

POSITIVE COPING BEHAVIOUR REINFORCES EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY

Johannesburg
06 October 2015

Article by Dr Dicky Els and Terrance M. Booysen

In a globalised economy excesses and imbalances in one part of the world inevitably affects the economies of another, and this is typically played out between developed and developing countries. With the accelerated pace of global development, expectedly there is a knock-on implication to increased business risk through aggressive competition and more pressure on increasing profit margins. It's therefor not surprising then to see -- at a global level -- how executives are forced to re-evaluate, redesign and sometimes shrink their trading operations in the face of tougher regulatory requirements, exacerbated by revenue declines and higher cost pressures. Organisations are operating in turbulent markets and they have to constantly adapt to increasing business uncertainty and changing circumstances, locally and abroad. Accordingly, the challenge (or the threat) to many business executives may be found in the way they react to severe economic stressors.

Two of the BRICS countries -- namely Russia and Brazil -- are in recession while the South African economy performs below market expectations. Figures released by *Statistics South Africa* showed that the government, transport and retail sectors had grown while agriculture, mining and manufacturing declined in the second quarter of 2015. Compounding matters yet further, the South African mining and manufacturing sectors have announced more plans to cut thousands of jobs. As the national economy continues to struggle, many organisations are battling to survive and the effect has a direct and negative impact on the psychological (and ultimately physical) well-being of the nation's workforce.

With increased organisational complexities, including the demands placed upon the workforce; there are many factors which could negatively impact the well-being of employees. Increasingly employees are confronted with more unpredictable work-related challenges, whilst their dwindling personal coping mechanisms and organisational support is not nearly enough to help them deal with the stress they are experiencing. Clearly, in order to maintain a positive, healthy and productive workforce, employers need to deal with those negative factors, all which if left unchecked, will continue to undermine workplace wellness and exacerbate personal stress.

Invest in positive behaviour

Employee wellness programmes should deliver more than just health awareness. Stronger emphasis should be placed on positive coping and stress management behaviour that enables employees and the organisation -- as a collective -- to be more resilient. Well-designed programmes employ strengths-based development processes to reinforce and broaden the response repertoire for employees. Individuals that expend effort to build their talents, competence and skills are able to gain far more as opposed to those who spend a comparable amount of effort to remediate their weaknesses. As such, organisations should focus on effective talent management which leverages employee wellness programmes to promote a positive, productive and resilient workforce.

Employee wellness programmes that promote positive thought, feeling and behaviour patterns are generally more effective in the long run; and they deliver a bigger return on the 'investment' because they unleash the psychological capital of their workforce. At the core of these employee wellness programmes is the development of personal competencies that not only buffers the employee, but are also known to transform work related stress. These programmes are founded on positive organisational virtuousness,



and a culture of wellness and proactive strengths-based processes that promote transformational coping strategies. Regardless of whether or not the workplace is known to have various challenges, best practice employee wellness programmes are most often the basis for developing individual strengths that empower employees to flourish. Organisations that utilise employee wellness programmes usually see employee health risks and workforce demands as opportunities and not as threats, harm or loss. They invest in -- and develop -- positive organisational behaviour characterised by high levels of self-efficacy, meaningfulness, happiness, optimism, hope and resilience that results in a committed, open-minded and connected workforce. For them psychological competence is strengthened through positive learning experiences, proactive goal setting, problem-focused solutions and voluntary employee engagement. Typical employee wellness programmes that make use of strength-based interventions incorporate physical and psychological constructs to promote employee health, including positive and appreciative behaviour.

Employees' responsibility

Employee wellness programmes intend to promote a positive employer-employee relationship, job satisfaction, positive experiences at work and a thriving workforce. But to get this working, it is ultimately the responsibility of the employee. Employees have the free will to choose their coping responses. Some employees may choose to unwind from stress with positive coping behaviour or they may enjoy a short-term -- and sometimes dysfunctional -- solution by abusing alcohol, medication, tobacco and drugs. Expectedly, the positive effects that healthy eating, physical activity, realistic beliefs and positive workplace experiences have on the reduction of stress and on health promotion are clear. The main difference between resilient employees and those that fall into substance abuse lies in the individuals' behavioural capacities. Employees differ in how well they perceive, express, understand and deal with stressors in the context in which it occurs. Those who cope positively tend to have more positive attitudes, better coping mechanisms, less perceived stress and a better quality of life. It is attributed to their combined internal and external resources which they actively manage with cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural coping strategies.

One of the most exciting features of our cognitive ability is how it could enable us to stand 'outside' ourselves and observe our own thinking. It is our thinking that creates powerful electromagnetic and chemical signals -- for better or worse -- that offset an organised set of emotional and physical reactions. It begins with a thought which suggests that it is our thinking that puts us in a *positive proactive* or a *negative reactive* coping strategy. Employees that cope well with stress are generally reflective in their thinking process and they tend to observe, review and re-appraise their own thoughts, emotions and actions (and if need be they will adapt it accordingly). These employees understand that they have free will and internal control about what they choose to think about and dwell on. Positive cognition utilises positive attitudes, trusting instincts, wisdom, self-insight, optimism, sense of responsibility, creativity and openness to continuously reframe and counter work-related stress.

Interestingly, positive emotions that promote positive coping behaviour are consciously accessible as long lasting feelings and are often free flowing. Such positive coping manifests not only as positive emotions, but also includes physical sensations, moods and attitudes. When employers cultivate positive experiences at work, they enlist positive emotions and workplace resilience is strengthened for their employees. It builds their positive coping resources in order to distinguish between good and bad emotional responses. Moreover, positive emotions also expand and strengthen the capacity of employees to effectively acknowledge and express their own emotions, as well as maturely respond to that of their co-workers.

As compared to positive emotions, positive social experiences are underpinned by friendship, compassion, forgiveness, integrity and dignity; all of which reinforces positive social interactions in the



workplace and amongst the employees. Understandably, interpersonal workplace relationships will flourish when it involves employees who enjoy a cohesive, fulfilling and enjoyable business relationship with their peers. Co-workers who share the same wellness objectives -- whether it is to get fit, stop smoking, manage stress or reduce blood sugar levels -- often share the same interpersonal values. When employees enjoy a mutual respect and trust with each other, positive social support is usually enabled and this gives rise to a greater and more positive social coping behaviour. Accordingly, high quality workplace relationships usually incubate a climate for interpersonal acceptance and inclusion that are in turn generally associated with effective coping mechanisms, longevity, stronger immune systems and lower blood pressure. Research by Gallup, Inc found that social interaction and quality relationships have a compounding effect on wellness. The research found that people who have three close friendships are healthier, have higher well-being and are more engaged in their work, while the absence of close friendships leads to boredom, loneliness and depression. Interestingly, those employees who have a best friend at work are seven times more likely to be engaged and less likely to get injured on the job (Well-being, The Five Essential Elements, T. Rath & J. Harter, 2010).

Conclusion

It may be true that organisations are becoming more aware of the benefits of employee wellness programmes, however many organisations still tend to focus only on disease management rather than on integrated health and wellness aspects. More than ever, employee wellness programmes should apply strength-based interventions that develop the positive coping capability and psychological competence of workers. Through the application of employee wellness programmes, organisations can create the ideal working conditions for workers to enhance their quality of life, and allow employees to achieve their fullest potential. Indeed, resilient employees are a critical asset to have, especially during financially stressful times.

Employees should be enabled to develop their cognitive, emotional and social talents that strengthen and expand positive coping behaviour. Research and case studies prove that employees who display positive coping behaviour generally perform better at work, and they are more engaged in wellness programmes. These employees also tend to deal with organisational change and personal stress far better than those without positive coping capabilities.

In respect of the organisation's human capital, in order for it to claim that it is wholly functional, we believe organisations must evaluate their employee wellness programmes, focussing upon their progress and their group wellness indicators and business results. Expectedly, these indicators and measurable results must be made known not only to the employees themselves, but also to the organisation's extended stakeholders. This information is usually articulated in the organisation's annual Integrated Report and enhances the stakeholders' understanding of the organisation's risk profile.

Should you wish to participate in our *Positive Coping Behaviour Research* or attend one of our *Positive Coping Breakfast Seminars*, please feel free to contact CGF's Workplace Wellness Consultant, Dr Dicky Els. Dr Els also regularly presents *Positive Coping Behaviour Training* as in-house wellness interventions. For more information, bookings or to request a copy of our Positive Coping Behaviour survey, please call Dr Dicky Els on 082 4967960 or send an email to dicky@bewell.org.za

ENDS

Words: 1,811





Dr Dicky Els is a Lead Independent Consultant in CGF. He specialises in Workplace Wellness and focuses predominantly on strategy development, programme design and evaluation of outcome-based health promotion programmes. For more information on our Employee Wellness Programme Evaluation or Wellness and Disease Management Audits, contact Dr Els directly on 082 4967960 or email dicky@bewell.org.za or go to www.wellnessprogramevaluation.com



Terrance M. Booyesen, the CEO of CGF has presented numerous interventions to public and private audiences in and out of South Africa and has received many accolades directly linked with corporate governance. He is a regular podium presenter and is considered knowledgeable in the practice, having produced many governance, risk and compliance reports and articles over the years. More information regarding CGF can be found at www.cgf.co.za