OVERVIEW

Stress often occurs when people feel they do not have the resources to do their jobs. Those in supervisory positions have indicated that among the things they find valuable is training designed to assist them to work with employees who are struggling with mental health problems. In this pilot, a 3.5 hour evidence-based training session was developed to empower managers to create healthy work environments by providing them with tools and resources. Managers and supervisors were trained on how to work with staff struggling with mental illness and how to work with these staff while supporting their mental and emotional well-being.

PROJECT DETAILS

The training was initially piloted with eight managers and supervisors from the UC Davis Administrative Management Group (ADMAN) Executive Committee. A focus group with four of these participants was held. The purpose of the focus group was to understand the types of challenges managers and supervisors face, to identify the skills they would like to learn to make them more effective, and to gather feedback on the pilot training they attended.

One of the suggestions the focus group made was to use actual UC Davis cases. Focus group participants volunteered to assist in developing cases based on examples from their experiences with challenging managerial situations that they perceived were related to mental health problems. These cases were then incorporated into the training material.
The initial training included eight managers and supervisors recruited from the UC Davis Administrative Management Group (ADMAN) Executive Committee. Participants in the second and third training sessions were recruited from the 307 staff who participated in a mental health gatekeeper training. From this recruitment, 18 managers and supervisors registered for training.

The number of employees managed by the training participants ranged from 0 to 275 with a median of six employees. The range of years that the participants have been managers ranged from 2 to 30 years with a median of 12 years. The participants had been employed in a university setting from 1 to 40 years with a median of 16 years.

The material covered in the training helped to re-frame how managers could approach employees without trying to provide “treatment” and without taxing the working relationship. A participant indicated, “I’m feeling encouraged to have some difficult conversations that I’ve been putting off.”

One participant stated, “I will absolutely use what I learned in communicating with an employee about a sensitive issue. I have much more confidence in my ability to set the stage for a constructive conversation after this training.”

The teaching content was also rearranged to begin with the situations that managers found most challenging.

Learning objectives for the subsequent trainings were that by the end of the training, participants would be able to: (1) identify when to intervene with staff, (2) apply skills to effectively intervene, and (3) practice coping strategies to manage stress associated with intervening. To allow for classroom participation, registration was limited to 10 participants. All participants were asked to complete pre- and post-questionnaires that asked about their experiences and perceptions of managing employees.

Evaluation data and discussions during the course indicate that there is a reluctance to manage employees when there is suspicion that the employee is suffering from a mental illness. In most cases, the employees who are struggling begin as “model” employees, thus, there is a tendency to wait and hope that the problematic behavior will resolve over time. Managers and supervisors indicate that they have heavy workloads. It can be difficult to find the additional time required to effectively and consistently follow-up with an employee who is struggling. The tools that were taught in the module helped to develop a plan for follow-up and collaboration between the manager and employee.

The delay in broaching the problematic behavior with the employee is also the result of a fear of escalating a situation that has become tense because of low productivity or disruptive behavior. Material in the training covers techniques for deescalating tense situations.

A number of environmental challenges arose during this pilot. Throughout the pilot period, there were ongoing union contract negotiations and preparations for two strikes. This limited the ability of all managers and supervisors to participate in the trainings and to help with recruitment of participants. Another challenge was the campus closure due to wildfires. A training had been scheduled during that time and had to be cancelled due to campus closure. The training was rescheduled, and despite short timelines, managers and supervisors still registered. In addition, one of the participants suggested, “Force (encourage) more men to attend.” In the three trainings, only two men attended.

While there is a current trend towards creating web-based training, the participant feedback indicated that the discussions were one of the most valuable aspects of the training. One participant summed it up with, “It was very helpful to hear what other managers are struggling with and the tips you gave to help them.” This type of interaction can only be created in face-to-face settings where people feel safe to honestly express their doubts and concerns.