

Improving the Emotional Resilience of the workforce

APSE's Sophie Bannister was invited to Knowsley to take part in one of the Council's training programmes. Focusing specifically on the emotional resilience of staff, it teaches them ways to manage stress, find a good life balance, and increase their levels of productivity.



Why is it that some people are able to cope with difficult situations, when others struggle? How come some people complete their goals or projects on time and within budget, yet others find it difficult? Why do we never see the full return on our training investments when staff go on training courses? Often, they come back all fired up and enthusiastic, but within days everything is as it was before.

Knowsley MBC believe that they have a solution to this problem. They have created a new training course which helps staff to develop their emotional resilience, enabling them to deal with difficult circumstances better and make more rational life choices. It's called the Emotional Resilience Programme.

In short, the course was mind-opening. It focused on a blend of three key resilience activities, proven to help people develop; Mental Toughness, Mindfulness, and Restorative Practice. Backed by theory that's been likened to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), together these activities help people to develop confidence, manage relationships with colleagues, friends and family, and improve control over attention span, memory, thoughts and feelings.

The course has been developed and run by Ken Harrison and Mo Keegan, from Knowsley MBC. They have found that, when talking to staff about workforce development, the narrative has definitely shifted over the past few

years. People are moving away from asking for technical or professional training to requesting mechanisms that will help them develop their own personal wellbeing and resilience, and asking for coping strategies. This was very true of the people on this particular session – working in a variety of challenging social care roles – who repeatedly asked why this course hadn't been offered to them sooner. Despite being offered to managers in the past, it is clear that there is a wider need for this sort of training.

Some days before the course, participants fill out an online Mental Toughness Questionnaire to measure their resilience and ability to cope with pressure and change. This then produces a development report, with scores for different categories and tips on how to improve in those areas. This, in itself, is very useful to know, and reflects the course well. The whole experience is tailored towards learning more about yourself and how you react to different events. The course itself then gives techniques to allow you to alter that behaviour, ensuring that you are able to react in a better, more productive way next time.

The training session itself was both interesting and enjoyable. Through their friendly demeanor and ability to create a welcoming environment, Ken and Mo created a space in which attendees felt they could share their worries and answer questions about how they feel at work in an honest, open way. There was no sense of competition when we were filling out the resilience questionnaires, or finding out using a simplified Myer Briggs Type Indicator which Simpson character we were – all of which were ways of helping us recognise and analyse our own behaviours. Even as the only attendee not working in social care, I felt part of the group and could relate to the discussions around resilience and mindfulness.

The Mental Toughness section was all about the four C's; Challenge, Commitment, Control and Confidence. We worked on techniques and ways of thinking that would help us develop in these areas. It was all about a change in mental attitude, and working towards a more positive mindset. Actually, this was an excellent part of the day, as many of the mental exercises and discussions were easily tailored to the attendees' own workplace circumstances. In this way, we were able to really benefit from Mo and Ken's knowledge.

When looking at Mindfulness, the group were taught some simple ways in which to become more 'mindful' (i.e. attentive, focused and aware) of the world around us. We even got a bit of homework in this section, as Ken showed us a 3-minute activity to do once a day. Doing this and keeping a diary is, according to Ken, an excellent way of developing our mindfulness. The short activity enhances a sense of calmness, as well as a clarity of mind. It worked so well that at the end of the day everybody committed to repeating the exercise for at least 28 days.

One of the final things we looked at was Restorative Practice in relation to the way we treat our colleagues and work partners. At times, relationships may require fixing, maintaining or simply building, and doing this in a restorative manner allows for a sense of social responsibility and shared accountability within the workplace. It is a fresh, enabling way to view relationships that stops them going sour. After all, many workplaces are stressful at times and it can be easy to feel resentful and angry towards colleagues. Restorative Practice attempts to eradicate those feelings and get to the root of the problem to fix it quickly.

Knowsley seem to have realised that its workforce is struggling under mounting financial and target-specific pressures. They understand that by investing in the wellbeing of its staff, the output will be better for all. They are currently tailoring this course to people in leadership roles and in social care. However, I am in neither of these positions and, having experienced it for myself, I firmly believe that everybody could benefit from a training course like this.

The Integrated Resilience Model



I'm trying to keep my commitment by continuing to practice the exercises and activities. It seems to be working; by being aware of my emotional resilience, I can manage my workload better whilst feeling better about it.

Ultimately, it seems that this course is a step in the right direction, encouraging employers to seriously consider investing in their employees' emotional wellbeing. And arguably, that should be something that is at the top of everybody's agenda.

For further information about Knowsley's work, please contact Maureen Keegan, Workforce Development Manager, on 0151 443 2466 or email maureen.keegan@knowsley.gov.uk

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