the leisure review

an independent view for the leisure industry

The why, what and how of workplace resilience

The Leading Learning Programme is offering a masterclass series of workshops to the sport, leisure and culture sector exploring the issues of workplace resilience. The Leisure Review spoke to Steve Wood, one of the course tutors, about resilience and what it means in current working environments.

Not too long ago the word 'resilience' was so little used that a respected publisher of dictionaries and reference works decided that 'bouncebackability' was worthy of a place within its pages. It is to our collective cultural credit that 'bouncebackability' has hardly been seen since but the re-emergence of resilience – both the word and the concept – into common usage is not necessarily all good news.

Resilience is now a recognised requirement of the modern workplace and is being added to the long list of skills that need to be demonstrated by those in leadership positions. Where being able to do the job was once considered the primary requirement, it seems being able to survive the working environment is now also a significant factor.

Steve Wood, who along with Graham Wyles is delivering the Leading Learning Programme's resilience masterclass workshops, agreed that the concept has gained profile in recent times. However, it is not necessarily new.

"Resilience is always something that leaders have needed," Steve explained, "but it is a particular challenge these days. Resilience is essentially two things: the ability to bounce back when faced with challenges but also the ability to thrive in a challenging environment; and by thrive we mean thriving personally, helping the organisation to thrive and also those around you, your peers."

The need to be able to respond positively to difficult and rapidly changing work situations is now so commonplace as to be an accepted part of any employee's life, particularly if they happen to be working in the sport, leisure and culture sector.

"The environment has become so challenging, and in the leisure and culture sector it's become unbelievably challenging," he said. "If you work in a local authority you're dealing with severe cut backs, which have gone on for certainly the last six years since 2010, and look set to continue. Many local authority departments have had 30 or 40% of their budgets cut.

"Along with that there are things that people don't talk about very much. Structures have changed and changed very quickly. For example, where you might have had a head of leisure you might now have a head of leisure and transport. Structures often emerge in an odd way and keep changing. Many local authorities still have to make cuts and have had to get used to working in state of flux. People are now being asked to do a lot more."

This environment is a stark contrast to what Steve remembers of his father's working life. A mid-level civil servant in the DHSS in the 1970s, Mr Wood Snr's working day was largely unchanged from one day to the next. He did not require much support as he did pretty much the same

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thing every day: walking to the station to catch the same train in the morning, a predictable workload with little need (or opportunity) to stretch himself outside his function, and the same train home every evening. As a result he had plenty of time to do things in the evening. Steve remembers his dad as a very active father who was fully involved in family life but who also had the time to be a semi-professional writer and producer for the theatre.

"He would have had very few surprises at work even when the pressure built up in his department," Steve said. "Times have changed so dramatically. My father wouldn't actually have come into contact with that many people but nowadays you can contact people globally at the touch of a button."

The rise in demand for workplace resilience courses has grown significantly in recent years. From a situation a couple of years ago where there was little interest in the sectors Steve's organisation wanted to work in, the number of enquiries for resilience workshops has risen steadily as the pressures of working environments have grown.

Figures for occupational health reveal a startling prevalence of problems relating to stress and anxiety. Where once back injuries were the bane of working life, mental pressure has replaced physical strain. Combine such pressures with the decline in support from equally pressured line managers or an organisation's restricted human resource function and the result has been a demand for the skills required to survive the workplace.

But could this recognition of the need for workplace resilience be construed as a tacit admission of organisational shortcomings by the commissioning organisations themselves?

"That's an interesting question but the big challenge is how to address the problem," Steve said. "Senior managers don't realise that they are implicit in this process, that they are part of the cause. All of our workshops are focused on individuals – what skills do you need to be resilient in that environment – but we never talk about creating a better environment in the first place. I think senior managers don't see this as an area in which they are complicit. They feel it is that people simply need to toughen up a bit."

Whether resilience training is about the need to "toughen up" or to replace a faltering HR function, Steve finds that those coming along tend to get more out of it than they are expecting.

"People come on these workshops because they are struggling so much; they don't have any support and they just don't know what to do anymore" he said. "They have so much more to do and don't have any more time. Increasingly people are beginning to notice the impact, of anxiety in particular, in the workplace and, of course, on their life.

"However, we're not just giving them tools to deal with stress. We're giving them tools to thrive. Now this doesn't necessarily mean thrive in the organisation but thrive in the environment. We're trying to focus on people's lives and how to respond better in general to the anxieties of the workplace. Some people's solution might be to leave. Step one is about goal-setting and taking control of your future, for you to control it rather than the organisation controlling it."

The four Leading Learning Programme masterclass workshops have been designed to complement the LLP course. The events, which will be held in London, cover the issues of planning change, managing your states, managing the flood and managing problems. Over the course of the four masterclasses, delegates will explore the principles and triggers to changing behaviours, taking charge of emotional states, creative problem-solving and new approaches to time management. In

recognition that the days when people can be away from their desks for days at a time on training courses are long gone, these sessions are designed to be short, focused and effective.

Having spent a career in business improvement, Steve has recognised that the focus on resilience for individuals is something of a departure.

"What you do in business improvement is say, let's find some solutions to the current challenges as an organisation. What we do with resilience is slightly different. We say, forget about that for a moment: let's just think about you. Let's accept that you're in a very challenging environment and accept that it's probably going to get worse. Bearing that in mind, what can you do personally to make sure you thrive as an individual?"

For all the many years he has spent working with businesses and organisations, Steve considers these resilience sessions to be the most rewarding workshops he has done. However, he does acknowledge that there may be some controversy about the approach being taken.

"We are aware that we are asking them to do things that their organisation may not want them to do," he said. "For example, we spend a lot of time on perspective: to remember that it is only work, that it doesn't matter that much. We spend a lot of time on lifestyle balance, getting people to remember how important it is to go home while they are under so much pressure to stay later at work."

These are pressures that Steve understands. For all his mastery of the concepts, he makes no claims to be a role model of resilience. He freely admits to taking on too much and, like almost everyone else, struggling to find the right work-life balance but the principles still hold true.

"The key message is that there's another day. You can go home and the sun will come up tomorrow."

For details of the Leading Learning Programme masterclass workshops visit www.ncfleadinglearning.co.uk

Workshops are scheduled for 23 June, 28 Sept, 2 Nov and 30 Nov. See the Leading Learning website for full course outlines, booking details, available discounts and anything else you might need to know.

Most recent statistics from the Health and Safety Executive

Work related stress, anxiety and depression statistics in Great Britain 2014/15

Work-related stress, depression or anxiety is defined as a harmful reaction people have to undue pressures and demands placed on them at work.

The latest estimates from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) show:

- The total number of cases of work related stress, depression or anxiety in 2014/15 was 440,000 cases, a prevalence rate of

1380 per 100,000 workers.

- The number of new cases was 234,000 , an incidence rate of 740 per 100,000 workers. The estimated number and rate have remained broadly flat for more than a decade.

- The total number of working days lost due to this condition in 2014/15 was 9.9 million days. This equated to an average of 23 days lost per case.

- In 2014/15 stress accounted for 35% of all work related ill health cases and 43% of all working days lost due to ill health.

- Stress is more prevalent in public service industries, such as education; health and social care; and public administration and defence.

- By occupation, jobs that are common across public service industries (such as health; teaching; business, media and public service professionals) show higher levels of stress as compared to all jobs.

- The main work factors cited by respondents as causing work related stress, depression or anxiety (LFS, 2009/10-2011/12) were workload pressures, including tight deadlines and too much responsibility and a lack of managerial support.

Source: www.hse.gov.uk/Statistics/

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