

Beating back the culture of fear in the workplace

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Internal demands for higher productivity can sometimes be counterproductive, as they often take their toll on the psychological well-being of employees and, in turn, their performance.

According to Eurostat, more than 20 percent of workers in the European Union suffer stress as a result of the intense pressure and heavy workload they face.

This should concern not only employees, who suffer from deteriorating mental health, but also employers, who are obligated by E.U. law to take responsibility for such matters.

When employees suffer high levels of work-related stress, the result can be a state of heightened fear in the workplace. Although feelings of fear may arise unconsciously in the individual, they often result directly from a company's managerial strategy.

As Jean-Pierre Papart and [Yih-Teen Lee](#) show in their study, fear is not an effective way of managing.

The authors base their research on the Geneva Study, which measured the effect of work on mental health in people at 10 Swiss companies between 2001 and 2005.

The mechanisms of fear

Fear is a feeling, a consciousness of the effects that certain emotions produce in us. These emotions do not trigger an internal reaction but are an instrument of social coordination.

They serve to manage our common actions and help us mobilize our resources for a particular task.

In the context of the company, fear is often caused when management calls on employees to undertake more tasks or increase their productivity.

But why should a message designed to improve working practices give rise to fear?

Using Karasek's "demand/control" model, the authors of the study have evaluated the detrimental effects that demands for higher productivity may have on employees.

They show that when management asks employees to raise productivity without offering them sufficient flexibility to complete their greater workload, the result is often increased employee stress.

This happens when the workload — and particularly the psychological demands associated with it — exceeds the time and resources available to the worker.

Unsurprisingly, he or she will find the tasks increasingly difficult to achieve, resulting in increased stress levels and, in the long term, greater anxiety and fear at work.

Managing stress

However, as the authors point out, workflow and scope for decision making can be regulated.

The impact on employees of growing work-related pressure can be minimized by providing employees greater leeway in completing tasks, offering them professional support and clearly explaining the reasons behind the need for increased productivity.

Some key points to bear in mind:

- Anxiety levels rise when there is a greater workload and less room for maneuver. Conversely, when the room for maneuver is increased, anxiety levels fall.
- A key factor in managing stress is the amount of professional support available, whether from management or from colleagues. The results are clear: the greater the support, the less the anxiety provoked.
- The reasons for increased productivity demands must be clearly explained. According to the authors, the pursuit of greater productivity should not be presented as an end in and of itself.

Ultimately, HR departments must help management and employees find the right balance between workload and work capacity.

As the authors argue, by learning to better manage stress, we will go a long way toward overcoming fear in our organizations.

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