicates that the development of emotional intelligence may not be possible or feasible. Instead managers should look to respond to each situation individually and manage the stress which can result in order to keep overall levels of stress in their organisation at an acceptable level.