SWP 9/97   BEYOND INDIVIDUAL STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES: TOWARDS AN ORGANISATIONAL SYSTEM APPROACH

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Beyond individual stress management programmes; towards an organisational system approach

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'One of my credit control managers has been causing me great concern. She got completely burnt out and I was really worried that she was about to go over the edge. She had started reacting badly to people and there was an incident when she just exploded at me. And as time went on she was getting worse. If you go back a bit though, she was the second manager I'd appointed to this post. The first was a man. He'd been around in credit control for some time and had a fair amount of experience. Not a stress prone type of person. In fact he had been an RAF fighter pilot. Not only that; he'd been part of a team who sat on top of live nuclear weapons in Germany waiting for an attack signal, so I couldn't have predicted what happened. I came back one day to find he'd had an epileptic fit. It was attributed to job stress.'

Senior Manager.

Over the last decade I have run hundreds of stress management seminars with colleagues, helping managers manage their own stress and to recognise and address stress in their staff (Arroba and James 1991). I have helped to set up counselling schemes for people who need a more in depth approach to cope with stress (Arroba and James 1988). But I believe that these are limited strategies for dealing with occupational stress. The problem, as reported in sickness notes and employee surveys appears to be growing, despite the growth in serious attempts to reduce stress in organisations.

The 1980s approach to stress management concentrated on creating awareness of stress as an important factor in performance output, by way of senior management seminars and stress

management training. The 1990s has extended the field much further with a variety of structured interventions, such as counselling schemes, to help stressed employees. Beyond this point, we must now begin to question the social construction of the phenomena of stress and the assumption that individuals alone have the responsibility to cope. Stress at work needs to be seen in a wider context as a product of social and political processes in society (Newton et al, 1995). In this paper I will focus on the need to recognise that organisational systems can create the medium for stress to emerge.

An alternative to individual stress management

Whilst it is clear that some people have characteristics that enable them to manage stress well, (Kobasa, 1982) and develop better coping skills for appraising and dealing with tough situations (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, Hamilton, 1996), and that many stress reduction and life style programmes are evaluated as beneficial, many of my clients over the years have reported environments which are inherently painful. This may be because they have acquired unmanageable tasks, cultures which assume a 7 day a week commitment to the job, extensive travel, a particularly difficult manager, a roller coaster of new initiatives, constant reorganisation or many other woes that lead to cries such as-- 'it's my boss who should be on this course!' --or-- 'can't you send the Chief Exec for counselling!'

It is easy to argue that each of these issues could be addressed at the personal level; the 'hardy' manager who re-framed the long list of 'top priority' objectives he was faced with as enabling him to choose his own priorities, certainly had a better chance of coping than his colleague who bemoaned the lack of organisational direction and his consequent work overload.

However, any trainer, management development adviser, counsellor or consultant who works over a long period of time in a single organisation or site learns to predict the repeated reports of pressure and stress in any group or consultation she or he undertakes. Patterns may be apparent that are less obvious to those more enmeshed in the organisation.

People work in a context; enhancing coping skills, taking a different attitude to work and changing health-threatening life styles can undoubtedly help many people through difficult times. However, one of the messages of self-help training is that if something doesn't work for you then it's down to you to fix it. This is only one side of the picture. Many people are not in a position to change the system they work in. Their stress is the result of carrying pressure which originates elsewhere in the organisation and which they may be unable to influence or of which they are unaware. The only option they may have is to go, and this withdrawal from the job (absenteeism, sickness or loss of effort) or withdrawal from the organisation (looking for another job or a different type of career) can have a high cost, for the organisation as well as the individual.

Individual stress management through training and counselling is often seen as a solution because it is quick, visible and can be actioned by middle managers. In one public sector organisation the problem was described to me as 'a blame culture, starting at the top, not enough resources and a perception that people are expendable.' So was the proposed stress management training for staff the answer? No, but the top team would not look at any part they had potentially played in organisational stress and would only fund specific training projects with defined outcomes; it seemed better than nothing. At least those who were tasked

with addressing stress could be seen to be active. Although the situation is not always as clear cut as this, the plethora of Employee Assistance Programmes, training events and fitness programmes emerging may turn out to be less effective than expected. What begins with good will can turn to cynicism. This may explain the kind of report seen in a local paper recently; a Local Authority had provided sessions in meditation as a form of stress management for employees. Some of the attendees had complained to the local press, and their comments included gripes such as no coffee and biscuits and hard seats for the sessions. Perhaps these problems were more accessible targets for their anger than the fact that their attendance on a course had not made the *source* of their stress go away. Unless there was an organisational framework for exploring these pressures, they may have felt that the organisation was blaming them not helping them-- despite the good intention of those who had set up the programme.

Jaffe (1995) suggests, that since the very structures, values, cultures and working relationships inherent in an organisation may lead to health problems, many individually oriented programmes have not had their intended impact.

The challenge for future stress management initiatives.

The focus on training and counselling for individuals, without a corresponding exploration of the sources of organisational stress, is at best well meaning, but at worst ineffective. Karasek and Theorell (1990) suggest that their work is currently unusual in taking an environmental perspective on stress. They are concerned that measures aimed at the individual alone, 'person-oriented cures', may lead to victim blaming and a tarnished reputation for attempts to redress job stress. Their work has resulted in an important framework for work reconstruction

to provide more 'active' developmental work roles and less high strain work. They argue that we may have created organisations which are maladjusted to human psychological and physiological functioning. MacLennon (1992) summarises the debate on individual stress management centring on belief, attitude, skill and behaviour change on the one hand and the view that what is necessary is job redesign and other organisational level change for reducing or eliminating the sources of stress at work on the other. She concludes that while not negating the importance of individual approaches, there are many ways in which changing the context of the individual's experience can reduce stress.

The next challenge, for those concerned to address the experience of stress which has its origins in the workplace, is to begin to address the dynamics which create the ground for the individual's experience of stress. This means getting away from the emphasis on the individual and looking further afield in the organisation.

The importance of the bigger picture; the credit control manager's story

If organisational stress is not simply a question of individuals' stress proneness, how can we get to grips with it? The answer lies in looking at the big picture. Getting people to look at the big picture, however, is not so easy. For example, at a seminar I ran for senior managers to address organisational stress a number of concerns arose. While directors now see stress as a real issue, it is still regarded as solely an individual's domain. The relationship between the activities of the top team, the culture of the organisation and stress is hard to grasp. Those tasked with addressing the issue of stress are expected to go away and *do* something and then report back on actions taken, not investigate the top team dynamics or question the practices of the organisation. Dealing with stress is an 'add on', not a part of the whole picture.

The situation described at the beginning is a real one. Both the managers referred to were unlikely victims of stress; both had a great deal of job relevant experience and had a track record of dealing with tough assignments. Using this as an example of an individual experience of stress that needs to be tackled at the organisational level may help to get the message about 'the big picture' across.

Our senior manager goes on to describe what was happening in the organisation at large.

'To understand what was happening you have to back to my arrival; I was first appointed as a consultant . When I went through what we needed to do to get to grips with credit control they didn't want to do it. They said the chairman wouldn't like it. I pointed out that the chairman had appointed me as consultant. I can only assume that they had been told by the auditors to improve but they hadn't really taken it on board.. So they got in a consultant to 'do it' rather than really address the problem. Eventually I was appointed to set up and take charge of four regional credit control offices we set up. But I think the problem goes right back to this .'

The first credit control manager had been tasked with setting up a coherent and systematic strategy and process for dealing with customers' credit. However, it became apparent that the organisation has not taken the 'debt problem' on board. To what could that be attributed? The first place to look is the management board. Members of this group have been with the company for almost all of their careers. The most significant players have come up through the sales route. The organisation is the biggest manufacture in their field and yet a myth exists in the organisation that they are a supplier to craftsmen, the small business who in turn provides a specialist and local service to their customers. There is clearly an attachment to this ideal, despite the fact that 95% of the sales are to large customers who do not fit this

pattern. There is an unspoken commitment to the dwindling craftsmen who make up 5% of the total sales, but 50% of the customer base; even a fantasy that they are the 'real' customers and must be protected. These businesses, however, are the most likely source of bad debts. Yet the creation of a coherent credit control strategy seemed to conflict with this conception of the business.

Traditionally the salesforce have been given a lot of leeway in arranging terms with the customers. If they couldn't pay on the due date the salesman simply extended the credit. Relationships between the salesmen and the customer are considered very important and sales resented the new credit controllers who came between them and their customers. This style of doing business closely reflects the views of the management board. Despite this, some regions were better able to manage the introduction of these new processes. In these regions there was more distance from the main management board, and this had resulted from a regional strength in running the business; the dotted lines to the centre were weaker. In the region in which these two managers operated there was a much closer link to the centre of the business and hence a stronger lead by the sales force. The credit control manager was at loggerheads with the Area Sales Manager and his team. The person in charge of the area sales had a very old-fashioned view of the business. Whilst each credit control manager in turn had been tasked with setting up a policy and system for bad debts. The sales team argued for freedom to do their own negotiations where there were extenuating circumstances. In the perception of the credit control manager 'every account was an exception with extenuating circumstances'. Relationships became strained and the mangers in turn felt that they had insufficient authority and discretion to do their job.

Without this bigger picture, the individual stress burden could not be resolved. The manager who brought this example to me had taken steps to address the system in which the credit control manager operated -though he could only make a change to *his* part of the system because the notion of profitability in relation to the craft business customers is currently undiscussable in the organisation. For example, a director who put forward a plan for big increases in profitability by reducing service to these small firms in his region, was in danger of losing his job. There are extensive tensions in the business between the desire to improve the professionalism of the company's managers and the desire to maintain their traditions. Thus, the manager began to question the assumptions behind the function of credit control in the company. He saw that the company did not have a cash flow problem and changed the concept of the department from tightening credit to focus more on risk management. This means looking ahead to the problems of the customer and taking a more business management approach to help the small business customers to develop their business. They now work more in partnership with the small business rather than as the bit of the business that says 'no'. This improved the relationships with the sales force and with the customers, yet hopefully had a positive impact on credit control in the longer term. Sales and credit control have a much more positive relationship. The manager who works for him is far less stressed; her job is redefined in tune with the image of the organisation held by the management board. (In fact the role was then developed further with another manager and the post of 'commercial development manager' was created to give financial advice etc). Neither of them actually agree with the small customer approach in the company but are working with rather than against the organisation. One downside to this resolution was that this action had a long time lag of two to three months before it began to have an effect; a long time given the manager's distress and the senior manager's desire to intervene successfully.

Neither has it resolved all of the tensions in the organisation; perhaps there are other managers who are experiencing tensions as a result of these differences; nor does it address other underlying issues such as the undiscussability of some thinking in the business, which is creating a variety of frustrations throughout the company. However, it does illustrate how relaxation and attitude training would have been insufficient to help those who are carriers of organisational stress (and in fact this had been attempted without success).

Not only had bad feeling centred on this location but it was beginning to centre on the credit control manager and one particular salesman. Since there was real concern about the situation, the salesman was in danger of becoming disciplined for his behaviour towards the credit control manager. Whilst some of his behaviour was unacceptable, the senior credit control manager was able to point out how it was all part of this bigger picture and that removing this person from the scene would not resolve the problem; another protagonist would simply emerge. This individual was acting out some of the frustrations of the whole sales team with the situation.

One interesting facet of the regional credit office examined here, is that it is physically separated from the other offices and housed in a little building on the periphery of the admin. area; when the relationships were bad, their office became a convenient repository for some of the frustrations experienced elsewhere in the business.

The actions of the senior manager prevented the credit control office from becoming psychologically split off and have resulted in integrating them within the whole system, reducing the stress that was being exhibited by one manager on behalf of the whole system.

As the senior manger said

'these two managers are achievers and that's what I found strange. What was going on can't be them. One person getting stressed, that happens. But when the next one suffers too, that's unacceptable, and you have to find another way of dealing with it.'

What are the lessons for organisations who take the problem of stress seriously?

There are a number of factors to take on board;

- when stress management is only addressed at the individual level and is not tackled at source, anger and cynicism can result

- individuals *can* be helped to cope with stress by training and by counselling schemes but if the origins of the stress lie within the system, these can only act as a 'band aid'.

- as organisations continue to change and introduce new practices, the whole system needs to be explored in order to take steps to reduce pressures which are unnecessary

- whilst managers can do this within their own parts of the organisation, it will be much more effective if an overall perspective of risks and protective factors is taken

- where a problem starts is not necessarily where it is experienced as stress

A strategy for organisational stress needs a comprehensive approach; a conglomeration of training events, EAP schemes and fitness programmes will not pick up assumptions, relationships, cultural attitudes and unhelpful thinking that create stress in the system. Maintaining peoples' capacity to do their jobs well and creating a healthy organisational environment is a matter of individual and organisation together as a whole; the strategy needs to be both /and, not either /or.

How this is tackled can be tailored to the particular organisation context. The key factor is a willingness by the senior managers in an organisation to recognise that stress needs to seen as a wider part of organisation practice. This does not mean that all the pressures that people find difficult to handle could or should be removed. But identifying unnecessary sources of

pressure is possible if there is openness to the possibility that there are other means of achieving ends.

A more important factor is taking on board that where a problem is experienced is not necessarily where it originates. For example, individuals in many parts of an organisation may feel stressed where conflicts in senior management teams are left unaddressed. The resulting divisions and splits in the organisation can result in some staff experiencing opposing forces that give rise to stress. These are not open to a simple role expectations analysis because the origins of the splits may be removed from the person's immediate experience. Again it is the big picture which tells the story.

Getting the big picture is not simply a matter of accumulating and categorising the problems brought up in training or counselling, nor of simply analysing data from attitude surveys, although all of these are useful sources. These and other contributions are best viewed as glimpses of a system in which all the parts interact and influence each other; some parts, like the management team can have a very powerful and noticeable impact on quite distant sub systems, others have a more local influence. Some parts of the system pick up the frequency of vibrations in another part very readily and the resonance is strong. The observer who does not appreciate the importance of taking a systemic perspective can be mislead into thinking that this resonance is actually 'the problem' and sets about helping a unit or person resolve their difficulties internally, without referral to the source. Instead, by standing back a little and letting the whole system enter the frame, the relationships between the parts can emerge. The 'organisation as a system' does not simply mean a checklist of organisational level factors to run down; culture, structure, style, and procedures. It implies the exploration of the

dynamic and changing relationships between these, the assumptions behind their adoption and the ultimate impact they have on people's capacity to do effectively what they are employed to do. This is a complex and mobile set of interactions. To comprehend it requires inquiry as to how people's capacity to do their job can be disrupted, what the ripples of impact of decisions in one field may have on another and how changes to practice can have unintentional knock-on effects. To bring this picture into perspective, a framework which offers guidance on 'where to look', can help.

A Framework for understanding the Dynamics of the Organisational System.

The framework described here draws on a model proposed by James, Jarrett and Lucas (1996) for exploring the psychological dynamics of healthy organisations compared with those which are identified by organisational members as having some dysfunctional aspects requiring change. The notion of health and dysfunction in this particular respect are relative and are based in the organisation's members own perception is that it cannot adequately address its key tasks. It does not describe an evaluative statement of external researchers and consultants. The framework describes those areas on which focused interventions may be fruitful for helping the organisation become better able to learn and make sense of experience and to be able to adapt to and create changing relationships between different parts of the organisation and with the external environment. The key aspect of this framework which makes it appropriate to draw on in the context of stress, is that it emphasises the systemic relationships between the various focus areas and not just a list of factors. It is shown diagrammatically in Figure 1.

The framework draws on a psychodynamic and systemic approach to understanding organisations, see for example, Hirschhorn (1988), Miller (1993), Obholzer and Roberts (1994).

It is posited that a number of areas can experience difficulty and that these can be passed around the system such that the difficulties are experienced in more than one place. The leader, for example, may have personal characteristics which lead him or her to take up their role in a way that people experience as helpful or otherwise. However, the leader's behaviour may be also a product of the expectations that others' have of him or her; people may, for example, (unconsciously) idealise or fear the leader, so that he or she is never challenged or questioned, no matter what feedback is requested, or can never live up to unrealistically high expectations. The leader is also part of the top team and the internal dynamics of the top team will be a significant factor determining what the leader can do. When the unconscious top team dynamics are explored, it may be observed that disruptions to doing the tasks the team has, are rooted in both internal anxieties relating to the group and also in the team's experience elsewhere in the organisation. The tensions, divisions and difficulties that the top team experiences and the tensions, divisions and difficulties experienced elsewhere in the organisation may reflect and mirror each other. The dynamics may reflect the political differences the organisation is managing and which may originate elsewhere in the system or externally. In turn the top team dynamics may be mirrored in other management and task groups throughout the organisation. Individuals who work in these groups bring with them their personal styles and preferences but also their history and experience of the organisation as a whole. Critical events in the organisation's history (recent or distant past) leave an emotional memory on those who were there. Feelings such as triumph or failure, betrayal or

comradeship, are carried forward to the present whenever events which echo these, such as crises of survival or fundamental change, are re-encountered. Those who were not present carry the lessons in the form of myths and stories which constitute the organisation's 'golden years' or the struggle for survival. This history can be written into the fabric of the organisation, too; it is found in the form of the structure and systems. These too influence what the top team looks like and what each member represents in the team. The history will have influenced the current choice of leader. Thus these key factors, leader, top team, sub groups, individual role holders, organisational structures and systems and organisational history all inter-relate and influence each other. They are entwined and to the extent that the assumptions and consequent behaviour of each is appropriate to the task the organisation is doing, there will be function or dysfunction.

The framework has two implications. Firstly, to understand what is 'going wrong' in the organisation, it is important to look at all of these factors as a coherent whole; to look at the impact each has on the organisation beyond the place where concern has arisen. Secondly, intervention may be needed in a different place than where the problem is experienced, but not necessarily at the point of origin. Changing in one place will have a knock on effect in other parts of the system.

The framework in action.

If we return to the case study in this paper and use this model to understand what happened, we can see that the stress of the credit control manager had its origins in the tensions and splits between the members of the management board and in the assumptions of the leader

about the nature of the business as it related to their customers historically. These tensions and divisions were played out in the regions and in particular between the sales staff and those who had to put in systems to make the business more efficient. The split in one region was symbolically underlined by the physical separation of the credit control team. The sales force had quite a different perception of their role in the business than the credit controllers. The sales and credit control staff were mirroring tensions in the centre of the business. The stress of the individual concerned was not likely to be resolved by changing the top team dynamics but could be alleviated by changing the organisation system she managed and by re-defining her role in the overall system.

Many of the interlocking facets of organisational life described in this framework, are known to the organisation's members, but there is no way of speaking about them if the overwhelming emphasis of meetings is deciding 'what action will be taken immediately to resolve the problem'. Raising an issue invites the question 'what do you propose to do about it ?' The approach suggested here invites the question 'what do we think is happening in the system?', first. Instead of rushing into off -the- shelf solutions, thinking about stress by looking at the big picture may mean that alongside actions there is a need for more critical reflection and observation of the organisation as a whole. This may be sensitive and painful because it requires managers to question some of the taken for granted aspects of organisational life. It is for a willingness to take the wider perspective, to see the part as a reflection of the whole, that this paper argues.

This new approach to organisational stress is already emerging. Whilst some organisations are still struggling to come to terms with the idea that stress is a problem they have to tackle,

others are beginning to pull the activities that they have generated in the last decade together to form a more coherent approach. One household name in the computer industry, for example, has a clear directive from the top to enhance the quality of working life for employees. At local level this means that the many initiatives around stress, counselling services, occupational health, fitness, balance of working life, managing diversity and so on, can be linked into this theme, so that it apparent to all staff that it is on the organisational agenda. Through existing staff consultation groups, views as to the sources of pressure and stress have been sought. Differences between different parts of the site and occupational groups have been explored. Ongoing data collection of stress levels are monitored and it is a serious issue for each manager to consider in managing his or her group. Training courses are designed so that common themes amongst participants, about organisational issues, can be taken back to managers in order that these can be addressed.

The challenge for consultants and trainers working with stress in the future will be to contribute to this organisational picture in such a way that the work they contract to do is part of systemic changes in the organisation, and not a collusion with the status quo. Sticking to individual stress management through training and counselling, without attending to organisational practices, can amount to colluding with the status quo. The first step for stress management consultants is to help managers understand how, in practical and human terms, this organisational wide perspective will actually make a real difference to the effectiveness of stress management interventions. It begins to connect this to the wider issues of quality of workplace life and the ability of the organisation to function effectively on its chosen tasks. Using the framework outlined in this paper, managers can see what the leverage points in their particular organisation might be, which can move the system sufficiently for the

individual's experience to change. We may not be able to alter the whole organisation, but most managers will be able to identify where to put their energy to change the parts that impact and resonate unhelpfully on their own units and so alleviate some of the existing tensions. Since organisational behaviour is a complex product of personal styles, the culture of the organisation, the history and experience if the group and organisation and the tasks they work on, it is unlikely that all the tensions can be *fixed*. Indeed, some may appear productive. But they can be *seen*, and this enables the levers for change to be aimed more accurately.

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Acknowledgements

Figure 1. -Psychodynamics &Organisational Health: Interelated & Dynamic Factors Which Can Be Experienced as Functional or Dysfunctional

Leader Preferences and Style

Influences choice of leader

Expectations transference/ projection

Organisation History

Top Team Dynamics

Embedded & reproduced in individuals & myths & stories

Team dynamics mirrored

Organisation Structures & Systems

Sub Group Dynamics

Reflect the past & help or hinder task

Individuals' Style, Experience of Organisation

Impact on inter-group working

adapted from James, Jarrett & Lucas, 1996

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