

## **The stress that dare not speak its name**

### **Stress Network Conference 2010/2011**

For the last two years, Vaughan Skirrey and Bob Woods, both experienced trade union stewards, have presented a workshop on how stress affects those who represent TU members in the workplace. They were both concerned from personal experience that the increasing stresses experienced in the workplace were transferring onto TU representatives. Although there was a lot of information and guidance for Representatives in terms of dealing with members who were suffering from workplace stress, there was little advice for the reps on how to protect themselves.

Our starting point was a questionnaire which we sent out in the summer of 2010 via Stress Network and also via our respective unions. We asked respondents to identify situations within the representing work which they had found stressful. We used the information to produce the case studies for our workshops.

The four case studies reflected different aspects of the issues being raised, (see attached) with reps working at different levels of their union structures.

The participants reflected this. They were from a variety of unions both large and smaller and ranged from new representatives to experienced, senior Branch Officers and Branch Secretaries.

The representatives were asked to discuss the case studies and to identify what could be done by the employer, the union structure (either national or local), the member and finally the TU representative themselves.

The process produced a huge amount of material and through the four workshops consistent themes emerged.

- Work overload,
- Balancing family job and union work, often ending up working at home.
- Increasing pressures from management:
- Line management disapproval
- Case work becoming more complex,
- Inadequate and inequitable preparation time
- Lack of adequate support structures from Union
- Apathy and Expectations from members
- Impact of members problems on rep

- Member v member conflict
- Members expecting immediate response and communication. Tyranny of union mobile and use of email. Phone calls late evening!
- Members off-loading but don't want to do anything,
- Members coming to you too late in the process often with inadequate or inaccurate information from members
- Reps dealing with significant suicide/self-harm/mental health issues with little or no support
- Numbers and ratios of membership to stewards
- Impossible cases!
- Members not following or accepting advice and playing parts of union against other parts including the central support systems
- Branch politics getting in the way
- Complex Safeguarding issues
- Ageing workforce, members balancing their work, family, looking after parents
- Restructures, constant change leading to stress. Conflict and sickness absence
- Union agreements with management not always suiting some members rep seen as management lackey
- Facebook twitter and IT issues, challenging confidentiality
- Huge unrealistic expectations from members
- Lack of support for branch secretary from union hierarchy
- Union literature setting up false expectations for members and new stewards
- Feeling that union structure not supporting stewards/officers
- Place of union rep amidst organisational change and bidding for work Members expectation that stewards will know everything about what is going on in negotiation
- Members' expectation that stewards will know everything about what is going on in negotiations. Expected to be a miracle worker
- Reps burning out and their work being transferred to already over worked colleagues
- Difficulties of getting members to become representatives so numbers of activists are reducing
- Stress comes up as well and down with representatives often sandwiched between union management and members

At the end of each session the participants, having identified the factors causing them stress, identified what advice would they give to new stewards and what would they do to improve their mental wellbeing!. There were many suggestions for actions by employers, unions and were dependant on a myriad of different union structures and rules and employers size,

attitude and relationships. We have concentrated on general tips that were under the representatives direct control!

**These were the top survival tips!**

### **Keep Control of Communication with members:**

#### **1 Mobile Phones**

Get a separate mobile phone for union work.

Have specific times when members know they can contact you.

Switch phone off evenings and weekends or if not available at work.

Keep voicemail up to date

#### **2 Emails**

Do not use your personal domestic email.

Consider setting up separate account with union in title

Refer to agreements before using work email

Do not use Facebook or twitter for individual communications

Use out of office messages, be clear about your availability

#### **3 Set Clear Boundaries**

Members will benefit from you being clear when you can be contacted and when you will respond

Be clear when you are available within in your workplace

Consider regular surgeries

Consider adoption of a service level agreement with members outlining your volunteer status and role, contact arrangements and context, member's responsibilities and agreements. Ensure this is consistently used within your branch and colleagues!

#### **4 Be realistic, do not promise what you cannot deliver**

Members will often be in crisis when they are accessing your support and advice. They may be much stressed and want immediate confirmation that all will be okay. Although

sometimes difficult, it is better to be realistic than set up false expectations. It is also an ideal time to set the boundaries that will allow you to act appropriately whilst protecting yourself from burn out.

### ***5 Try to keep detached***

This is often easier said than done! But remember that over identification and emotional responses are more likely to lead an unsuccessful conclusion. Your emotional commitment to employment representation is your motivation, getting over identified or emotional with a member will be counterproductive.

### ***6 Don't be afraid to ask for support***

You are not alone, ask for support. Take to your branch and suggest set up of a buddy system. Move the support issue up the line.

### ***7 Just say no***

You will do yourself or your members no favours if you keep saying yes to new cases. There is a limit to what you can take on. Discuss with your union colleagues, your family, and if appropriate your employer, and decide what is achievable.

### **Our Final thoughts!**

We firmly believe that the suggestions above are underpinned by the basic principles of trade union work. They will help ensure that the service members get will be equitable, ethical, effective and realistic. But they will also help those who volunteer to be TU representatives can continue to offer this valuable service without exposing themselves or their families to avoidable stress.

We would like to thank all those who have attended the workshops and filled in the questionnaire. This is work in progress and we would welcome comments on the website for further survival tips for surviving the stressful but rewarding task of becoming a trade union representative!

Vaughan Skirrey and Bob Woods January 2012