

Managing HR Stress

By Kathy Greer

Never before have the times been as challenging as they are now for Human Resources (HR) professionals. The financial downturn and resulting embattled business organizations bring new challenges to HR every day. However, even in the best of times, the HR field is a hotbed of stress as HR professionals become involved in almost every corporate crisis - from leading the way through challenging national events to managing the people side of most company reorganization; such as layoffs, terminations and acquisitions. Are most HR professionals prepared to lead during times of crisis without giving too much of themselves away?

Workplace trauma is more public and better understood than ever before. “Caregiver” or “rescuer” stress typically describes a syndrome whereby someone in the helping professions such as a nurse, counselor, or first responder becomes traumatized by witnessing or absorbing the stories of others who deal with frequent crises. These professions have built-in ways of supporting these responders to deal with their stress. However, even though trauma may be normal in these cases, the results can still be devastating to the victims.

HR professionals are not typically included on the list of helping professionals who are considered most vulnerable to trauma. From an EAP perspective, this is one profession that should be added. It is widely accepted that trauma can impact the functioning of employees and that EAP intervention can help. However, the data reveals that HR professionals themselves are often the last to accept support from counseling resources.

HR professionals are on the front line, being asked to manage crises every day. For example, they lead by delivering the company message, and deal with employee behavior and performance - including feelings that may be out of control - with no internal support available to them. Add to these crises the chronic stressors of changing business landscape, new technology needs, understaffing, and isolation from others due to the confidential nature of HR work. It’s easy to see that the average HR professional is at risk. In any profession, the combination of acute stress, and chronic stress can be a recipe for disaster.

HR professionals need extra resiliency in order to avoid burnout. You can develop more “psychological hardiness” by recognizing what you have control over and taking small courageous steps. Here are some additional tips to help HR professionals shield themselves from the negative effects of stress:

- Recognize that the job requires the wearing of many hats and expect to change them often over the course of a day.
- Find sources of support that don’t violate confidentiality. A good friend, a small HR support group, or writing in a journal all help to relieve the stress of the job providing an outlet for concerns and feelings. For example, one HR group formed their own support group to debrief after any traumatic events.

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- Don't fall into a martyr role. Recognize that you only have so much of yourself to give and protect the rest. Pay attention to early warnings of stress overload so you will know when to pull back.
- Watch for negative thinking. Observe your thoughts while at work to note if the positive thoughts outweigh the negative. You want your glass to be half-full, not half-empty.
- Don't let the administrative side of the job outweigh the human interaction – your interest in people is probably the reason you entered the field originally. Keep a big picture view of your job and remember why you stay in the profession and how you are making a difference.
- Develop more “psychological hardiness” by engaging in small acts of courage, embracing change, and finding support through community.
- Take good care of yourself. Practice stress management techniques such as eating an emotionally and physically healthy diet, exercising, practicing meditation, and getting enough sleep.

Being an HR professional is an incredible challenge and honor. A thought leader in HR can influence a company's strategy that will in turn affect vast numbers of employees and customers. It is one of the few professions where one person can help a whole organization succeed and help the people in it to flourish. Accept that challenge and you will surely make a real difference in the lives of many.

Bio – Kathy Greer



Kathy Greer is founder and President of KGA, Inc., a unique HR consulting firm. Founded in 1982, KGA provides immediate services for EAP and HR issues to organizations around the world. KGA also provides training, coaching, consulting and wellness and has won a variety of Massachusetts workforce training grants for clients.

For the past decade, Kathy has been dedicated to helping HR and Benefits professionals prevent burnout and build resiliency. For seven years, she hosted an HR Conference at Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires and has co-lead the NEHRA Stress Management program with Liz Hahn since 2002.

Kathy's background includes work in the mental health and substance abuse field after earning a B.S. degree in management from Babson College and a M.Ed. in counseling from Northeastern University. She is licensed as a mental health counselor in Massachusetts and holds a CEAP.

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