



British Aerospace (BAE) is known for its advanced defence technology which protects people and national security while maintaining the country's critical information and infrastructure.

Its principal function is to search for new ways to provide its customers with a competitive edge across the air, maritime, land and cyber domains.

The company employs a skilled workforce of 85,800 people in more than 40 countries and works closely with its local partners to support economic development by transferring knowledge, skills and technology.

With more than 34,000 employees in the UK, of whom 27,800 are based in the Air sector, BAE recognises its obligation to provide a healthy working environment and puts the wellbeing of its people high on its corporate agenda.

Understanding and supporting the physical health and mental health needs of such a large workforce is a considerable undertaking but it has a team of dedicated health & safety professionals and a long-established relationship with the experts at Park Health & Safety, to ensure a best-practice approach is in place.

This relationship was particularly important when BAE implemented a significant change programme and introduced new ways of working.

Unfortunately, organisational pressures resulted in a number of changes landing around the same time and it was this combination of activity which brought about a need for additional support for employees within the business.

As Park Health's Occupational Health and Hygiene Partner Clare Forshaw explained: "Change is recognised as being a cause of uncertainty and, for many people, it can leave them feeling unsettled and unsure of their position in the workplace as they move from the known to the unknown.

"Many businesses focus on the design and delivery of the change and the people impact can sometimes be underestimated, leading to the challenge of bringing people on board after the fact, rather than as part of the buy-in process.

"When the BAE team outlined the changes that were taking place in their operations and how quickly they were expected to be embedded as business-as-usual, at Park we recognised that this presented us with a real opportunity to

BAE found focus groups where staff could talk freely helped them cope with workplace stress



use this situation and the learnings from it to develop a positive mental health programme.

"With our partners at BAE, we knew we could develop an approach that would not only help employees to address their own misgivings and to deal with these immediate changes but also provide a best-practice platform for an ongoing mental health strategy."

From the outset, the team wanted to create a programme which could be used at any location and would be accessible to all employees, regardless of their role or grade. They knew it had to be easy to implement and would have to be accepted as a meaningful way forward in the BAE environment.

With a wealth of experience to capitalise on from within the highly-reputable Park team and with Clare leading as an expert occupational health professional with a successful 20+ year career, the team was well-placed to research the workplace, identify the challenges and implement an approach which would not only support the change programme and improve the culture but would lay the foundations for a credible mental health strategy.

"The BAE management team was quick to take action when it became apparent the introduction of the new terms and conditions and new procurement process had had an impact on wellbeing," said Clare.

"We had a number of constructive conversations and, applying Health & Safety Executive risk assessment methods alongside Park's own progressive 4Ws framework, we were able to determine a way forward."

The first priority for the team was to get under the skin of BAE to understand the concerns of the employees.

This feedback was to be key in finding workable solutions and would be invaluable in defining the culture of the organisation at that time.

Recognising employees generally are suffering from survey fatigue, it was agreed that Park would lead a comprehensive schedule of interactive meetings, with focus groups, face-to-face conversations and drop-in sessions, where employees were encouraged to speak freely about how they were feeling and to voice their worries over recent changes or any other difficulties they were

experiencing, working for BAE.

This was followed-up with a very simple, short questionnaire and an open invitation to approach Clare or one of her colleagues for a confidential discussion.

To underpin the genuine nature of this approach, Clare shared her contact details extensively with employees and made herself visible and accessible within the workplace.

It was clear that having an independent person leading each of the focus groups gave individuals the confidence and assurance to speak freely.

This resulted in frank and honest dialogue which highlighted that a number of employees were suffering from stress as the new ways of working were not supported with sufficient time or training and "glitches" in the system were causing further problems.

Using this information to help shape a solution, a structured action plan was developed in collaboration with Park and the executives from each part of the business across the Samlesbury, Wharton and Brough sites. This was then shared with the management and H&S teams who were asked to use their local knowledge

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and expertise to implement effectively at each location.

This included a commitment on the part of BAE to provide tangible support to its employees, working in an agile environment with practical assistance to deal with the system and any ongoing system changes.

It also committed to take steps to build trust as a fundamental core across the business, between management and their teams and across functions and divisions. It addressed the need for a more empathetic culture, where individuals are more supportive of each other and management is more cognisant of the importance of workplace wellbeing. A specific expectation on managers is to act quickly to identify any

issues arising from the wellbeing of their employees and to encourage colleagues to speak-up if they are struggling.

A particularly popular addition to the workplace was a wellbeing tree where colleagues were invited to hang notes on branches with their ideas and thoughts on making more BAE a more positive environment.

While the action plans have had a tremendous impact on the health and wellbeing of employees at BAE, the business is keen to progress further and continues to work alongside Park to stretch the parameters of its mental health strategy to include ongoing risk assessment of workplace stress, coping mechanisms, prevention and resilience and a focus on health outcomes.

"All too easily, stress can take hold in the workplace but, as evidenced at BAE, if the commitment and wellbeing tools are in place to take action to address issues as they arise, it can be overcome," said Clare.

"Having a mental health strategy, which is supported by the leadership team and management, can make a real difference in not only what your employees deliver but how they deliver it."