

LegCo Panel on Public Service

Management of Stress at Workplace in the Civil Service

Purpose

This paper presents for Members' information an overview of the assistance being provided to civil servants in the management of stress at workplace.

General

2. In the face of economic downturn, rising expectations and changing demands of the community, the Civil Service is going through a period of adjustment. To meet the challenges ahead, it is essential that the Civil Service keeps pace with the community it serves, continuously upgrade and enhance its efficiency. Against this background, civil servants need to adjust and cope with changes brought about by new initiatives, management reforms and changing demands. Civil servants, like members of the public, may face a certain degree of work stress at times and some of them may need to seek assistance in order to cope with the stress.

3. The Government adopts a two-pronged approach to help staff cope with stress at workplace : namely to provide professional counselling service to those in need, and, as a preventive measure, to facilitate supervisors to be alert of the problem and to help staff develop the necessary skills in stress management, and promote a balanced and healthy lifestyle through training programmes, seminars and other health education activities. Details of these measures are set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

Counselling Service

4. In 1999-2000, the Civil Service Bureau launched a 2-year pilot scheme to provide professional counselling service to help staff cope with stress arising from work and other personal problems. Under phase one of the scheme, some 30,000 civil servants working in 13 bureaux and departments had access to the counselling services of Hong Kong Christian Service and Christian Family Service Centre for nine months from June 1999 to February 2000. Apart from seeking professional advice over phone, the staff might

have individual interviews with counsellors or clinical psychologists if necessary. Phase two of the scheme lasted for six months from September 2000 to February 2001. It was extended to cover 120,000 staff in 82 bureaux and departments.

5. A total of 1,906 calls from 933 staff were received in the two phases of the scheme. Of the 933 staff who had called, 612 required counselling service. Altogether 1,585 telephone counselling sessions, 299 interviews with counsellors or clinical psychologists were conducted.

6. Following a review which received positive feedback from the users, user departments and the counselling agencies under the pilot scheme, the Government has decided to continue with the provision of professional counselling service on stress management to staff.

7. With effect from 2 July 2002, the Hong Kong Women's Christian Association was commissioned to provide a hotline counselling service to about 70,000 staff from 66 bureaux and departments, i.e. all bureaux and departments are covered except those which have their own in-house or procured counselling service, for a period of 24 months. The centrally provided service includes –

- (a) telephone counselling service from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., Monday to Friday except public holidays. Calls outside service hours will be answered by a paging service and counsellors will return call as soon as possible;
- (b) face-to-face counselling will be provided to staff by experienced counsellors or clinical psychologists, if necessary; and
- (c) referral to appropriate bodies if the service required is not covered by the scheme. Those bodies include public and private institutions providing psychiatric treatment, consultation, training and other welfare service.

Briefing sessions and publicity drives have been organized upon the commencement of the service.

8. Over the past five months (i.e. from July to November 2002), a total of 631 calls were received by the counselling agency. Of the staff who had called, 283 required assistance. 309 counselling sessions over phone and 88 interviews were provided. Over 50% of the counselling cases were

concerned with work-related problems, such as relationship with supervisor and colleagues, workload, job security, job adjustment etc., whilst the remaining cases were related to health, family, financial or other personal problems. According to feedback from users and the counselling agency, the service was useful and effective in helping staff to cope with stress arising from work and other personal problems. A comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of the service will be conducted after the first 12-month service period and the full 24-month service period.

9. Apart from the centrally provided service, about 100,000 staff of 12 departments can have access to different forms of counselling service arranged by their own departments. The Correctional Services Department, the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department, the Fire Services Department, the Hong Kong Police Force and the Social Welfare Department provide their staff with in-house counselling service, such as interviews with counsellors or clinical psychologists. The Customs and Excise Department, the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, the Government Land Transport Agency, the Department of Health, the Hongkong Post, the Housing Department and the Transport Department have engaged professional counselling agencies to provide hotline counselling to their staff.

Preventive and Educational Efforts

10. As a preventive measure, we have organized a series of personal effectiveness and stress management programmes and educational activities to promote healthy lifestyle and healthy workplace. These activities, amongst other things, aim to :

- (a) help participants to better understand the causes and outcomes of stress and enhance their capacity to handle them positively and constructively;
- (b) introduce some effective measures and simple tools for them to cope with stress and enhance the quality of their work and life; and
- (c) introduce some counselling skills that can be applied in work situations to support colleagues in their teams.

Examples of these activities are set out below.

Personal Effectiveness and Stress Management Programmes

11. Since 2000, we have organized seven seminars on stress management for civil servants at all levels and over 3,000 staff have participated in these seminars. In addition, stress management also forms part of the regular training programmes for different levels of staff at the directorate, senior and middle management. About 6,000 officers have also participated in training programmes on stress management and personal effectiveness since 2001-02 under the three-year training and development programmes.

Promotion of Healthy Lifestyle

12. To promote physical and mental well-being and healthy lifestyle, Government departments have also regularly organized campaigns and educational activities for their staff. For example, the on-going 'Healthy Lifestyles Campaign' organized by the Hong Kong Police Force has proved to be an effective preventive measure to help staff cope with stress at workplace. In the Correctional Services Department, regular workshops/ seminars on stress management and healthy lifestyle have also been organized for their staff. The Post Office has also launched a 'Healthy Life Week' in August this year to entrench the importance of balanced and healthy lifestyle and mental health.

Promotion of "Healthy Workplace"

13. In the context of occupational health, we have also organized activities to promote a healthy work environment. For example, we have jointly organized with the Hong Kong Tuberculosis, Chest and Heart Diseases Association an exhibition cum seminar on 'Healthy Workplace' in March this year. The objective is to enhance civil servants' awareness of the importance of occupational health. Amongst other things, topics on stress management, proper work posture and rest, stress-relieving exercise in the workplace, personal inter-relationship etc. were covered in the event.

14. In recent years, the Government has been promoting in the civil service the implementation of safety management system so that safety and health issues can be managed systematically. Consultation, communication, co-operation between management and staff are fundamental to a good safety management system. In this connection, departments have also set up their Safety Management Committees comprising both representatives from the management and staff to promote occupational health and, amongst other things, explore improvement measures to ensure a healthy work environment. Departments are also encouraged to organize promotional programmes to meet specific needs of their staff and enhance their awareness of health issues, such

as stress management. What we want to achieve is to foster a caring and safety culture in the civil service and to ensure that risks to people's health and safety at work are properly controlled.

Way Forward

Organisational-based

15. On departmental management side, we would sustain our present efforts in assisting Government departments to promote healthy lifestyle and workplace. We plan to develop guides and checklist for departmental management to monitor and provide assistance to staff in need. We would also organize seminars and experience-sharing workshops for departmental management to facilitate them to develop good practices/systems in management of stress at workplace and to enhance their skills that can be applied in work situations in identifying and supporting colleagues under stress. In the process, we would enlist expert input from relevant professional bodies.

16. Assistance would be provided to departmental management to enable them to develop stress management and related programmes to meet their specific needs. We would continue to encourage bureaux and departments to organize suitable occupational health education programmes to promote balanced work-life.

Individual-based

17. For individual civil servants, we plan to enrich our web-resources on stress management and extend the service hours late in evening and on holidays of the existing counselling service for more easy access of staff to professional advice on stress management.