

Executives in crisis?

By Dr Derek Mowbray

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- ▶ In an organisation of any size, the top managers may not have insight into their own difficulties
- ▶ Senior executives may suffer from an exaggerated sense of pride, and believe that stress is a weakness
- ▶ Few have the skills, knowledge and experience of top management and expertise in psychological distress to act as a 'critical friend' to senior execs
- ▶ Case study evidence demonstrates that the executives start to change their behaviour and become energised, focused, and more effective after only a few weeks



Top management can often believe it is immune to the stresses and strains of the rest of the workforce - but it is just as at risk. Professor Derek Mowbray explains why it is important to have a 'critical friend' for the senior executives.

Recently, an organisation with over 25,000 people went through an expansion programme that combined enlargement with the headquarters moving into a new building. It wasn't planned this way! After this intensive period of about two years, the performance of the organisation dropped dramatically, with lower income and higher numbers of staff being absent, so higher costs. A perfect storm. The picture was inadvertently made worse by the chief executive giving a blistering performance on television where he, uncharacteristically, walked out of the interview mid-stream.

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Something was going badly wrong. It took the health and safety advisor to suggest that the executive hierarchy was suffering from burn-out and stress. He took his opinion to the chairman, who acknowledged that this was a possibility. It was at this point that the hunt for help was started. Several kinds of help was required. Help to raise awareness amongst the executive hierarchy that they might be suffering, and needed help; help to persuade the chairman that there are people who have the skills, knowledge and experience to help; help in providing the kind of support that senior executives on a board would regard as credible.

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Several points arise from this brief introduction. In an organisation of any size, the top managers may not have insight into their own difficulties. They often assume that they are immune to the same stresses and strains that the rest of mankind deals with. There is no evidence that senior executives are any more or less resilient to pressure, strain and stress than the rest of the workforce. Senior executives may assume that the problems of the organisation lie with the workforce and not them. Senior executives may suffer from an exaggerated sense of pride, and believe that stress is a weakness, whereas acknowledgement is a strength. Senior executives may believe

that less senior staff have no right of audience to senior executives, and therefore have no right to an opinion about the health and wellbeing of the senior executives.

In this case, the chairman was able to take the responsibility for doing something to help the senior executives, and commissioned a programme of executive support.

There are not many people with the combined skills, knowledge and experience of top management and expertise in psychological distress who are credible enough to act as a 'critical friend' to the senior executives. Having found the right person there was a series of other hurdles to overcome. Building trust between the 'critical friend' and the executives was a staged process, starting with substantial discussions testing the 'friend' on his knowledge. Then there was the concern that a single 'friend' would receive too much information about the organisation as a whole, and may use the information to influence the approach to supporting different executives – a kind of playing one executive off against another idea.

Overcoming these concerns is part of the process of being a 'critical friend'. Each stage was a test of the 'friend' until he actually became a 'friend' and trust began to be built. The concern that too much information would be held by the 'friend' was addressed by importing a second 'friend' for the chairman – the remaining executives did not find this a concern, and were reassured, in any event, that Chartered Psychologists cannot use personal information in the way imagined, in any event, without finding themselves in very deep water and without a job.

Having satisfied all the preliminary concerns, the approach to the 'burn-out' scenario was two staged. The first was a seminar describing everything about psychological distress in all its forms, and how this can come about in organisations facing different challenges. The seminar described the part that culture and personality plays in the issue of resilience, and the methods that can be used to create and sustain resilience at work. There were a number of assessments that were completed, showing the degree to which the executives were suffering psychological distress, behaving in ways that create stress, and how the organisation was performing as a result. This baseline measurement is essential to establish the impact that the 'critical friend' might have on the performance of the senior

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executives, and on the organisation. It was, also, a way of placing a mirror in front of the executives so that they could resonate with the information being obtained and shared with them.

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The second stage was individual sessions with each of the executives. Each was able to allocate time for four sessions over a period of a month. The sessions took place outside the headquarters, in a nearby hotel. Each session lasted between two and three hours. The purpose of each session was to create and sustain behaviours and approaches to resilience against psychological distress, and to support an action plan that would reinforce behaviour change. This approach embraced the behaviours needed to adjust the cultural envelope within which the executives behaved. For example, there was a culture that praised long working hours. The fact that high performance results from intensive, focused but short working hours, produced a change in the ways that meetings were conducted, and the length of the working day. It, also, changed the attitudes towards the balance of work at the headquarters and productive thinking and working elsewhere, such as at home, if this was appropriate.

The whole intervention lasted less than five weeks, but the executives started to change their behaviour and became energised, focused, and more effective. Without the intervention, the prospects were very high that they would have faced meltdown, with absences, low morale, little hope, and continuous poor performance spiralling downwards.

The role of the 'critical friend' is crucial in this process. It is well established that the individual chosen to be the 'friend' needs to have the skills, knowledge, experience and personality to be able to be credible with hard-nosed, hard-working, but vulnerable executives.

Professor Derek Mowbray is a consultant organisation health psychologist who specialises in implementing mental health and wellbeing at work. Mowbray focuses on the behaviour of leaders in relation to their employees, and helps leaders to develop the behaviours that encourage commitment, trust and staff engagement. He provides a service to support Executives and Professionals in Crisis and is an expert in Conflict Resolution. For further information visit

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