

Training Journal



"promoting excellence & ethics in coaching"

SUSTAINABLE WELL-BEING – MARTHA SIMPSON

Workplace well-being has never been higher on the agenda as businesses seek to squeeze more and more output from their employees from reduced costs and resources. As a consequence they risk squeezing their people resources to breaking point, making it more likely that employees will succumb to absence from unrelenting stress at work. Ironically, employees are either fearful of having no job, or are unable to cope with the highly pressured environment and unrelenting demands of having a job.

Stress related absence from work is at an all-time high and almost half of middle managers say they are under excessive pressure either every day or once or twice a week. The Association for Coaching UK (AC UK) believes that coaching has an important role to play in building resilience and well-being at work, particularly at this time when employees are feeling under more and more pressure.

The link between being happy at work and high productivity is well established, yet if the demanded level of high productivity is unreasonable and unrelenting it has quite the opposite effect, causing increased disenchantment, reduced motivation, absence as a result of stress and ultimately resignation. The likelihood of sustainable high performance and happiness at work is increased if certain conditions are met, but first of all let's look at the forces that mitigate against well-being at work.

THE FORCES THAT MITIGATE AGAINST WELL-BEING

An estimated 134 million working days were lost to sickness absence in the year to June 2011, which equates to 2.1% of all working time. Since stress is now the number one reason for absence let's consider some of the commonly recognised causes:

Too much work and not enough time

Whatever the performance arena, whether that is the office, the mountain or the racetrack, people can normally exhibit high performance in their area of expertise for short or even medium term bursts of output. However, it is obvious that if this high level of output is required over an excessive period the performance will drop or the performer will simply not have enough time for recovery between expected outputs and will burn out. Terry Orlick, describes this well in his book *In Pursuit of Excellence*, when he exhorts readers to remember that recovery time is as important to high performance as practise and training.

For someone with high expectations about their own performance and for high achievers, loss of excellence in performance is particularly stressful. It is also very demotivating and the longer it continues, the greater the demotivation and sense of defeat. This puts stress on both body and mind.

Loss of confidence

One of the impacts of unrelenting pressure which leads to a drop in performance is loss of confidence. People start to question their abilities and commence a self-dialogue which questions whether or not they were all that great at delivering performance in the first place. This can also include a slow burning anger under the surface relating to the unfairness of the demands and a general frustration at work. The factors which impact negatively and positively on confidence are shown below.



Factors which affect confidence – Simpson, 2008

We will look at the positive impact factors below.

Poor relationship with 'manager' or 'leader'

Apart from sole traders, all other people engaged in a business have internal relationships as well as external facing relationships, the majority of people as employees. A high number of absences and departures relate specifically to human relations within the workplace and the CIPD has reported that four in ten managers are ineffective . It is critical that line managers pay attention to the impact of their behaviours and requests.

Interestingly enough the factors stated as increasing confidence in the model above reflect behaviours which a good manager will demonstrate to staff: listening, supporting, providing feedback and appropriate self-determination.

Uncertainty about job security

In the recent environment, this has created a wave of anxiety among various sectors of the working community. As unemployment and inflation have risen, greater pressure has been exerted on those whose job security is fundamental to the happiness and security of themselves and their families.

In the recent economic environment job security has become tenuous, but perhaps creating a culture of high trust and openness is still possible in many companies.

Environmental stress

Spending long hours in a place which is not conducive to the required work is stressful. Open plan offices which save space and are reputed to give employees better opportunities to build relationships can be noisy and stressful. It's difficult to find an article which argues for the benefits, but many thousands on the negative impact.

CREATING SUSTAINABLE WELL-BEING AT WORK

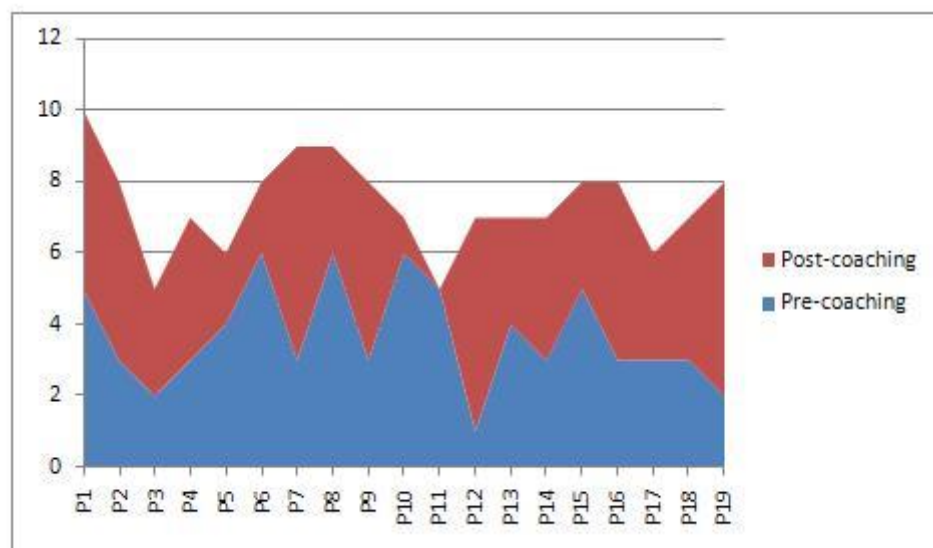
So with all these factors mitigating against well-being at work what can be done to create a sustainable agenda for well-being and to help people to be happy at work?

The Association for Coaching believes that coaching provides just such an antidote to enable sustainable well-being, when used as part of an overall well-being strategy and last year's conference was devoted entirely to resilience and well-being.

The links between mental and physical well-being are now taken for granted. The best conditions for mental well-being include the ability to develop one's potential, do productive and

creative work, build strong and positive relationships and contribute to community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose .

Coaching resides in the arena of such goals. In one study that looked at the impact of coaching on 19 senior women, even a short coaching programme of three sessions with an external qualified coach increased their satisfaction by 100%, in the topic area which formed the coaching agenda.



Pre-Coaching and Post-Coaching topic satisfaction levels across 19 participants – Simpson, 2008

In addition to supporting satisfaction levels, how else can coaching contribute to sustainable wellbeing? Here are three areas where coaching has proven impact.

Personal values

A mismatch between organisational culture and personal goals, values and purpose can create stress and tension in the workplace. Working with a coach can help people to think through and identify points of conflict and take steps to resolve it. Personal values, if harnessed, can be a tremendous motivation but, if these are contrary to the behaviours expected in the workplace, or are polar opposites of the culture within which someone is working then sustainable well-being is placed in jeopardy. Clarifying a sense of purpose, personal values and personal goals are often at the heart of Professional Coaching. These areas are much more critical to the sense of being happy at work than lower level areas like physical environment, behaviours or skills. History is populated by examples of people working in difficult environments with poor capabilities and

tools, who are still able to complete incredible feats because they are driven by a sense of purpose and what is important.

Coaching can help individuals to be clear about their values and explore the match, or mismatch, between personally held values and the values of the organisation. Work and dialogue can then begin on whether or not it is possible to align the values of the individual and the organisation, and clarify any points of conflict. This clarity and alignment of values is a positive contributing factor in improving mental well-being in the workplace.

Work life balance

The balance between work and other parts of life is delicate in a society which sees workers in the UK working longer and longer hours, many of them longer than our European counterparts. It is critical for people to be able to balance the needs of self, family and the workplace in a way which is sustainable over the longer term.

Traditionally, we thought of work life balance as the domain of women, but experience and discussion with coaching clients confirms that it is every bit as challenging for men, who also want to balance the demands of work with a satisfying personal life.

Many companies are now offering flexible working as a means of giving people as much choice as possible over their working lives. Where this includes working from home it is important to monitor the volume of work which is being done outside of working hours. Technological tools, such as smartphones are becoming a must have, but can soon creep into every life space: the dining table; the bedside cabinet, the shower room. This was not the intention of flexible working. Again, working with a coach can offer people an opportunity to think through the best approach to keeping a balance over the demands of varying aspects of life, with someone who is non-biased. Sustainability is crucial to this conversation, as is boundary setting which allows employees to have structured time when they are fully 'at work' and other times when they are fully 'at play'.

Building resilience

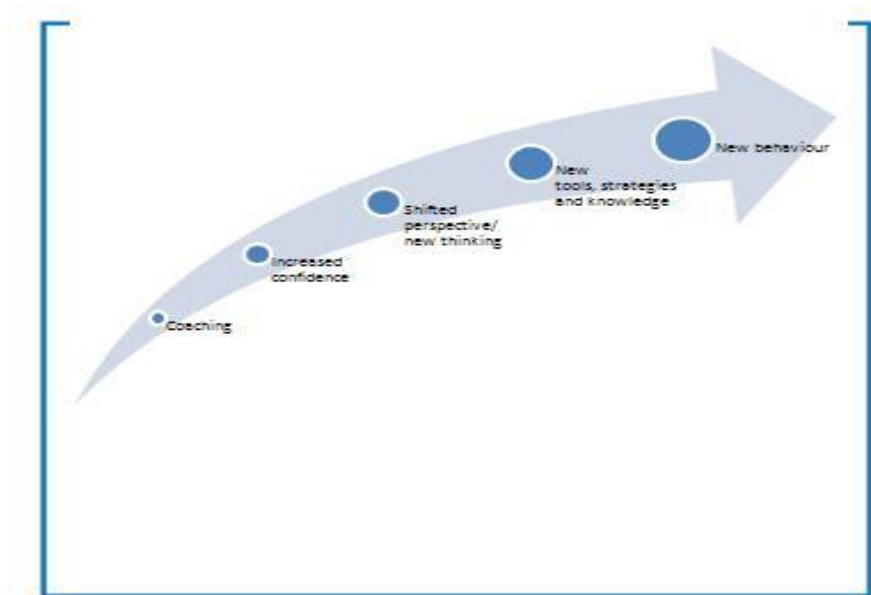
Sustainable well-being in the workplace will also be influenced by an individual's resilience and the behaviours and tactics people adopt to minimise the risk to their health and well-being from a long hours culture. However, while some people seem to have an innate resilience, there is evidence that resilience can be developed and coaching can be crucial in helping to achieve this.

Music is a great example of an area where there are those who can excel because they are 'gifted' and those who can excel because they have support, dedication and commitment to being the best musician they can be. The same is true of resilience. Clearly there are those whose make up enables them to be naturally resilient and there are those who with support, intention and commitment become more resilient.

Resilience is about the ability to adapt rapidly to change: it is about living in the 'here and now', rather than regretful yearning for 'what was' or 'what may be'. At an organisational level resilience is about the ability to quickly assimilate environmental information and build empathy, trust and commitment in the organisation using excellent communication skills. At a personal level, it is about building upon a foundation of emotional competence which includes self-awareness, confidence to act decisively and a high degree of self-belief based on a clear sense of identity, values and beliefs.

Coaching can help people explore their current levels of personal resilience and develop strategies to improve and develop their own resilience. Working with a coach supports people in facing their own vulnerability and is often the starting point for moving forward confidently having cleared their headspace and given themselves the opportunity to move beyond limiting beliefs into the arena of confident and resilient action.

The Model of Coaching Impact below shows the outcomes possible from coaching that can be applied to generating a more sustainable agenda for workplace wellbeing. Coaching impacts positively on confidence, enables people to develop different perspectives, gives them new tools and strategies all of which support and sustain new behaviours.



Model of Coaching Impact© – Simpson, 2008

In short, sustainable well-being at work is possible. However, it requires positive action on the part of both employer and employee. More and more people are leaving their current workplace as a result of excessive stress at work and facilitators and coaches are well placed to modify this trend. Wise employers will recognise the value of resourcing existing employees through coaching initiatives, rather than continuing to spend increasing sums on recruitment and staff absence.

For individuals it is important, whether your organisation provides it or not, that you take responsibility for your own well-being and invest in your mental and physical health. Even a short coaching programme or on-going low frequency programme can make the difference between being happy and well at work and being one of the stress statistics.

As one person who experienced coaching has said about sustainable well-being: "I found the key to the door, the game has changed!"

Martha Simpson – Association for Coaching UK, www.associationforcoaching.com

About Martha Simpson

Martha Simpson is former Head of the Association for Coaching Scotland and runs an Executive Coaching business. www.associationforcoaching.com.

Martha is also the founding Director of Harvey McMillan Associates Ltd, a strategic HR Company and is a Fellow of the CIPD. www.marthasimpsoncoaching.com.