Supporting Staff in Antagonistic Environments by Training

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Abstract: Purpose – This article aims to consider the impact on employees of working in antagonistic environments. Design/methodology/approach – This paper considers how organizations can best prepare employees for this type of assignment, including pre-assignment training and counseling, as well as on-going post-assignment support and the pivotal role of line managers in trauma management. Findings – The paper utilizes the experiences of two organizations, Action Aid International and Concern Worldwide to outline their approach to supporting employees working in antagonistic environments. Originality/value – This paper responds to a growing debate around the impact of extensive exposure to violence, tragedy and natural disasters for employees of a range of international organizations.

Keywords: Training, Ethics, Talent management, Multinational, Wellness

1. Introduction

Travelling overseas on business is an expected and exciting part of the job for very many employees and something that takes place without incident or reflection once they are back on home ground and looking ahead to their next project. Yet, for Employees who are asked to work overseas in what can be referred to as antagonistic environments, their experience of working abroad is very different and has the potential to have a long and lasting impact on their lives and those close to them.

In this article, we explore how organizations can help employees prepare for assignment overseas and discuss the type of post-assignment support that can be made available. It also looks at the unique role of line managers in supporting employees who are working in antagonistic environments and considers their role in minimizing the short- and long-term impact of these assignments on the individuals involved.

2. Defining the Antagonistic Environment

Our world of 24-hour news and online current affairs content enables us to glance into antagonistic environments around the world and catch a sense of the violence, tragedy and natural disasters that are taking place there. For most of us, these are regions that we tend to avoid when planning trips abroad, and we will take travel advice from the government seriously. However, for those whose work may involve news gathering, aid work or onsite development and who are employed by construction and engineering companies, multi nationals, NGOs or news agencies, their work may take them directly into dangerous terrain.

The BBC, in their Editorial Guideline [1] defines an antagonistic environment as: “[. . .] a country, region or specified area subject to war, insurrection, civil unrest, terrorism or extreme levels of crime,banditry or lawlessness or public disorder. It also includes areas with extreme climate or terrain”.

It is therefore very easy to see that working in such an environment (particularly over a long period of time) can have an impact on employees both physically and psychologically as well as on their colleagues and families. It has been acknowledged for some time [2] that extensive exposure to violence, tragedy and natural disasters for employees of NGOs and news agencies in particular is substantial.

For many of these employees, addiction disorders, relationship breakdown, poor performance and behavioural change are common symptoms of stress-related illness that can kick in if duties of care protocols are not adhered to. Employers have a particular responsibility to employees and volunteers to prepare them for their experience and support them in whatever capacity is required before, during and after their assignment.

3. Understanding the Human Response to Trauma

According to a study by the Institute of Employment Studies (1996), 90 per cent of people will experience a traumatic event at some point in their lives, and of this majority, one-third will develop trauma-related illnesses and are likely to have longer-term symptoms that would benefit from professional help (Rick et al., 2006). It is only a very small minority of people who will suffer from a persistent impairment that can affect their ability to deal with “normal” life. For those who are working in antagonistic environments, it is therefore highly likely that exposure to ongoing trauma will impact in some way.

Journalists, as well as emergency service professionals and aid workers, can be particularly affected by trauma even when not directly involved in a situation because as observers they may frequently be exposed to violent and disturbing scenes, including war, riots and natural disasters. Although those working in the frontline in antagonistic environments can be well prepared for the exposure to dramatic events, they may be less prepared for the effects of cumulative trauma – the relentless nature of their work which deprives them of the body and psyche’s
Fatigue, lack of clear management, separation from families and friends can be a powerful cocktail resulting in debilitating stress-related symptoms. However, educated and emotionally intelligent managers will be able to spot the early signs of burnout and identify changes in behaviour at an early stage that will enable them to address the problem.

Managers who are trained to monitor their staff will have an eye out for signs of increased anxiety – whether this is through staff withdrawing from team activities, resorting to addictive behaviours, delivering impaired work performance or a multitude of other signifiers. Resilient managers will have the capacity to lead a resilient team if they are well supported by their employer and have appropriate well-being strategies in place.

A proactive employee assistance programme can enhance resilience in such situations, with 24/7 telephone support lines available to all and online resources with self-care programmes and stress awareness material supporting staff around the clock and around the world.

4. Preparation for Assignment Overseas

An employer has two distinct roles when it comes to supporting employees who will be working in a antagonistic environment. First, they have a duty to prepare and plan for a crisis (and by virtue of this manage the risk involved as far as is possible) as well as preparing for the likely trauma the identified situations might bring. Alongside this, employers have a duty to plan their response to any incident in an appropriate and timely manner.

Training is, of course, at the heart of this preparation, and it is useful to think of it as a psychological inoculation, just like a flu jab, that can help to protect employees if the worst does happen. After all, organizations regularly conduct fire drills to ensure employees know what to do if there is a fire in the workplace; training for trauma and critical incidents is the same thing, but this time the focus is on preparing employees for the psychological impact of incidents that can be debilitating and long lasting unless spotted at an early stage.

While it is not possible to train people for every eventuality, an awareness of what we can do in a range of situations can help to reduce feelings of helplessness for both managers and employees and enhance their resilience.

At Concern Worldwide, an international non-governmental organization that seeks to tackle hunger in some of the poorest countries in the world, for example, all employees are screened for medical fitness prior to deployment. This includes medical fitness examination, in-depth review of medical history followed by a health briefing and stress management workshop.

“The physical and psychological health of our employees is paramount before, during and after their assignment and we seek to identify any pre-existing conditions that individuals might have so that we can support them while they are overseas”, explained Maria Duffy, health advisor at Concern Worldwide.

“We also require that all employees assigned to countries of medium to high security risk take part in a one week antagonistic environment training programme. The course deals with potential threats and risks, such as kidnap, riots or natural disasters, which could occur in many of our countries. The preparation and security training itself can be a challenging experience for staff but the course prepares them to respond appropriately in a crisis. Staff are also given a full security briefing on the country they are going to, regardless of the level of risk”.

“The screening process along with the health and security training prepares staff to be effective and ready for risks in assignment countries. Our pre deployment procedures increase awareness of risks in our overseas countries, emphasize precautions to take and underlines the support that Concern offers to staff”, says Concern Worldwide’s Duffy.

Similarly, at Action Aid, an international charity fighting poverty, deployments, particularly in emergency situations, focus on the psychosocial wellbeing of employees.

“All deployments are accompanied with a pre-medical examination, psychosocial counseling and well-being assessment which is followed by a post-deployment briefing that includes a medical check-up and psychosocial assessment. Alongside this, on location, employees and volunteers have access to an on-site dedicated safety, health and security briefing. They will also be able to access a third-party service to assist them with on-the-ground support and enquiries, including cultural, housing and social orientation issues”, explained Jayanta Bora, Head – Strategic HR, Systems & Operations at Action Aid International.

Training to prepare not scare employees

“A dedicated period of preparation training is an important part of any plan to send teams overseas to undertake business in complex or antagonistic environments. In the same way that the psychological preparation is fundamental, it’s also necessary to put employees under a small amount of pressure via practical training sessions that take them out of their comfort zone to help them start the preparation for tackling difficult situations ahead”, explains Rupert Godesen, Managing Director at antagonistic Environment Security Training (HASP) Training.

This type of training focuses on the point at which an individual employee receives their offer to work overseas and covers research, such as finding out about local curfews, attitudes to foreigners and recommendations to find someone in your office or network who has been
recently – as well as documentation, including advice to make a will, letters of introduction, emailing or copying all your documents to a memory stick just in case hard copy versions are stolen.

Training should also highlight probable scenarios that will equip employees with the skills required to make an informed assessment should an incident take place; should they go on, or should they call it a day and back away or head for the airport?

“Confident, well prepared, safety conscious staff that can carry out simple security reviews by themselves are much happier and also reflect well on their employer. This type of training doesn’t need to be antagonisticist people learn best when they’re relaxed, comfortable and in a conducive environment to sharing ideas and life lessons. However, it does need to be part of planning for and supporting employees who are working overseas in antagonistic.

Antagonistic Case study: supporting staff in conflict situations.

In December 2012, employees of Action Aid were affected by conflict between rebels and government in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo. The situation resulted in rebels taking over the town, leaving communities without protection. The Action Aid offices and staff in Goma were impacted and looting of shops resulted in the closure of many businesses.

Jayanta Bora from Action Aid International explained how the organization responded:

“Naturally, the situation put the safety and security of local and expatriate staff at risk. The work of our programme was affected, food supplies were limited, banks were closed and staff had no access to their salary or cash. There were reports of some members of staff being robbed by rebels and more widely our staff members were traumatized”.

“We took immediate steps to evacuate expatriate staff and set up a crisis management committee that met regularly. We mapped the homes of local staff members and conducted daily staff checks. We were able to access cash from Rwanda advance staff salaries so they had funds once again. Counseling provision was also implemented to support staff at all levels”.

“The planning and preparation we had put in place for this type of incident, including staff awareness training, ensured we could respond swiftly here. Our immediate response ensured staff felt supported and safe and could access psychological support as required so that ultimately we were able to continue the invaluable work of the programme in this region”.

5. Ongoing Post-Assignment Support

In an ideal situation, employees should be supported before, during and after assignments and managers often need to be trained to talk to their staff on return from a mission overseas. The emotionally intelligent manager will have an awareness of the psychological and emotional needs of those returning from challenging environments, and will have protocols in place for each staff member to be given appropriate support.

This might take the form of a formal session with the manager or a designated team member to enable a genuine opportunity for the employee to talk about their experience. It could also take the form of a group session where team members who have shared difficult times can talk together with an empathic facilitator. It is crucial that these sessions are not seen as “performance management” meetings or some form of critical appraisal where staff will not want to own feelings of vulnerability of impaired resilience. A combination of group and individual might be facilitated by an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provider, where the content of the sessions is seen as totally confidential, but allows the opportunity to explore feelings and ideas.

6. The Pivotal Role of Managers in Trauma Management

The managers of employees affected by trauma and critical incidents have a particular burden in these circumstances, as they will themselves be impacted by what they hear. The ‘ripple effect’ of trauma can quickly take hold across a team or department and affect the functioning of even the most mature organizations. Yet, managers who are well trained in spotting aspects of the effects of traumatic events on their workforce will gain respect from their teams as well as feeling confident in their own leadership skills.

7. Conclusion

The key to a resilient workforce. None of us know how we will react to working in a antagonistic environment over a short or sustained period of time, but ultimately the key to emotional resilience in these circumstances is to be prepared both physically and psychologically for the challenges that may present while on overseas assignment, whether you are a volunteer, employee or manager. As an employer, you need to know that your employees are ready to deliver the project that is required of them. This will only happen if you can prepare them as far as possible. Well-trained managers who have the ability to support their teams before, during and after assignments will reap the rewards of a far more emotionally resilient workforce than would be the case if staffs are just assumed to be able to “cope” with abnormal circumstances. Flexibility and preparedness training requirements for staff support in antagonistic environments is essential.

Reference


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