



MANAGING MENTAL HEALTH: THE WEAKEST LINK

I was recently at a client's premises to help them with the implementation of their wellbeing strategy and I got talking to Laura, one of the managers. She told me a story about a staff member called Phil, that she inherited from another manager. Phil had a mental health condition, which was known to the previous manager. The previous manager had responded by allowing Phil to come into work at his discretion and he had not been concerned about whether Phil met his work objectives. If this had been a very short-term response to retain Phil in the workplace, as opposed to him going off sick, it may have worked. Unfortunately, this situation continued for 18 months so that when Laura took over as manager, she was the first manager to try and address this situation effectively.

The situation was not helped by the fact that Phil was a difficult personality who constantly accused colleagues of being negative towards him. This meant that his colleagues were frightened of being with him, in case he accused them of discriminating against him in some way. Because the situation had not been effectively addressed at the outset, Phil had established a pattern of doing what he wanted and not being challenged, so it created a lot of pressure for him when Laura tried to put a strategy in place to support him in delivering the work that he was contracted to deliver. Equally, it placed a lot of pressure on Laura because Phil did not want to comply with Laura's attempts to get him back to a normal working pattern. Sadly, this story did not have a happy ending as Phil eventually left the organisation and Laura felt let down by the previous manager and her organisation. I would like to point out that this client was usually very good at dealing with wellbeing issues and very supportive to staff. Equally, they are an organisation with a small HR Department, who consequently rely heavily on their managers to manage staff issues well, however, it only takes one weak link to break a chain.

Have you experienced any similar situations in your organisation?

The Issues

- The first line manager did not provide adequate support to protect both Phil and the organisation
- For eighteen months, Phil was not encouraged to work towards full attendance and normal work tasks/deadlines
- The first line manager allowed the situation to drift on with no recovery plan to support Phil
- The organisation allowed Phil's difficult personality to deflect them from dealing with the real issue, his mental health condition
- The situation caused unrest and distress amongst Phil's colleagues

- The situation resulted in additional stress for Laura and eventually for Phil.
- The organisation inadvertently allowed Phil's previous manager to avoid his managerial responsibilities with regard to Phil.
- The organisation lost productivity, not only from Phil but also from colleagues that he raised grievances against, as well as Laura and possibly the previous manager

What Can We Learn From This Story?

- Managers vary in their level of social skills and their ability to have difficult conversations with staff members
- There is still a lot of stigma around mental health and some managers are frightened to address it. Many managers are worried that they will make the situation worse if they try to manage it in any way.
- Not addressing mental health conditions early on, actually makes things more difficult in the long run.
- Staff with 'difficult' personalities make management more of a challenge but it is important to remain focused on performance and what support is needed to enable the staff to manage their work effectively.
- Organisations need to work closely with and support managers who are managing staff with mental health conditions.

Recommendations

- Ensure that your managers are trained and confident in recognising and addressing stress and mental health conditions. Training should concentrate on stress/anxiety/depression (the conditions most likely to be seen in the workplace) and should focus on how to identify and manage them in a work context.
- Mental health conditions, like physical health conditions, respond better to early intervention, so encourage your managers to bite the bullet and hold a supportive conversation to find out what support the staff member needs.
- Encourage your managers to recognise that managing mental health is no different than any other aspect of performance management
- When managers are managing staff members with stress or mental health conditions, it can create more pressure for the manager and impact negatively on their mental health. You will need to make sure that these managers feel that they are supported. If you only have limited HR/OH resources, then encourage managers to buddy up and support each other.
- There are resources and tools available to help managers support and manage staff with mental health conditions. There is not time to mention them here, but do get in touch if your managers need more support to manage mental health conditions in the workplace.

If you know of anyone who would benefit from reading this article, please share it with them.