Ethical wellness: it's a goal worth pursuing

The view that ethics is the right thing to do enjoys wide support. However, the fact that ethics is also good for you is not as well recognised: ethics is generally not linked to wellness. Yet ethics can make a big difference in the workplace both to minimize negative issues and to optimize positive outcomes.

Ethics and stress reduction

Stress-related illnesses have increased substantially over the last few years. While stress derives from many factors, one of the main sources of stress is a person's job, and today work related stress has become a frequent and costly issue in workplaces. A 2018 study conducted by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group revealed that more than 40% of all work-related illness is due to work-related stress, major depression, burnout and anxiety disorders.

In pursuit of minimizing workplace stress, there are a number of situations that organisations can and should address via their ethics initiatives.

Ethical conflicts – about what is right or wrong, good or bad, fair or unfair – increase work stress a great deal. This can occur when there is a clash between the values of the employee and employer, the most severe version being when the organisation advocates conduct that is unethical or illegal. For example, how many people would have felt ethically conflicted if they had worked for Bosasa, the company that provided government services based on an extensive network of bribes? When the company's practices conflict with employees' personal ethical values it leads to high level of stress.

Unethical conduct can be a major cause of stress, anger and dissatisfaction for all stakeholders. The offence and outrage that is caused when an employee is subject to discrimination or treated unfairly are but two of many examples. Such treatment can lead to long-term unhappiness that has the potential to manifest in negative relationships and poor performance.

A challenging and very stressful problem arises when unethical behaviour is an instruction from a superior, for example, when an employee is pressured to by-pass tender requirements or job application criteria. In a mostly ethical environment this would probably not represent a serious problem because the individual could deflect the instruction by reporting the matter to another superior or the relevant authorities. However, in a less ethical workplace failing to 'co-operate' by bending or ignoring the rules and regulations is likely to incur a personal cost. It means you may find yourself facing trumped up charges to be suspended or dismissed, or you might have to deal with more subtle repercussions such as being overlooked for an increase or a promotion. The ethical distress this generates is amplified by the fact that once the employee has complied with an unethical instruction, he/she becomes an accomplice who is guilty of committing the offence. And the defence that the employee was 'only following orders' is, in law, not very effective.

Ethics as a source of wellness

The degree of ethical health of the organisation – that is, the extent to which it has an ethical culture – has a major impact on employees' ethical wellness. Being part of an organisation that is characterised by honest, fair and respectful conduct does not only remove stress, but also contributes to employees' sense of well-being.

One positive consequence of an ethical culture that is worth being highlighted is that it entrains better quality relationships. When you work with people who behave with integrity and whom you can rely on, it makes for very positive interactions that are free from unnecessary stress.

An ethical workplace also serves to increase employees' commitment to the organisation and build greater levels of responsibility and accountability. It follows that this has a positive impact on performance and productivity.

In addition to organisational values that obviously impact employees' wellness, such as honestly and respect, the value of care can have an impact on employees' stress. An ostensible obstacle to the inclusion of care as a value stems from the fact that the event or circumstance that warrants care, compassion or understanding is often not work related: a sick child, a family conflict or a divorce. If the organisation subscribes to a 'work is work and home is home' view, these issues would fall outside its boundaries – although the impact will still affect the employee at work. But if the organisation recognises that the impact of work and home co-exist in employees, helping them – as a supportive leader or by providing access to suitable counselling – can reduce the employee's stress and help them to cope with the problem better.

Collectively these factors contribute to higher levels of trust which, in turn, results in other positive outcomes, such as a higher degree of confidence in management and a greater sense of workplace security and certainty. The value of trust is such that it can well be regarded as the primary currency that organisations and their leaders need to protect and preserve.

Of course, an ethical culture cannot eliminate employees' stress. But working in an ethical environment can minimize their stress and increase their peace of mind. As such, organisations should expand their ethical initiatives to encompass these outcomes. In today's complex and challenging times, this is a goal worth pursuing.

Cynthia Schoeman is the MD of Ethics Monitoring & Management Services which provides a comprehensive range of services and products to help organisations to improve ethical conduct, manage ethics more effectively, and build an ethical culture.