Managing to make a difference

Jon Sutton talks to occupational psychologist **Emma Donaldson-Feilder**

To me, occupational psychology often seems preoccupied with how to bridge the gap between research and practice. How do you approach that personally?

The way I see it, the key thing for occupational psychologists is to take an evidence-based approach. Personally, I aim to sit firmly in both research and practice camps. I am actively involved in research in order to have the best possible evidence-base for my practice, while my consultancy and coaching within organisations ensures that the research is of genuine use in real-world settings. I need to go the heart of the issues presented by the client.

For example, about 10 years ago, I was asked to provide training for managers on how to manage stress in their teams, so I consulted the literature for evidence on which to base the training design. I found that there were very few research findings available, yet from personal experience I knew that my manager's behaviour had an enormous effect on my stress levels. The natural response was to do some research myself… for which I was lucky enough to team up with my colleagues Jo Yarker and Rachel Lewis.

And what did you find?

Our findings revealed a behavioural framework of what managers need to do in order to prevent and reduce stress in those they manage. This includes areas such as managing emotions, having integrity, proactive work management, empathy, and managing conflict. Since then, we have used a similar research approach to look at what managers need to do to engender employee engagement.

Most recently, we have brought the two together to create a behavioural framework setting out how managers create sustainable employee engagement – where individuals are engaged, but not to a point that they are at risk of stress, so both engagement and well-being can be sustained over time. We have also

conducted research looking at return to work following long-term sickness absence, resilience, managing conflict and cancer at work – always aiming to provide practical tools that help managers and organisations improve employee health and well-being.

I've often thought that if companies and organisations had to include employee engagement and well-being data alongside the financials in their annual reports, it could revolutionise the world of work overnight.

Yes, it would be great to see! Business in the Community (BITC) is campaigning to get businesses to report on these metrics – it has launched a pilot that will benchmark all FTSE 100 companies on their reporting of employee wellness and engagement. BITC research has shown that FTSE 100 companies that have robust arrangements for reporting on these factors outperform the rest of the index by 10 per cent, and some investment firms now use 'human capital issues' as part of their investment decision making. I would like to see this happening across the board. There is so much evidence now that employee health, well-being and engagement are linked to performance – it is clear that healthy, engaging people-management makes sound business sense. The problem is that not all employers recognise this – we need to get the message out there to employers and to public policy makers.

And I suppose getting that message out there is the collective responsibility of the discipline as a whole, not just the individual psychologists?

Individual psychologists have a role to play – we can all be advocates in our own ways. But messages are so much more powerful when they come from a collective voice and/or are endorsed by a recognised organisation. So, yes, I strongly believe that we have a collective responsibility to get key messages out there. And not just about healthy workplaces and good people management – there is an enormous range of topics on which psychology has valuable things to say. We need to engage as a profession with key influencers – employers, policy makers, national institutions, and so on. The Division of Occupational Psychology has formed a working group called OPIPP (Occupational Psychology in Public Policy) to focus specifically on getting the OP voice heard in public policy making. OPIPP's aim is to support the development and implementation of government policy through the more effective integration and application of evidence-based occupational psychology.

And is the government listening?

There are examples where occupational psychology has informed public policy making, such as the NICE guidelines on

mental well-being at work and the Health and Safety Executive management standards for stress – the research mentioned earlier on management competencies for preventing and reducing stress at work was funded by HSE and forms part of its guidance. But there are also examples where OP evidence could have made a difference if it had been used, or used more – a classic case being the Beecroft report on employment law. Overall, OP input has been limited and fragmented and sometimes policy makers draw on other professions – particularly economists – for comments on OP fields of expertise. That is why we set up OPIPP – to provide a stronger, collective voice and build relevant relationships. We won't change the situation overnight; it will take a concerted programme of relationship building and emphasising our messages. During 2012 OPIPP members held conversations with stakeholders to understand how best to do this, based on which we have developed an operational plan for the next few years designed to get the ear of the government and relevant others.

That must be keeping you busy! What would you change about your own working life?

Well, I always wish there were more hours in the day, days in the week, weeks in the year… So much to do, so little time! Particularly when combining my volunteer activities like OPIPP, the Council for Work and Health and other working groups, with my research, consultancy, coaching and all the other interesting things I want to do in this field – including earning a living, of course!

That financial aspect crops up a lot in my discussions with occupational psychologists – the need to really sell and market the individual and the discipline. There are lots of other consultants and coaches out there who claim to be able to get similar results, so what's your USP and how do you guard against overselling?

My USP is that I integrate research and practice – they are intertwined strands in all my work. For my research sponsors, this means I bring strong awareness, understanding and experience of the workplace settings in which research outputs are to be applied. I can help ensure that the research is grounded in real-world issues and generates really useful practical tools, guides and resources. For my consultancy and coaching clients, I draw on the wealth of my research experience, knowledge and

expertise, in order to ensure the best possible evidence base for the work I do with them. I have found that clients value the credibility of this research-into-practice approach as well as the effectiveness that results from using proven frameworks, methodologies, etc.

Taking an evidence-based approach guards against overselling. We have to be clear about the evidence behind the claims we make.

And in your own area of work, where is the evidence strong and where is 'further research needed'?

In terms of the role of the manager in employee health, well-being and engagement (HWE), there is now strong evidence that the line manager *is* important and through our work we've developed an understanding of the specific manager behaviours that make the difference to HWE. However, there is definitely 'further research needed' around how best to support managers to behave in these ways. My colleague Rachel Lewis and I have put together plans for a research programme that, firstly, develops the evidence base about what organisational factors impact on the relationship between manager behaviour and employee HWE outcomes, what

affects the success of management development in this context and how to ensure learning is transferred into managers' day-to-day management approach; and secondly, converts that evidence into interventions that combine management development with enhancing organisational and employee capability, in order to shift manager behaviour and enhance employee HWE in a sustainable way. We are currently seeking sponsors to join our research consortium to fund this research.

Can you give me an example of how any of our readers could shift their own behaviour?

Our research suggests that, for managers in particular, receiving upward feedback is an important factor in identifying and making behaviour change. By understanding how your management approach is perceived by those you manage, you can identify both strengths and potential areas for development – this can clarify specific behaviours that it would be beneficial to change and in what way. For example, being more accessible to team members, stepping in earlier to manage conflict in the team or taking a more consultative approach to managing the team.

Questions from Twitter

From @breckonjones – What are your top resilience tips for preventing (not reacting to) employee burnout?

Firstly, the very concept of prevention is really important to get across to employers: don't wait until people are suffering or burnt out before doing something – prevention is always better than cure.

Secondly, good people management is key to preventing stress and burnout: make sure anyone with responsibility for managing people receives development, feedback and support to ensure they manage in ways that are good for employee resilience/prevent burnout.

Thirdly, look at organisational culture, structure, processes and environment: make sure these support resilience through providing opportunities for social support, building confidence, autonomy, meaningful vision and clear goals.

Finally, there are ways to help individuals improve resilience through building their social support networks, developing self-efficacy, being clear about goals and purpose, improving their well-being, understanding their own strengths, and so on – but individual resilience development should not be done in isolation without considering the management and organisational context, otherwise it implies all the responsibility lies with the employee, when it needs to be a shared employee–employer responsibility.

From @Bungledinho How do you engage and motivate those on low wages already treated poorly by management?

Change the management! Seriously, either replace the managers or help them change the way they are managing – people need to be treated well if they are to be engaged and motivated.

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