Bolstering resilience

How resilience matters in the workplace and what employers can do to increase it

Life is full of stressful situations, be they personal or professional. Stress of some kind is often unavoidable, or, at least, a common experience for nearly everyone in the workplace.

Learning how to be resilient is a life approach that helps those who’ve developed it handle stress more effectively. For some, resilience is a way of living, but for all it’s something to learn and incorporate as they develop.

What exactly is resilience? Resilience refers to the ability to adapt, recover and grow stronger from adverse situations. Robert Brooks of Harvard Medical School calls resilience “ordinary magic” because everyone has the capacity to be more resilient.

“They have strengths and challenges,” says Annette Kolski-Andreaco, manager of Account Services for LifeSolutions, an employee assistance program and an affiliate of UPMC WorkPartners.

“It isn’t that resilient people are extraordinary people,” she says. “It’s that they’ve been tested and learned that they are adaptable.”

Smart Business spoke with Kolski-Andreaco about resilience in the workplace and why it matters to employers.

Why should the resilience of the work force matter to an employer?

The workplace can be a challenging environment for employees for a variety of reasons. They need to navigate complex networks of relationships and continuously adapt to changing work processes to keep up with the relentless competition in the marketplace.

Many employees today can easily feel overwhelmed, fatigued and disengaged due to their work environment. They may come to question whether what they do really matters, and if they can find professional fulfillment and meaning in their work.

To succeed on the job employees need to acquire cognitive skills through training and education. But equally important for success is the establishment of a solid work/life balance with families, social networks and leisure pursuits. It is that support that enables employees to have a solid foundation from which to better handle stress in the workplace and expand their capacity for change and resilience.

Recent surveys from Gallup polls show that less than 30 percent of employees are actively engaged in their work, while 56 percent are disengaged and 15 percent are actively disengaged. When people are able to change their mindset toward being more hopeful and optimistic, the result is healthier, happier and more productive employees.

Research also supports the idea that when employees and employers actively cultivate a positive attitude, the work environment becomes more optimistic and creative.

How can an employer create an environment that encourages resilience?

The capacity for resilience is there in all people, but there are things that can be done to nurture or reward resilience. Engaged employees who believe their contributions have value are able to be more resilient and are less vulnerable to workplace stress.

Most employees want an opportunity to shine. They also want their employer to be fair, and to give them some control over what happens to them. They want their employers to be respectful and want to connect with their manager on a human-to-human, personal level.

What are the advantages of having a resilient work force?

A more confident, challenged and interested work force is what every employer wants. The simple truth is that for this objective to be realized, managers need to spend the time and make the effort to know each of their employees as an individual contributor to the overall mission and vision of the organization.

Employees are far more motivated by flexibility, fairness, opportunities to learn and develop themselves, and acknowledgement of their accomplishments, than we realize. Stressful work environments are a fact of life, but a more resilient response by employees and their managers makes all the difference in whether they’ll be overwhelmed and burned out.

Creating an atmosphere for resilience to emerge is something that comes from leadership at all levels. An employer can turn to an employee assistance program to learn different ways to develop resilience in their managers and for their staff. <<

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