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Article

Yogic Practices and Human Resource Management

Naresh C Saxena and Saran S. Singh

Abstract: The process of managing people in an organised way to assist a company in achieving its goals is known as human resources management. An increase in workplace stress, which is detrimental to an employee's health and well-being as well as the performance of the organisation. Certain guiding concepts and precepts are evergreen and can support the development of human resources while ensuring the wellbeing of the individual and the company. In this study, we examine how the methods and practices of yoga might benefit public organisations by lowering employee stress levels and boosting their altruism and greedlessness.

Keywords: occupational health; stress; human resource development

Introduction

In Europe during the 1800s, the field of human resources started to take shape. During the industrial revolution, Charles Babbage came up with a basic concept that was expanded upon. These polymaths came to the conclusion that people were essential to an organization's success. They stated the belief that happy people produced flawless work and that the company could not survive without happy personnel. The early 20th century saw the acceptability of human resource management as an academic field grow as researchers such as Fredrick Winslow Taylor started recording methods of generating commercial value via the scientific management of labour forces. The function has evolved beyond transactional work as a result of globalisation, technological improvements, and pioneers' scholarly research.

Raising the productivity of work force remains the main objective of Human Resource Management and the experts in this field are constantly scouring the world of ideas for adoption or adaptation in furtherance of this objective. The focus is on developing a work force which can effectively help the organisation to meet its objectives. There are three fundamental components of human resources development: individual development, career development and organisation development. Of these three the most important is the development of the individual which involves developing individual skills, knowledge and improving the psychosocial work environment. Strategic improvement in workplace performance depends, among other things, upon a healthy and mentally focused workforce. Workplace stress and improving resilience to stress is engaging many organisations as they struggle to meet organisational restructuring demanded by globalisation and technology.

Stress at the Work Place

Stress is commonly understood as a mentally or emotionally disruptive or disquieting influence or alternatively, a state of tension or distress caused by such an influence. Stress is the inability to cope with the perceived threat to one's mental, physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Definitions found in psychological books also focus on the adverse effect of stress on the physical and mental body. Stress is a psycho-physiological arousal that can fatigue the body systems to the point of malfunction and disease.

Occupational stress is a widespread phenomenon and is a contributory factor to absenteeism, physical and psychological illnesses and lowered productivity. In the 1990s surveys conducted in the U.S.A by Northwestern National Life Insurance Company, Princeton Survey Research Associates, St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company, Yale University and The Families and Work Institute

revealed high levels of stress at the work place. The surveys also indicated that job stress was associated with health complaints. A subsequent 2000 Integrasurvey also reported that nearly 65% of workers said that work place stress had caused difficulties. The survey also revealed that stress caused health related problems. 62% of the workers had work related neck pain; 44% reported stress in eye; 38% complained of hurting hands and 34% reported difficulty in sleeping because of stress.

The World Health Organisation has dubbed stress as an epidemic and a survey done in U.K. found that senior human resources professionals believe stress to be the biggest threat to the future health of the workforce. It is estimated that 175 million working days are lost each year in the U.K. due to sickness absence out of which half are stress related. In the USA the number of employees calling in sick tripled from 1996 to 2000, and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work reported similar figures. A subsequent European Commission Survey found that occupational pressures were responsible for 30% of workers suffering from back pain, 20% complaining of 'stress'; 20% feeling fatigued and 13% with headaches. Work related stress has also been associated with hypertension and with conditions such as anxiety and depression.

Management of Stress

The state of stress is not fixed. It remains in a continuous state of flux in which the cognitive, behavioural and physiological processes interact. However, it is possible to aggregate information and come to a conclusion about the state of stress. Though the stress management field lacks strong theoretical foundation, there are some models which help to manage the stressors. One model of stress and health is interactional model in which the magnitude of a stress response can be better predicted by understanding the stressor in the context of the disposition of an individual, thereby facilitating a better understanding of individual differences to stress response.

While Levi's interactional model is a general model applicable to all situations of stress, Karasek's Job Strain model is helpful in identifying those work characteristics which might contribute to job stress. Occupational stress research has widely used this model. Karasek's Job Strain Model proposes that when the demands of an occupational situation exceed the levels of control over the job and the social support available to the individual then there is an increase in psychological and physical illness. Levels of control over the job entail decision making authority, support from supervisors and colleagues and confidence to get the designated job done. Psychological health and job satisfaction are the two outcome variables frequently used to measure job strain. Psychological health is a sense of wellbeing which is context free, while job satisfaction refers mainly to the feelings that individuals have in relation to their jobs i.e., the feeling is specific to the job. The state of stress manifests where there are low levels of psychological health and job satisfaction. Management of stress has to be a priority in human resource management in public enterprises.

What is Yoga

Yoga is an ancient oriental science and an eastern perspective on physical, mental and emotional health. At the personal level, a large number of successful businessmen are practicing yoga. A book titled 'Autobiography of a Yogi' was the only book downloaded by Steve Jobs on his personal iPad 2 before he died shortly after the launch of the product. A large number of companies are encouraging their employees to take up yoga.

Yoga considers the body as an instrument which enables the individual to evolve and to live and work fruitfully. A correct practice of Yoga is believed to fructify in health or wholeness through the rediscovery of the yoked reality of the experience of the individual of the body and mind. It brings the body and mind together into one harmonious experience. The body, mind and breath are connected to energise and balance the whole system. Routine practice of Yoga brings better health, mental peace and an integration which are precursors to a higher mental state. Yoga seeks to remove nine obstacles to a fulfilling life which are familiar to people of all places and in all eras: illness, mental stagnation, doubt, lack of foresight, fatigue, over indulgence, illusions about one's true state of mind, lack of perseverance and regression.

Yoga probably arrived in the west in the mid- nineteenth century. In the late nineteenth century a few famous Indian yogis like Swami Vivekananda introduced yoga to USA. However, yoga became widely known and accepted only in the twentieth century. With the spread of knowledge of the beneficial effects of Yoga it gained wider acceptance and has also gained respect as a valuable tool for the management of stress and improving health and general wellbeing. Whereas the western experience of Yoga is generally limited to the practice of pretzel like poses, breathing and meditation, Yoga also includes a large body of precepts, attitudes and techniques though only a handful of western practitioners ever go beyond the level of posture practice. Yoga could be defined as a set of practices which could holistically develop the employees and equip them employee with many practical tools to deal with work and life. This paper builds on 'eastern wisdom and western knowledge' theme in the context of human resource development.

Yoga Techniques for Stress Management

Yoga is perhaps the most effective way to deal with various disabilities along the same, time honoured lines of treatment that contemporary medicine has just rediscovered and tested. Yogic body postures are probably the best tools to disrupt any learned patterns of wrong muscular efforts. Controlled breathing and withdrawal of mind from the domination of senses are extremely efficient techniques to divert the attention of the individual from the objects of the outer environment, increasing a person's energy potential and to achieving control of one's inner functioning.

In the early 1970's western science began looking at the system of integrated health and the physiologic benefits of meditation. This facilitated the mainstreaming of yogic science. During the last decades of the twentieth century, the work of pioneers like Benson, Ornish, Kabat-Zinn and Garfinkel brought yoga therapeutics into traditional medical awareness. The three yoga practices of body postures, controlled breathing and meditation commonly used in a typical yoga class will be discussed in some detail.

Body Postures

The aim of the practice of body postures is to reduce the activity and inertia in the mind and reinforce clarity. In other words, body postures increase mental calm, clarity, steadiness and alertness. Finding the natural link between breath and movement is simple: on exhalation the body is contracted and on inhalation it is expanded. There are however some exceptions. There are two ways of practicing a body posture. The dynamic practice repeats the movement into the posture and out again in rhythm with the breath, whereas in static practice the posture is held for a certain number of breath cycles. The process involves moving into and out of that position with controlled breathing. The component movements, their interactions and their relationship to the breathing process and the spine are important. In therapeutic Yoga these are modified to meet the requirement of the individual.

The work place as also many sporting activities contribute to structural imbalance in the body. Body postures are useful in correcting structural imbalances by using movements to work on each side of the body separately. Ancient yoga texts emphasise the importance of maintaining the structure of the spine. Movements of the body as also breathing patterns affect the spine. With appropriate breathing and appropriate movement these postures can be used to maintain the strength and flexibility of the spine. The postures must have the dual qualities of alertness and relaxation. These qualities are achieved by recognizing and observing the reactions of the body and the breath to various postures. What differentiates yogic body postures from other form of exercises? Perhaps the most important distinction is conscious involvement of the mind in the movement and placement of the body.

The ideal plan would ensure that all joints from toes to fingertips, all sections of the body, and the respiratory and the circulatory systems are adequately 'felt' and exercised. The guiding principal is step by step progression that has a beginning, middle and end. When applied to a particular posture progression begins with visualization, proceeds to the starting position with the incorporation of the breath into the movement. The performance concentrates on the flow of movement and smoothness of inhalation, exhalation and sometimes retention of breath, and then

towards a prescribed completion. Each step is a preparation for the next. And so it is with the sequence of body postures. These body postures promote wellbeing, strength, flexibility, skeletal alignment and neuromuscular coordination for optimum body function and psychological wellbeing. This leads to clarity and balance of the mind.

Controlled Breathing

Breathing is a normal process of life, yet because of incorrect breathing practices sufficient blood does not reach the lungs, brains and other tissues. Under the state of stress, many people further restrict their breathing thereby increasing fatigue, muscular tension, irritability and anxiety while stressed individuals are often recommended to change the way they breathe as shallow breathing leads to an anxious state. Paying attention to breathing significantly reduces respiratory rate and decreases tidal volume instability. The yogic technique of controlled breathing has been found to be an effective tool in the management of stress. It is the conscious, deliberate regulation of breath replacing unconscious patterns of breathing. It involves the regulation of the inhalation, the exhalation and the suspension of the breath. The regulation of these three components is achieved by modulating their length, and maintaining this modulation for a period of time, as well as directing the mind into the process. These components of breathing are required to be long and subtle.

Breathing is the one physical function which is both voluntary and involuntary. The breath therefore, can be used to control the autonomous nervous system. In order to understand the science of controlled breathing it is necessary to consider the nature and function of the nervous system, for this system coordinates the functions of all the other systems in the body. It is subdivided into the central and the autonomic nervous systems. The central nervous system consists of the brain, twelve pairs of cranial nerves, the spinal cord and thirty one pairs of spinal nerves. The cranial and spinal nerves spread throughout the body, forming a network of nerve fibres. The automatic nervous system is subdivided into the sympathetic and para-sympathetic systems. These two systems work in harmonious regulation. The parasympathetic system, for instance, slows down the heart while the sympathetic system accelerates it and between these two opposing actions the heart rate is regulated. Research suggests that long controlled breathing activates the parasympathetic system and lowers stress.

Meditation

Yoga has two traditional complementary meanings. The first is to 'bring two things together' and the second meaning is to 'converge the mind'. The Yoga tradition places great importance on the mind as it believes that the mind is the cause of bondage and liberation of humans. Yoga is the cessation of the whirling thoughts in the mind. According to yoga the mind has a significant role to play in all disorders. A disturbed mind lowers the immunity of the body and makes it vulnerable to diseases. Every psycho-physiological disturbance, every negative emotion, apart from causing distress also interferes with the rhythm of muscles. This disturbance not only affects the skeletal musculature but the body as a whole thereby changing the entire postural substrate of the person. This along with disturbance in glandular secretions makes the body more prone to infections and disorders. Yoga prescribes various methods to quieten an agitated, restless mind. Persistent practice and detachment from cravings is suggested. Yoga also advises an attitudinal change to purify the mind. Changing dysfunctional habits and thoughts is largely a matter of mind. The prescription is to develop an attitude of friendliness, compassion, joyfulness and equanimity. Yoga shows ways of understanding the functioning of the mind and helps to quieten the movements leading to mastery over the mind and the emotions. It is interesting to note that the ways and means to achieve a balance described by Yoga are similar to the 'Rational Emotional Therapy' described in modern psychology.

Yoga is a contemplative tradition. Consciousness and attention actively cultivated in Yoga are employed for meditation. Besides the spiritual benefits of meditation, there are a wide range of physical and psychological benefits which are manifested through the practice of meditation. Reduction in levels of stress is one such benefit.

Mindfulness Meditation Based Stress Reduction

Mindfulness is inherently a state of consciousness. Although awareness of and attention to present events and experiences are present in all individuals, there could be a wide variation in the quality. The concept of mindfulness has roots in Buddhist and other contemplative traditions like Yoga where conscious awareness and attention are actively cultivated. Mindfulness is usually defined as the state of being attentive and aware of what is happening at the present moment. Western scholars prefer to subtract mindfulness from spirituality and consider mindfulness simply as a cognitive process. An individual can, at any given moment, be conscious of thoughts, motives, emotions as well as sensory and perceptual stimuli.

Consciousness encompasses both attention and awareness. Awareness provides a background to consciousness where the inner and outer environment is continuously monitored. An individual may be aware of a sensory stimuli without the stimuli being the focus of attention. On the other hand attention focuses conscious awareness by directing heightened sensitivity to a limited range of experience. But what actually happens is that awareness and attention are intertwined and there is a constant interplay between the two. Although attention and awareness are relatively constant features of the normal functioning of an individual, mindfulness leads to focused attention to and awareness of the reality of the moment or the experience of the event taking place at the moment. For example, while holding a baby a mother may be aware of the physical sensation of holding the baby as also the emotion of love. However, awareness or attention may be diluted if the individual is multi-tasking or can be compromised when an individual behaves impulsively. In such states which are less mindful, emotions may occur outside awareness and may commit an individual to behaviour not under the control of the individual. Mindfulness, thus, is associated with clarity and sensitivity of the experience of the individual at a given moment and is differentiated from automatic functioning. Mindfulness can be engaged to delink an individual from automatic thoughts, habits and unhealthy behaviour patterns leading to maintenance and enhancement of psychological and behavioural functioning and wellbeing. For example, an open awareness may be useful in deciding on the choice of behaviour which are of relevance to the needs, interest and values of an individual. It is thought that attention is the key to the communication and control processes that underlie the regulation of behaviour.

Mindfulness which is an attribute of consciousness has long been associated with the promotion of wellbeing. Mindfulness based approaches are now increasingly being put to use for the treatment and management of a wide range of physical and psychological disorders. Such mindfulness based approaches include group based standardised mediation such as mindfulness based stress reduction and psychological interventions such as mindfulness based cognitive behaviour therapy. A review of the different mindfulness based approaches with respect to philosophical underpinnings, techniques, aims, outcomes, neurobiology and psychological interventions reveal wide differences in the ways mindfulness is conceptualised and practiced. However, the common ground is the mind. All the forms of mindfulness reflect cognitive operations on the aspects of the self through self-study. Mindful meditation involves focusing attention without judgment, on the moment. It is to be adopted as a way of life and is not situation specific. Mindfulness can disrupt the impulsive fight and flight reaction which depends on the sympathetic system thereby allowing the individual to consciously address a situation or event instead of reacting to it in an automatic fashion based on past experiences. It orients the individual to holistically look at inner resources for personal growth, learning and healing.

Mindfulness based stress reduction programs which were introduced in 1979 in the health clinic of University of Massachusetts generally consists of 8 to 10 weekly group sessions. The format has been designed to be skill based with a fair amount of interaction and discussion among the participants. Psychophysiology of stress is discussed and opportunities are provided to the participants to apply mindfulness skills to specific situations. Practice of meditation is taught and participants are also guided to bring mindfulness to everyday activities. Mindfulness reduces stress and improves job performance directly as also through increase in resilience. Mindfulness based stress reduction programmes are part of a patient centred educational approach that uses training in

mindfulness meditation to teach people how to take better care of themselves so that they could lead a healthy and productive life.

Conclusion

Rene Descartes, the seventeenth century French Philosopher and mathematician was of the view that the mind and body are separate entities and therefore demand separate examination and separate treatment. This dichotomy between the mind and the body has since been supplemented by the idea that the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of the individual are all interconnected and influence each other. Yoga—an ancient oriental tradition—has a holistic view of the human being. There is a practical orientation of the psychological aspects of yoga. The theory—practice continuum, the psycho- integrative and experiential matrix of the concepts of yoga lay a fertile ground for the growth of the best techniques in the development and management of human resources. To get the best of yoga it has to be adopted as a technique and tool to manage life and work. Studies have validated the physical and psychological benefits of Yoga. A holistic discipline now calls for holistic adoption so that human resources are developed in a manner which contribute to the growth and wellbeing of the public sector enterprises as also the individuals working there.

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