

## HR must act to challenge attitudes on mental health

Robbie Swales, 01 Aug 2012



### **Do you have policies and processes in place to cope if an employee is diagnosed with anxiety, stress or depression?**

According to the Office for National Statistics, one in four British adults will experience a mental health problem in any one year and statistics this year show that stress and other mental health issues are the leading cause of workplace absence. Yet many HR practitioners remain shockingly ill-prepared to cope with an issue that could potentially affect a quarter of the workforce.

Those who have experienced a mental health difficulty often feel excluded or alienated from everyday activities. Many have to contend with prejudice, ignorance and fear. Some claim that being discriminated against at work, and in social situations, is a bigger burden than the illness itself. The simple truth for organisations is that having policies in place to cope with mental health isn't enough. The real challenges for HR are to change the organisational and individual attitudes and behaviour towards mental health, foster an inclusive environment and provide adequate support to manage the transition back into the workplace.

Reintegrating an individual back into a team is not easy, particularly if their work colleagues haven't been told why the individual has been absent. The onus of responsibility often falls on line managers, who have a duty of care for the well-being of their team members but, at the same time, are judged on results. They may sympathise with the individual and want to help but they also have to consider the needs of others in the team and the impact on performance.

When people have a 'visible' impairment, organisations have to make 'workplace adjustments' to minimise the impact of their disability. This includes making physical adjustments (such as installing ramps or making IT accessible). However, if someone has experienced anxiety, stress or depression, there are unlikely to be specific physical barriers that they'll have to contend with, when they return to work. Instead the 'barriers' may be the prejudicial attitudes of others.

Line managers may need to make non-physical adjustments (such as changing the role or adjusting performance measures) to help those that have experienced mental health difficulties return to work. The implications of these adjustments will need to be explained to the individual's colleagues, therefore line managers must be equipped to deal with the expectations and reactions of the other team members.

All of this creates a significant training need. We've worked with forward-thinking HR practitioners to implement training interventions which challenge attitudes and change behaviour in the workplace, so that people returning to work after mental health problems can make a positive transition back into the organisation. We also work with the wider team to explore what it means to foster an inclusive environment where difference is respected and valued. In seeing scenarios played out, we give individuals a chance to understand their role in supporting the management of mental health issues in the workplace.

For those looking to do something similar, help is at hand from a national campaign, called *Time to Change*, created by the mental health charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness. Since 2009, they've been trying to end the stigma around mental health and the discrimination against people with mental health problems. Recently, they've focused on removing the fear and awkwardness that stops many people talking about mental health. A very positive step forward for HR would be to incorporate their guidelines into a best practice development intervention.

What would happen in your organisation if someone was diagnosed with a mental health problem? If your line managers would say 'put on a brave face' or 'carry on regardless', you need to take action now.

**Robbie Swales is a director of Steps, which has been changing workplace behaviour through drama-based training for 20 years.**