

STRESS & ANXIETY AT WORK

HOW MANAGERS CAN SUPPORT

Responding to stress and anxiety with trust and clear
boundaries

ARTICLE 5 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



How Managers Can Support

Responding to stress and anxiety with trust and clear boundaries

Managers play one of the most significant roles in shaping an employee's experience at work. Research consistently shows that the quality of leadership can have a profound impact on wellbeing, engagement and job satisfaction. While managers cannot remove every source of stress, they can influence how employees experience pressure, whether they feel supported and how comfortable they are asking for help.

Employees experiencing stress or anxiety often worry about being judged, viewed as incapable or negatively affecting their career progression. As a result, many continue working while struggling silently. They may avoid conversations about their wellbeing until they reach the point of burnout, sickness absence or resignation.

Supportive managers create environments where employees feel safe to speak openly about challenges before they become overwhelming. This is not about becoming a therapist or solving every problem. Rather, it is about recognising signs of distress, responding with empathy and helping employees access appropriate support while maintaining clear professional boundaries.

When managers prioritise wellbeing alongside performance, organisations benefit from improved morale, higher engagement, reduced sickness absence and stronger staff retention.

Why Managers Matter

The relationship between an employee and their manager can significantly influence workplace wellbeing.

Supportive managers help employees feel:

- Valued.

Heard.

Respected.

Safe to ask for help.

Clear about expectations.

Confident discussing concerns.

Poor management, on the other hand, can become a significant source of workplace stress.

Leadership style matters.

Recognising the Signs of Stress

Managers are often among the first people to notice changes in an employee.

Possible signs include:

- Reduced concentration.

Increased mistakes.

Changes in mood.

Irritability.

Withdrawal from colleagues.

Reduced confidence.

Missed deadlines.

Frequent sickness absence.

Working excessive hours.

Declining engagement.

These signs should be viewed as opportunities for supportive conversations rather than assumptions about poor performance.

Create Psychological Safety

Psychological safety means employees feel able to:

- Ask questions.

Admit mistakes.

Raise concerns.

Share ideas.

Request support.

Be honest about challenges.

Employees are far more likely to seek help early when they know they will be met with understanding rather than criticism.

Managers set the tone through their everyday behaviour.

Start Supportive Conversations

Many managers worry about saying the wrong thing.

In reality, showing genuine care is often more important than having the perfect words.

Helpful questions include:

- "How have you been feeling recently?"

"I've noticed you seem under pressure—is everything okay?"

"Is there anything making work more difficult at the moment?"

"What support would be helpful for you?"

The aim is to understand, not to interrogate.

Listen Without Judgement

Effective listening means giving employees time to speak without interruption.

Managers should:

- Remain calm.

Avoid rushing to solutions.

Ask open questions.

Show empathy.

Acknowledge feelings.

Clarify understanding.

Sometimes feeling heard is the first step towards reducing stress.

Avoid Common Mistakes

Well-intentioned responses can sometimes unintentionally minimise someone's experience.

Avoid saying:

- "Everyone is stressed."

"Just try not to worry."

"You'll be fine."

"You just need to relax."

"Others are coping."

Instead, acknowledge that stress affects people differently and focus on understanding the individual's experience.

Review Workload

One of the most effective ways to reduce workplace stress is to review demands.

Consider:

- Are priorities realistic?

Are deadlines achievable?

Can tasks be redistributed?

Are unnecessary meetings creating pressure?

Does the employee have enough time to complete their work?

Reducing unnecessary pressure often prevents problems from escalating.

Provide Clear Expectations

Uncertainty increases anxiety.

Managers can reduce unnecessary stress by:

- Clarifying priorities.

Setting realistic deadlines.

Providing regular feedback.

Explaining changes early.

Confirming expectations in writing where appropriate.

Clear communication builds confidence.

Encourage Healthy Boundaries

Managers influence workplace culture through their own behaviour.

Support healthy boundaries by:

- Respecting annual leave.

Discouraging unnecessary overtime.

Avoiding emails outside working hours where possible.

Encouraging lunch breaks.

Supporting flexible working when appropriate.

Employees are more likely to maintain healthy habits when leaders model them.

Support Reasonable Adjustments

Some employees may benefit from temporary or ongoing adjustments.

Examples include:

- Flexible working hours.

Temporary workload adjustments.

Quiet working spaces.

Additional supervision.

Home working where appropriate.

Clear written instructions.

Regular check-ins.

Adjustments should be discussed collaboratively and reviewed regularly.

Encourage Professional Support

Managers are not expected to provide therapy.

However, they can encourage employees to access appropriate support.

This may include:

- Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs).

Occupational Health.

Human Resources.

GP support.

Counselling services.

Mental health charities.

Knowing where to signpost employees is an important management skill.

Support Employees Returning to Work

Returning after stress-related absence can feel overwhelming.

Managers can help by:

- Holding a supportive return-to-work meeting.

Agreeing realistic expectations.

Reviewing workload.

Scheduling regular check-ins.

Encouraging gradual reintegration where appropriate.

Reviewing adjustments.

A thoughtful return-to-work process increases confidence and reduces the likelihood of relapse.

Looking After Yourself as a Manager

Managers are not immune to stress.

Supporting others while managing organisational pressures can be demanding.

Managers should also:

- Monitor their own wellbeing.

Seek supervision or support.

Take regular breaks.

Maintain healthy boundaries.

Access wellbeing resources.

Healthy leaders are better able to support healthy teams.

Building a Wellbeing Culture

A positive workplace culture is created through everyday actions rather than one-off initiatives.

Healthy organisations:

- Encourage open conversations.

Train managers in mental health awareness.

Promote psychological safety.

Celebrate healthy working practices.

Address workplace stress proactively.

Value employee wellbeing alongside performance.

Culture begins with leadership.

Key Takeaways

Managers play a vital role in supporting employee wellbeing.

Early recognition of stress can prevent burnout and long-term sickness absence.

Psychological safety encourages employees to seek help early.

Listening with empathy is often more valuable than trying to solve every problem.

Reviewing workloads and expectations can significantly reduce workplace stress.

Managers should know how to signpost employees to appropriate support services.

Healthy leadership creates healthier teams.

Final Thoughts

Managers cannot eliminate every source of workplace stress, but they can have a powerful influence on how employees experience and respond to it. By creating psychologically safe environments, encouraging open conversations and responding with empathy rather than judgement, managers help employees feel supported before challenges become crises.

Supporting mental wellbeing is not separate from good leadership—it is an essential part of it. Clear communication, realistic expectations, regular check-ins and a willingness to listen all contribute to healthier, more engaged teams. Equally, recognising when an employee may need additional support and knowing how to signpost them appropriately demonstrates both professionalism and compassion.

Ultimately, organisations thrive when their people thrive. Managers who invest in wellbeing build stronger relationships, improve trust and create workplaces where employees feel able to perform at their best while maintaining their mental health.