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ADVERSITY

Support & Solutions

Clinical Director's Report 2010

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an economic climate in which traits such as resilience, flexibility, responsiveness, sustainability and creativity are highly valued it is important to consider the factors that may prevent growth in these areas.

In this report, we have examined ways in which organisations and individuals can experience potentially-destabilising elements that require timely effective decisions in order to survive and we have looked at the hidden risk factors experienced by employees that the employer is likely to be completely unaware of.

Organisations who implement best practice find themselves managing situations that they previously may have felt unable to deal with, and managers find their skills are enhanced when they know how to deal with adversity on both an organisational and an individual level.

Most employers cannot be expected to have the internal resources to deal with all adversity; access to expert professional help and advice, coupled with a partnership approach, leads to positive outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) are built on the premise that supporting workers who are experiencing difficulties will speed up their return to wellbeing and reduce the negative impact on the workplace.

Right Corecare has worked diligently to achieve this goal for over twenty years; in that time, we have come to understand the issues that face employees and have created helpful solutions – sometimes using evidence-based Counselling but more often giving accurate information, advice and signposting.

We have also, because of our long-term relationships with customers, become Trusted Advisors working alongside employers to create greater wellbeing at work and to develop initiatives that not only support employees but also support the organisation in achieving strategic goals.

In providing our services, we become privy to a large amount of confidential yet valuable information about an organisation and its workforce. Whilst we are responsible for maintaining the privacy of individuals and the commercial confidentiality of organisations, we also recognise our responsibility to use the knowledge we accumulate in a responsible way, to help reduce workplace problems and to enhance employee and organisational wellbeing. We do this in many ways, but two areas in which we have made a significant difference are Critical Incidents and Individual Risk Management.

This paper explores the ways in which we have worked to create positive outcomes from situations that had the potential to overwhelm organisations, individuals and sometimes both. It examines some of our work in 2009 and looks at what we did to promote safety, security and resilience.

BACKGROUND

2009 was a complex year for UK business. The global economic turmoil had a major impact on the ability to conduct business, to raise finance, to achieve service delivery goals and to retain a well-resourced workforce. In this context, the greatest threat to companies was financial survival.

At the same time, the government focussed heavily on workplace wellbeing, based on the simple concept that 'Work is good for people'. It is good for psychological wellbeing, for physical health and for economic strength. The message was that organisations who embraced wellbeing were more likely to find themselves with a resilient, flexible workforce who could manage change effectively and could rise above temporary crises.

Yet, whilst the economic battle raged (and continues), other factors were impacting on survivability. We found that businesses were asking "What helps us maintain our stability?" and "What has the potential to overwhelm us?"

These two questions go to the heart of Right Corecare's work at an individual and an organisational level. Individually we find ourselves working at times with people who are at a tipping-point of being overwhelmed by life experiences and emotional burden whilst organisationally we encounter events and situations that have the potential to destabilise and disrupt business to a significant level.

In 2009, for instance, we identified 219 UK workers as being at very high risk of significant psychological and personal damage. We also received 49 requests for help with Critical Incidents, workplace problems that the organisation did not have the resources to manage entirely without assistance. The details of these two areas of activity show that with the right processes in place risk can be reduced, people can recover and organisations can manage effectively and efficiently.

By providing expert solutions in these circumstances we add real value across the board; the paradox is that the confidential nature of our work means that we don't often disclose much of what we are doing.



Right Corecare Service Usage, 2009

PERSONAL ADVERSITY

One of the challenges for organisations such as Right Corecare is to identify risk and to provide services in accordance with this assessment.

People accessing our EAP will typically make their first contact using our telephone helplines. We do receive contacts by email and other internet routes, but these are always signposted to the helpline. At this stage, our concern is to identify the needs of the caller; we listen, clarify and respond to what we hear whilst establishing the most helpful way forward. As part of this process, we try to establish the degree of risk faced by the caller.

Risk at this level looks at four specific areas as well as a general overall assessment. The specific areas are suicide, domestic violence, child or carer abuse and risk of danger to others (work colleagues, members of the public, the organisation). In addition there are some statutory requirements imposed by Prevention of Terrorism legislation and the Proceeds of Crime Act.

Callers rarely tell the whole story, and this can be particularly true for issues that we might want to escalate to Red Flag status, the marker we apply to cases in which we perceive a heightened risk. This means that we have to maintain a fluid assessment at all stages of our engagement with an individual, evaluating a changing relationship and additional knowledge and understanding throughout our work together. Someone may well indicate no risk at helpline stage yet indicate a darker story in Counselling; alternatively, someone on the phone may be in despair and make quite alarming comments yet, after time to reflect and with emotional support offered by our trained and qualified helpers, return to stability quickly and pose no real threat at all.

SUICIDE

It is not unusual to hear people talking about their life and a current emotional or practical crisis and making comments about losing the will to live, feeling sometimes that life is not worth the effort. We explore these feelings carefully to make a distinction between ideation – the thoughts that sometimes cross someone’s mind as an indication of how hard they are finding things at the moment – and the intent, the plan and the opportunity and the means to act. Some of the employees we worked with in 2009 were at what we considered to be the extreme edge of suicide risk; these were people who had a detailed realistic plan, with the means and opportunity to carry it through. Contrary to popular belief, these were not attention seekers or people crying wolf, they were employees who were on the brink of death, desperate for a solution but with almost no belief that one could be found. Although this may sound dramatic, it reflects the degree of despair some employees present. Very often, apart from the individual, we were the only people who had any inkling of the seriousness of the problem; certainly, the employer was unaware and, in almost all cases, this is how it remains – we worked confidentially and under great pressure to find solutions, to preserve life and to help the employee access the services and support that would make a real difference whilst delivering on our promise to the client that we would not disclose their details to their employer unless there were compelling reasons to do so.

Of the 219 Red Flag cases we identified in 2009, 137 involved suicidal intent.

“Some of the employees we worked with in 2009 were at what we considered to be the extreme edge of suicide risk....”



Even with the most rigorous of assessments, and ongoing re-evaluation, there is always a risk that a client may hold back some vital information that might lead to more urgent action on our part, and we can never guarantee we will identify and reduce all risk; the reality is though, that we made a real difference to some of these people in 2009 – none of our Red Flag clients carried through their threat.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Suicidal intent, though, is not the only high-risk element we encounter. In 2009, as in most years, we heard from a number of callers who were experiencing domestic violence. Although the great majority of these were female, we did hear from a number of men who were victims as well. When working with domestic violence, we applied considerable case management resources; sometimes we found that there were children in the home, which meant we had to consider whether there may be child protection issues, and we also explored the co-morbidity with substance (including alcohol) misuse. Very often, when we encounter domestic violence, we find that at least one of the parties is drinking heavily on a regular basis. In child protection issues we connected with social services and other specialist children's services as appropriate, and also helped a number of women hook into local networks designed to protect and support vulnerable women. As is so often the case with our EAP, we found that the main issues faced by our clients were psychosocial and thus required a more complex response than remedial psychological therapies offer.

Excessive drinking and Domestic Violence often go hand-in-hand

OTHER RISKS

We have also, in 2009, had occasions where we needed to consider the safety of the employer, the workplace or colleagues; we tread a careful path of confidentiality coupled with responsibility and duty of care, and this means there are (very rare) occasions when we need to make someone else aware of our concerns. In 2009, this has ranged from people making credible threats to shoot or maim others through to people being blackmailed by others outside of the workplace to commit work-related fraud. In all cases in which we breached confidentiality we tried to gain acceptance from the client, and we always conducted a full case review within our clinical team to be sure that we were making appropriate judgements.

Amongst the other Red Flag cases were people with severe eating disorders that were not being addressed medically, people who were self-harming severely and a small number who were exhibiting signs of severe mental illness.

One of the difficulties for UK plc is that, at a time of high economic pressure with a concomitant reliance on fewer staff being more productive, individual employees experiencing these sorts of individual adversity find it extremely difficult to remain at work, engaged, productive and focused. Personal adversity becomes an employment issue even though the great majority of it isn't caused at work. With the price of presenteeism estimated at twice that of sickness absence, employers who worked with us received a direct benefit through our ability to work, not only with people who present with mild but disturbing problems, but also with some very disturbing cases that required a high level of clinical and organisational sophistication to create positive outcomes for all.

"...we tread a careful path of confidentiality coupled with responsibility and duty of care ..."



ORGANISATIONAL ADVERSITY

When Right Corecare first began operating over 20 years ago it was not unusual to find that employers struggled with what have been classified as Critical Incidents. These were events that had the potential to overwhelm the organisation and were seen to need a response that went beyond the potential of internal resources. Very often, the perceived need was for a therapy-related response with a team of rapid-deployment counsellors.

With experience gained over a number of years, we realised that quite often there was often a perceptual problem with Critical Incidents; this was made up of two misconceptions that we have subsequently worked hard to redress.

The first was that the organisation could not cope, the second was that counselling would make a difference if it was initiated immediately after the event.

"...the greatest predictor of a workforce's ability to return to equilibrium after an incident is the way in which the employer responds."

ORGANISATIONAL COPING

Perhaps the greatest predictor of a workforce's ability to return to equilibrium after an incident is the way in which the employer responds. We realised that we were often being asked two questions when we were asked to become involved - 'What should we as an organisation do?' and 'What should I as a manager do?'. Quite often this was accompanied by an explicit 'Come and do it for us/me'.



In creating a rational response to these questions, we looked at what issues employers presented to us. They covered a range of problems including death in service, accidents in the workplace, robbery and fraud, vehicle accidents, local traumas that staff had witnessed, adverse audits from either a financial or a service delivery perspective, racial assault, sudden organisational change and a number of other issues.

One aspect that was immediately clear was that some organisations were being overwhelmed by predictable events - in the retail sector, for instance, thefts from the shop floor are not uncommon and in the public sector it is not uncommon to experience aggressive service users. We took a view, in consultation with the employers, that our energies would be better focussed on providing line managers with the skills to handle these unpleasant yet predictable events; feedback from the workforce was almost always that they preferred internal management to take centre stage and that they felt more positive about managers and the organisation's ability to meet their needs when this approach was taken.

"...some organisations were being overwhelmed by predictable events"

This has meant that, in 2009, we were able to support line managers who approached us for help and have often confined our support to this level of intervention - out of 49 incidents we provided on-site specialists in only 10. The double benefit for employers was that managers' abilities and strengths were enhanced, and the financial cost was lower since we don't make any additional charge for telephone-based manager support.



Whilst adopting this approach, we have also incorporated the latest research on post-incident personal support. For the last five years or more the message has remained consistent - immediate interventions have very limited value and are almost always contra-indicated. This is not because of an unwillingness to respond rapidly but rather from evidence that people don't actually recover any quicker and can, under specific circumstances, actually create psychological problems. Best evidence says that a 72-hour delay before an on-site intervention is realistic and probably a minimum, and that a one-week or two-week pause may be appropriate.

Some Public Sector organisations have to deal with sudden death, suicide and attempted suicide of service users.

Our view is to support the evidence but to augment the support available by providing expert advice and information to the organisation and managers whilst continuing to provide 24-hour telephone support to our EAP customers.

For the incidents that did require an on-site presence, we provided a variety of services. Typically, these included a mixture of individual and group sessions, either in the workplace or at another local venue. Some interventions were for half a day whereas others were for a whole day or even two. The sorts of situations encompassed death or attempted suicide of a service user for Public Sector customers (this happened to a number of organisations), an employee suddenly diagnosed with a terminal illness, sudden death of a colleague, a workplace accident injuring members of the public, a serious assault by customer.

We also, in 2009, shifted our focus from Critical Incidents to Organisational Adversity. This was based on previous experience that had shown us that things happen in and around the workplace that are not critical yet do have an adverse effect on the organisation.



One of our partners, for instance, was faced with a court case leading to adverse media attention that had the possibility of diverting their attention away from day-to-day operational management, that disrupted staff and led to some being pursued by representatives of broadcast media and also had the possibility of creating an adverse organisational reputation. In recognition of our excellent working partnership we were asked, in strictest confidence, to work with the employer to analyse the potential problems, suggest solutions and adopt with them a pro-active incident management protocol. The successful outcome of this event was that disruption was contained, that high-risk individuals were identified and supported appropriately and were also up-skilled in preparation for any adverse attention, and that the organisation was able to continue functioning and weather the storm.

"...a conjoined approach...pays dividends"

Although not all Adverse Incidents are predictable, this activity did demonstrate that a conjoined approach that identifies all hazards and promotes active collaboration pays dividends. We have also used this approach with educational establishments to manage upcoming OFSTED inspections.

All organisations can predict that they will experience adverse incidents from time to time. Whilst these can sometimes be specifically foreseen, at other times they are merely random events that require an appropriate, effective evidence-based approach and our work in 2009 has underlined the benefits of this.

STRESS RISK AND ADVERSITY

There is a third strand to workplace adversity. The link between work-related stress, individual and organisational wellbeing is well established and has been the subject of extensive published research. It is because of the well-defined links that the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) was able to determine key characteristics of work-caused stress and make specific recommendations about how these could, and must, be eliminated wherever possible.

Although the HSE present 6 key areas of influence, we have taken these and created a subset of 12 so that we can, for example, make a difference between bullying and discrimination. This enables us to provide customers with a more detailed analysis of the specific issues experienced within their organisation along with clear data surrounding this – one of the key aspects of this is that the information we receive comes from a minority of the workforce so that the employer needs to take an informed view of how best to extrapolate across the entire business.

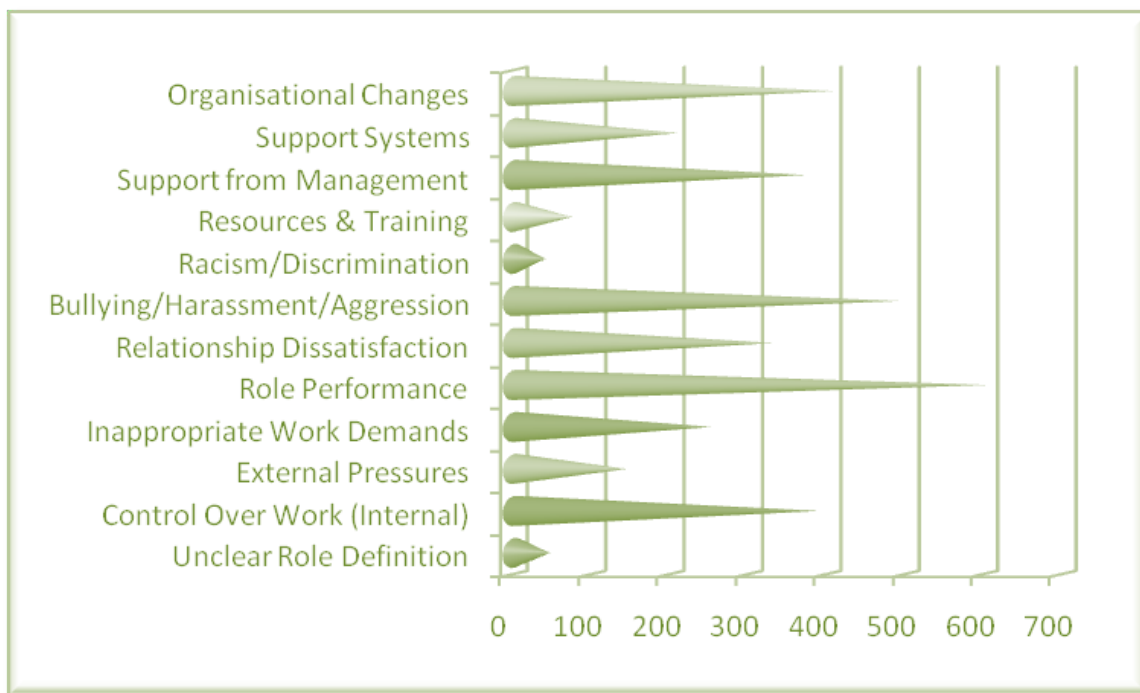
We have reported on the data surrounding usage of the Right Corecare EAP on a regular basis, often looking closely at those people who engage in counselling with us. For this report, we have looked at the way work-related stress is reported on the helpline, since this is normally the first point of access for users.

The link between work-related stress, individual and organisational wellbeing is well established"

At Right Corecare we receive data in a number of ways to enable us to draw a composite picture of our service and to provide evidence of our reach and our effectiveness. At the very heart of our delivery lies the helpline; our helpline professionals in 2009 fielded over 30,000 calls; most callers were looking for individual support but sometimes they were seeking organisational input as well. Of all the calls taken, some 16,000 were handled by our team at Fareham, Hampshire.

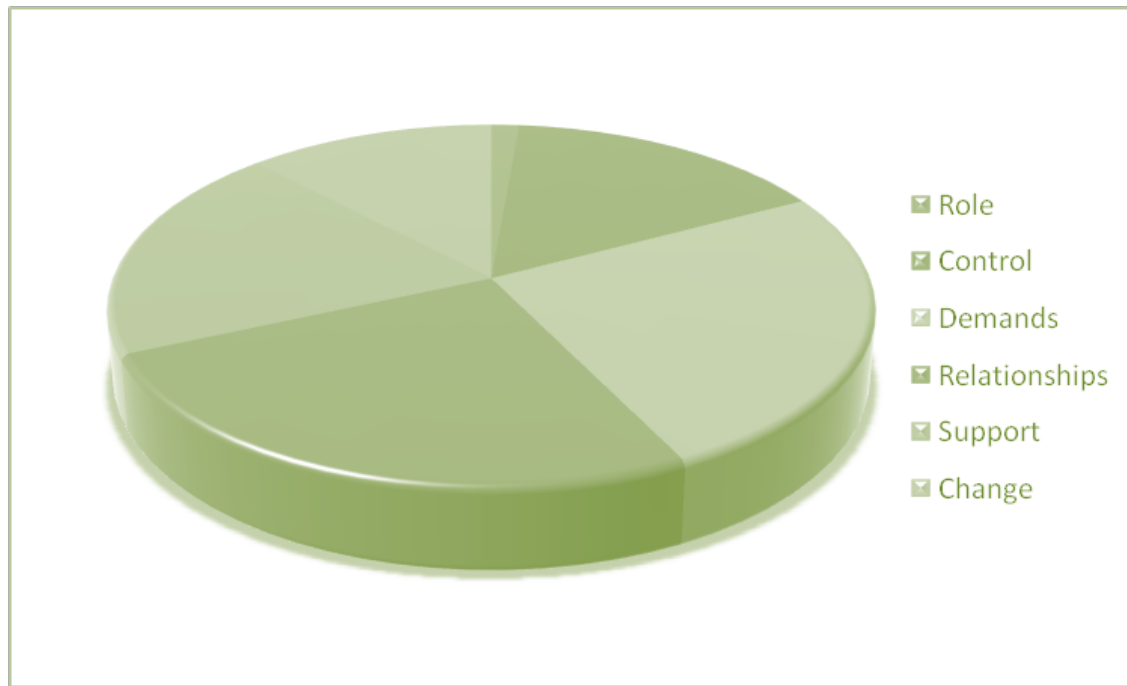
In total, the Fareham team managed 16,135 calls and logged 20,519 presenting problems (because callers sometimes have more than one issue on their mind). Of the presenting problems 3,367 were about work-caused stress. This 16% ratio is relatively normal – we have always said that approximately 80% of calls are about issues that are not directly about work – but they do tell an important story.

In terms of the problems reported, the chart below gives a clearer picture:



2009 WORK-RELATED STRESS: PRESENTING ISSUES (PER OCCURRENCE)

These 12 components are aggregated to produce a picture showing the relative frequency of the 6 HSE Stress Issues:



2009 HSE STRESS STANDARDS: PRESENTING ISSUES (RELATIVE)

This data represents a double jeopardy for the employer. Not only does it reflect the individual distress experienced by specific staff but it also shows a picture of the organisational dysfunction. There is a body of research, for example, about the psychological effect of bullying at work which can be concatenated to show that the victim (and often the perpetrator) works at significantly less than optimal efficiency but also that for each victim there are five other members of staff who are affected negatively and at least three of these intend to leave their job within the next six months.



In reporting on the UK workforce, we can see that workplace relationships are a key factor in the wellbeing of staff; this is interesting when looking at recruitment policies which tend to focus on technical skills and neglect the way people will work together. Complaints about lack of support from managers are at almost twice the rate of complaints about lack of support from peers and colleagues. Again, this is something we find year after year, that managers can sometimes find it difficult to engage with the support needs of employees.

We find that many employers collect HSE-related information through other internal sources, so that our data helpfully integrates into their existing matrices and adds further depth.

When considering adversity, both organisational and individual, our belief is that this data should be central to thinking.

CONCLUSION

Resilience – both organisational and individual – means having the skills and aptitude to deal with life as and when it happens. Often, life continues as normal and much of what happens is within a normal scope of expectations. Occasionally, however, things can happen to create disturbance, disruption and potential disaster.

Many potential hazards can be identified and built out of systems, or training can be put in place to create structures and processes that can flex to cope with the pressure laced upon them. Most employers conduct Health & Safety assessments (all should) but it is not clear that many include an assessment of the psychosocial risks in the workplace, nor that they train managers to cope effectively. An organisation that does not contemplate – at a strategic and an operational level – how to deal with adversity is more likely to be badly affected than one which has a realistic plan supported by good training.

Any group of people will include a broad section of emotional and physical resilience - events that have a strong negative impact on some may leave others unmoved. The availability of good professional advice and information, preferably delivered by peers and line managers, creates a context within which recovery and stabilisation take place promptly.

Right Corecare's careful, tactful Case Management system and Adverse Incident Management service, delivered in a measured yet effective manner, complement each other and provide real benefits to users – both individual and organisational.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Friery – Clinical Director for Right Corecare

With a background of over 20 years Management experience in the public, voluntary and private sectors, as Clinical Director for Right Corecare, Kevin is also an accredited Counsellor and Trainer accredited by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. He is an Associate of the Chartered Institute of Management and a regular speaker at industry conferences and events.

ABOUT RIGHT MANAGEMENT

Right Management is the talent and career management expert within Manpower, the global leader in employment services. Our expertise spans talent assessment, leadership development, organisation effectiveness, employee engagement and workforce transition.

Part of Right Management, is Right Corecare, a specialist team offering a complete range of services to organisations concerned about the welfare and performance of people. It is the leading provider of Employee Assistance Programmes in the UK.

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