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Sophrology, Organisational Change & Employee Well-Being

OBSERVATIONS ON THE USE OF SOPHROLOGY AS PART OF AN ORGANISATIONAL
CHANGE PROCESS

Dr Samantha Evans
Lecturer in Human Resource Management
Kent Business School
S.J.Evans@kent.ac.uk
+44 (0)1227 824231

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Observations on the use of Sophrology as part of an organisational change process

INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on one case study organisation and their offering of sophrology to support employees during a period of significant change. Research was conducted in the head office of a FTSE 100 international financial services group who is in the process of closing its London operation and making redundancies over a two year period. The organisation has been mindful of its responsibilities towards its employees and offered a number of employee well-being initiatives alongside more traditional outplacement services. The support for well-being included sophrology sessions for a small number of staff. Research was conducted by Dr Samantha Evans of Kent Business School to assess the value and use to employees of the sophrology sessions on offer.

METHODS

The research was conducted as a pilot study to appraise the efficacy of offering sophrology to employees during a period of challenging changes. Three key questions directed the study:

1. Do employees value the offer of sophrology sessions?
2. To what extent did participants practise sophrology outside of the guided sessions?
3. To what extent does the offer of sophrology sessions influence employee well-being?

Data was collected via two methods: a survey to measure the well-being of employees participating in the sophrology sessions; followed by one-to-one telephone interviews with the survey respondents. Initially, participants were asked to complete a brief survey instrument measuring their affective wellbeing using the positive and negative affectivity schedule (PANAS: Watson, Clark and Tellegen 1988). The schedule comprises 10 positive and 10 negative adjectives, which respondents rate on a 5-point Likert scale, in terms of how they feel in general in the workplace. The study involved a total of six employees who all worked at Head Office and had participated in at least one sophrology session.

Respondents to the well-being survey were invited to participate in a follow-up interview to discuss the following:

- their feelings of well-being;
- their perception of the sophrology sessions (as well as the other well-being and traditional outplacement support on offer by the organisation);
- the impact of the sophrology exercises on immediate well-being during the sessions;
- the practise and impact of the sophrology exercises outside of the sessions and influence on employee well-being.

Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis over the telephone and all interviews were carried out by Dr Evans. Participants were invited to talk around the topics outlined above and advised of the ethical approval of the project by the University of Kent, the confidentiality of their responses, and the neutrality of Dr Evans. In an effort to increase the validity and trust of participants the interviews were not recorded, but extensive notes were made.

FINDINGS

Employee feelings of wellbeing

Participants completed the PANAS survey of well-being in March 2016. The survey found that staff had relatively low to moderate levels of anxiety and maintained some positive feelings about their work. However, with such a small sample size no statistical analysis or conclusions can confidently be drawn from this work. During the interviews staff discussed their feelings of insecurity and anxiety following the announcement of the Head Office closure:

There's a big loss of stability and job security.

The company was like a very close knit family. The culture was very very good, but morale is now low. The culture changed almost overnight.

I'm feeling disappointed.....I'm hacked off, really peed off and have a strong sense of fear.

Participation in sophrology sessions

All six employees who were interviewed had participated in the sophrology sessions, although only one had attended all six sessions on offer. Some of these employees had also participated in other organisational support on offer by the company during this period of change, such as mindfulness workshops, positive change seminars and personal development coaching. Time pressures were cited as the most common reason for non-attendance. All six interviewees were familiar with the concept of sophrology as they had

been offered sessions in the past at their workplace. Some spoke of having a positive outlook towards sophrology while others mentioned feelings of apprehension:

I was quite apprehensive as I didn't know what was required. That feeling went almost as soon as I went into the room.

I initially thought it might be odd, but it was actually very useful.

Value of sophrology on immediate employee wellbeing during the sessions

All participants spoke positively about the sophrology sessions and had high praise for the exercises they were taught. References were made to the opportunity to reflect and relax in what had become a stressful workplace environment:

It does make me relax – I have been known to fall asleep in the session.

It's a chance to reflect and focus on yourself – to 'wring out your sponge'. An opportunity to relax.

I enjoyed them as it was nice to switch off and relax – to think, but not think.

It makes you aware of where the tension in your body is through the body scan exercise.

Practise of sophrology and impact on longer-term employee well-being

Nearly all the participants practised at least one of the sophrology exercises outside of the sessions and in their own time. Participants drew on the exercises for different reasons and at different time of the day. Some actively engaged in the exercises while at work to reduce feelings of anxiety and stress:

I pick up on some of the techniques when I need it. I draw on it when I'm in stressful meetings.

My life is quite stressful and I feel quite overloaded a lot of the time so I use the square breathing in stressful times. I also use the neutral object exercise to help clear my mind when I'm feeling overloaded.

It's about stepping back and taking a moment. You need to recognise that you need to do it – I feel it in my shoulders and know I need to take a moment.

I get quite pulled down by other people's negativity and that makes me feel low so the sophrology can help with that.

Others used the techniques to aid sleeping:

I use the square breathing a lot, if I ever can't get to sleep.

Some of the exercises have helped me with my sleep.

I practise sophrology techniques when I have trouble sleeping or a bad headache. I tend to use the sit up, breathe out, lift arms up, fold arms and breathe out.

Others incorporated the exercises into the daily routines:

I try to practise the techniques outside – I'll walk and do the three minute breathing and focus exercise. Also do stretching at my desk to energise my body.

It's been four weeks since the last session and I practise one exercise a day, usually the breathing and meditation ones.

It's helped me 100%. I've done the breathing techniques such as the square breathing; the visualisation of breathing in the sun and the body scan. I take 5 minutes to do the body scan to relax.

The effect on feelings of well-being and reduced anxiety were also noted:

When I do the exercises I feel more energised. I think it's helped and when I need it then I do use it.

Although I struggled to practice in between sessions I've felt a difference in myself and other people have noticed.

I still use the sophrology techniques to step back and take a moment, particularly the breathing exercises although not the visualisation ones.

Barriers to participation and practise

While all participants were positive about the opportunity to attend the sophrology workshops, only one attended all six sessions. During the interviews the question of barriers to attendance at the sessions and barriers to practising sophrology outside of the sessions was discussed. Time pressures were cited as a significant factor for both attendance and practise:

I struggle to find time in the day and then if it's later in the day then I'm tired. I tended to drift off in the sessions which isn't so good.

I don't do the exercises as often as I should – I find it difficult to find the time. I know the instructor said we could do some of the exercises on the train, but I didn't think that was very realistic.

I haven't yet adopted it for myself or practiced it in between sessions as I only have so much time in the day.

I wish, I just wish that I could make myself make more effort for me.

Others mentioned specific exercises that they found difficult to use, especially the visualisations:

I find the visualisations a bit harder to do.

While others cited the timing of the sessions, both in terms of the scheduling and the length:

It was a bad time of the day – between 4.00-5.00 pm on a Tuesday.

An hour session can make it hard for fitting in with everyone else.

Maybe an hour for a session is a little bit too long.

Some talked about their personal preferences for practising the exercises mentioning that this should be taken into account in the sessions themselves:

I prefer to be sitting down when doing the exercises as I struggle standing up with the balance.

Overcoming barriers to participation

Some discussion concerned suggestions for improving the take-up of sophrology sessions within the workplace. All believed that the sessions were beneficial to their well-being at work, particularly during the stressful context within which they were now employed:

I think all employees would find sophrology quite useful if it were made more widely available.

I think a lot of people would find it very useful as you need a bit more than just developmental support.

Suggestions for improving the perception and take up of sophrology at work were plentiful and often included the marketing and communication of the offering:

Put it under the well-being banner as so many people don't know or realise that they have to look after themselves

While I think it would be useful for my colleagues, a big stumbling block is that a lot of people would find it a 'bit out there'. You need to market it accordingly, maybe as an 'unexpected bonus'.

How the sessions are communicated is important as to whether people would be interested in attending. Also need to ensure that they attend all sessions.

I think it would be useful to offer it as development sessions for all staff whereby you talk about all sorts, such as mindfulness, MBTI, career anchors. Hit it on all levels so they feel they'll get something tangible out of it – testimonials might help.

Others had more practical suggestions for encouraging attendance at the session:

You need to find the right time of the day to run the sessions – I think that would make a difference to the take up.

You could offer it as a walking session – maybe at a lunchtime as that can be a way to get people to open up and have a conversation, but discuss the techniques and how they can be incorporated into daily routines.

CONCLUSIONS

This pilot study research suggests there are benefits to be gained from offering sophrology sessions to employees - even during the most difficult of circumstances – as such intervention can still have a positive impact on employees’ physical and mental health. Participants did practice the sophrology exercises outside of the guided sessions and used them in a range of contexts to address a variety of issues, although time pressures were the greatest challenge for employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations made here derive from the pilot study conducted and are twofold: (1) suggestions are made concerning how to improve the take up of sophrology in the workplace; (2) recommendations are made to develop an evidence-based approach to explore the value of sophrology to employees and employers in the workplace.

Improving employee participation in sophrology

- Ensure the communication & ‘marketing’ of the offering is appealing to employees and appropriate to the workplace culture.
- Use testimonials from previous participants when communicating and marketing sophrology sessions.
- Communicate sophrology as a well-being initiative.
- Initially offer sophrology in conjunction with other well-being initiatives with which employees may be more familiar e.g. MBTI; mindfulness; personal development.
- Carefully consider the timing of sessions – both in terms of the time of day and length of sessions.

Research: going forward

To encourage organisations and their employees to make wider use of sophrology in the workplace, an evidence based approach to research would provide an integrated and structured approach to investigating the value of sophrology to organisations and their employees. Such an approach uses a variety of sources of evidence to improve the validity of the data collected to increase confidence in the research findings. A variety of methods and studies could be used, as listed below. However, these suggestions are by no means exhaustive:

- Use the PANAS survey of well-being to periodically measure employees' well-being; in particular before embarking on a course of sophrology; during the course of sophrology and longer term. This data could be compared to non-participants.
- Employers may be more interested in organisational-specific measures such as the effect of sophrology on employee performance using a range of indicators; employee engagement i.e. the Gallop Q12 survey instrument could be used in a similar way to the PANAS survey outlined above.
- It is important to investigate participants' practise of sophrology exercises outside of the guided sessions, and where possible to study this on a long-term basis to assess the sustainability of employee well-being through sophrology. Additional questions could be added to a survey instrument to measure this.
- If embarking on a course of sophrology sessions with an employer or group of employees, then informal interviews, similar to those used in this pilot study, could give a deeper understanding of the perceptions; value; practise and barriers of the sophrology sessions on offer.