

Theme booklet for managers

The good interview on stress

This booklet is intended for managers, who need to conduct an interview with an employee who is exhibiting symptoms of stress. The booklet provides inspiration and specific proposals on how you, as a manager, can tackle the interview. The booklet is part of a series, and you may therefore benefit from reading the entire series, which deals in greater detail with preparation for the interview—including practical tips and how to use the log book to note down your observations.

Introduction

As a manager, it is important that you act quickly if you discover that an employee is unhappy in his/her job due to stress. Stress can manifest itself in an employee's growing dissatisfaction with work and the organization, and can easily lead to further frustration and dissatisfaction. Stress also has a tendency to spread or become 'contagious'.

As a manager, you should keep an eye on changes in the employee's behaviour. It is important that you draw on your own observations in the interview. You may notice that an employee who is usually outgoing and helpful, starts being abrupt and irritated. Or maybe an employee who is otherwise on time starts arriving late for meetings or forgets agreements.

You can read more about stress and stress symptoms on DTU Inside, or contact your HR Partner, who can also offer advice on tackling stress.

Preparation before the interview

There will always be something at stake for the employee, when you, the manager, invite the employee to an interview on stress. Even if the interview is of a more preventive nature or arises out of a concern for the employee.

Stress is a sensitive issue, and interviews concerning stress may be perceived as you 'prying into other people's business'. Perhaps the employee is not even aware that his/her behaviour has changed and the person may be surprised, angry or upset.

Therefore, conduct the interview in appropriate surroundings where you are sure not to be disturbed. When conducting the interview, be sure that you and the employee sit in relative close proximity. In the introductory folder, you can read more about how best to prepare for the interview.

As part of your preparation for the interview, you can write down an overview of the observations you have made and which constitute the basis for the meeting. The overview should not be reviewed point for point, but is there to ensure that you do not get stuck if something unexpected should happen during the interview.

During the interview

Begin the interview by welcoming the employee and being positive. Make sure to maintain eye contact, speak clearly and explain the reason and purpose of the interview. Ambiguities create anxiety for the employee, who may be expecting something 'worse', e.g. termination of employment or cooperation issues. Make it clear to the employee that you want them to tell you if they feel that any of your questions are too personal.

Begin, for example, the interview like this:

"I'm pleased we could meet so quickly. What I'd like to talk to you about is that I have recently become a little concerned that your work tasks may be causing you stress."

"The purpose of this interview is to give us both an opportunity to have a chat about stress. I have recently become concerned that you may be suffering from stress. I have noticed"

Once the interview is underway, go directly to sharing your observations about the employee. You need to focus on what you have noticed and what has made the interview necessary now. Be straightforward and describe things as you have observed or experienced them.

Describe what you have observed:

“I have noticed that your behaviour has changed in the last couple of weeks. You have seemed uncertain when making decisions.”

“I have noticed that you have come unprepared to project status meetings.”

“You have seemed sad at whiteboard meetings and you have excused yourself several times for a few minutes.”

“I have noticed that you find it difficult to maintain an overview of the situation when the annual examinations are held.”

“I have noticed that you quickly become irritated about even minor things, which affects cooperation with your colleague.”

“You are, after all, one of the department’s most experienced employees. I have noticed that you have changed. You look tired in the morning, you have become more hot-tempered, and you isolate yourself—the door to your office is usually closed.”

When you have used various examples to describe what you have observed, end with: “ **... and I am concerned about you and the performance of your daily tasks.**” Pause for a moment and give the employee time to reflect on what you have said.

A good starting point for an interview on stress is to express your concern for the employee’s well-being.

The interview is an opportunity to work together with the employee to find out the reason(s) behind your observations and a solution to the problem.

An important element in the interview, therefore, is that the employee is given the opportunity to give his/her view of the situation.

As a manager, your role here is to adopt an exploratory approach to the interview. By being curious and interested in finding out what makes the employee to do or act as he/she does, you avoid making the person feel defensive. Here are some examples of inquisitive questions that you can ask the employee:

Ask inquisitive questions

“Can you tell me how you experience your work situation right now?”

“Do you feel stressed? Why do you think you are feeling stressed?”

“Is there anything we can do to ease your working day?”

“Have you felt this way before? What did you do at the time? What worked? Did you receive any help? Is there anything you learned from that experience that you can apply here?”

“If you were not feeling stressed—how would your working day look? What would be different?”

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“What if it was not you, but a colleague who was suffering from stress—what would you say to her?”

“Have you thought about what will happen if things continue unchanged?”

“What do you need right now?”

“Is there anything I can do here and now? What do you need from me?”

It is important that the employee does not feel that you are trivializing the situation, or that you are making it entirely their problem that they are feeling stressed. The employee may also be embarrassed by the situation and view stress as a weakness.

Stress can have many causes. Similarly, there may be many possible solutions.

If the employee’s stress is due to private issues, it is a good idea to discuss how DTU can step in with support, e.g. in the form of alternative working hours.

If the employee’s problems are work-related, you can analyse the situation together. Perhaps the employee has some ideas and suggestions as to how to solve the problem. Or the employee may, as a result of stress, be unclear about the tasks he/she can handle. On the basis of the interview, you must conclude by making your expectations clear to the employee. This is irrespective of whether the interview concludes here and now, or whether a solution is subsequently to be found, or whether a specific course of action is to be taken. You can also offer the employee a series of interviews with DTU’s Psychological Counselling regarding stress management.

Conclude by summarizing the interview and focusing on what will happen in the future—for example:

- The most important thing that needs to change
- How this can be achieved
- What help you are offering
- What you expect of the employee
- Other agreements
- New date for a meeting
- Any information to colleagues—in which case, agree with the employee on what to say.

Finish, for example, the interview like this:

“It’s time to round off the meeting. What we have agreed is that over the next four weeks we will meet every Monday morning and prioritize your tasks for the week together. In addition, I will talk to [name] to make sure that all enquiries from the laboratory technicians no longer arrive on your desk unsorted. Every second Wednesday you will work from home, and I want you to use this time to complete the three reports, which have an upcoming deadline. If you experience any additional stress factors, or the agreements that we have made do not work, I want you to contact me. Then we can work together to find new solutions. It this also your understanding? After the four weeks, we can review your work situation again and come up with a new plan.”

After the interview

After the interview it may be a good idea to prepare a summary. You can read more about this in the introductory folder. Where appropriate, contact your HR Partner and discuss the interview with him/her.

If the employee's stress worsens and the employee takes sick leave, you may benefit from reading the booklet 'the good interview on absence', which forms part of this series.