

# Good managers could put an end to sick days

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*Absenteeism in the workplace costs South Africa between R12bn and R16bn each year in lost productivity. But a new study reveals that a good manager can help reduce employee sick days and boost output at work.*

A new study by UK company, Business in the Community, shows that managers are even more important in the workplace than previously thought – able to reduce stress and mental distress among employees, leading to a reduction in absenteeism at work.

This study says that managers play a vital role in spotting signs of employee stress, anxiety and depression. The report demonstrates a clear link between employee wellbeing and business performance and promotes tools for developing mental health literacy in managers within the workplace.

Occupation Care South Africa (OCSA) as well as Statistics South Africa claim that on any given day, over 15% of staff could be absent. More worryingly, they also believe that two out of three employees who fail to show up at the office are not physically ill – but are rather battling to cope or are unhappy at work.

A 2015 Bloomberg study ranked South Africa as the second “most stressed out” country in the world with Nigeria coming in first place. In 2015, the Johannesburg office of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) received 400 calls on average per day from distressed people.

Management development expert Bruce MacDonald says being a manager means by definition that people are being managed. “It is all about relationships and how to manage other people. This means being empathic and genuine and understanding what drives individuals.”

He explains, “Many employers think what employees really want is more money, but what employees really crave is recognition and feedback,” says MacDonald.

MacDonald is the convenor of the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB) Programme for Management Development (PMD). He says too often people are promoted to management positions in recognition for their outstanding technical skills, underestimating the importance that people skills and knowledge of human behaviour have on employee performance.

He quotes research by the University of New South Wales, which surveyed 5,600 people in 77 companies and found that the single, greatest influence on productivity was the ability of leaders to spend more time developing and recognising their staff, giving feedback and fostering co-operation.

Samantha Crous, Regional Director Africa and Benelux at the Top Employers Institute (TEI), says many companies fail to take into account how burn-out can affect staff morale and health. TEI statistics show that assistance offered to employees suffering from burnout increased significantly from 36% in 2013 to 46% in 2014.

In the UK, 44% of certified Top Employers have in-house doctors available for staff and some kind of stress management training or support. Other companies encourage wellness by offering yoga or tai chi classes.

But MacDonald says good management goes beyond offering wellbeing programmes – there is no substitute to really being able to listen to employees. Participants on the two-week PMD programme learn about general management as well as how to communicate and listen. “Believe it or not there are techniques for this,” he says.

GSB Director Professor Walter Baets says, “PMD has expanded from a South African course to a programme with up to 70% of participants coming from outside the country’s borders. Up to 10 different African countries are represented at a time. It has become the most diverse management development programme in Africa.”

MacDonald, who has run the programme for 17 years, says, “There are many examples of how the programme has benefited organisations financially, for example, the manager of one of the big four SA retail organisations used a Systems Thinking methodology that he picked up on this course to redesign the logistical processes in his region, resulting in savings of about R10m in the first year.”

For MacDonald a healthy bottom line is just one way to measure the impact of a good manager. “A good manager is somebody who knows him or herself well, understands how human beings function under pressure and how to really communicate. It is not as easy as it sounds. If you can get it right then you will see your team and your organisation flourish.”

He concludes, “There is no science behind it. Management is not a fact or a formula you can follow; there is an art to understanding how to manage people to ensure that they are happy, productive and want to come to work each day.”

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