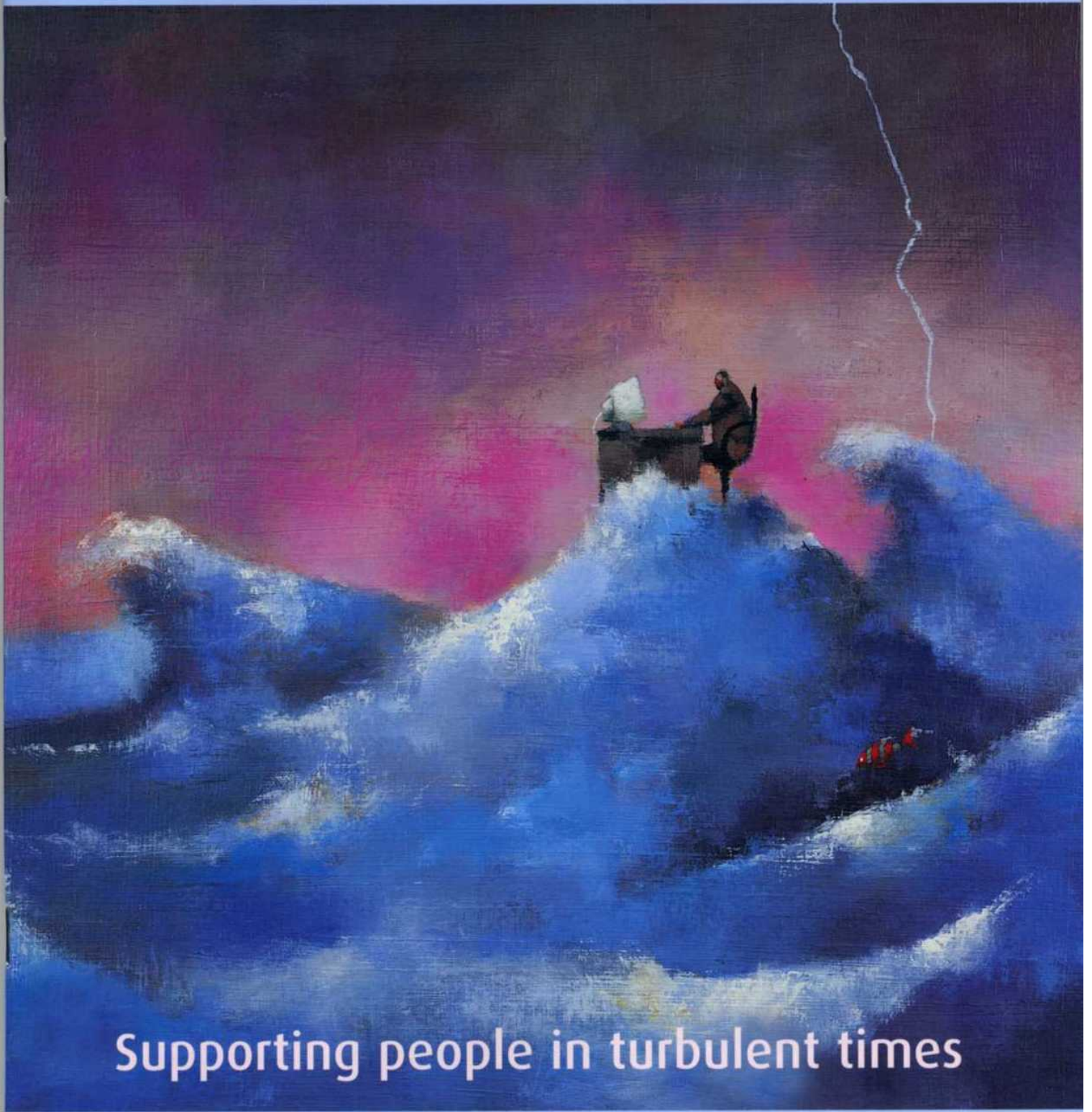


Counselling at work

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Supporting people in turbulent times

Working with redundancy • Organisational attitudes • Tax advice
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Good counselling can't hide bad management

Andy Jarosz identifies three organisational attitudes to employee wellbeing

We won't need to worry about counselling for our staff,' our middle eastern hosts assured us, 'they have their families if bad things happen'.

As I explained in broken Russian to the shepherd, high up in the Tien Shen Mountains of Kyrgyzstan, how my company provides psychological support for those who suffer traumatic events, his wizened old face betrayed confusion as to how a total stranger could possibly help someone with a personal matter. 'That's what the community elders are for' was his reply (I think).

These are two of the many recent examples that I have encountered of how the emotional needs of the individual in a crisis are best perceived to be met. I don't have to travel so far to encounter these disparate opinions. Many companies we meet in the UK are equally unconvinced of the need to provide emotional support for their staff; lack of knowledge, lack of control of outcome, fear of opening themselves up to litigation are all objections that we hear. Are they neglecting their employees by denying them this support? We encounter a myriad of opinions from companies, from those who want to provide help for the employee who may have witnessed a road traffic accident on the way to work, to those where the managing director feels that their 'open door' is the only access to support that their employees require (even when they are clearly the problem).

At docleaf we often ask ourselves, 'Why does this divergence of opinion exist, and does it matter?' In this article, I try to explore these differences in care provision for employees and the correlation that these appear to have in relation to the underlying culture within an organisation. I will explore this from my non-clinical standpoint, and argue that the standard of care (professional or not) given to employees is more important than the availability of outsourced specialist services. I will emphasise that for the provision of organisational care services to be taken seriously, the providers must demonstrate clear and tangible benefits, something that traditionally has been very difficult to do.

Emotional support in organisations is not confined to that provided by mental health professionals. While there will come a time in every organisation where professional support is needed, there is a more routine emotional engagement that occurs on a day-to-day basis. This is part and parcel of good management practice, and involves the concern of the individual employee's physical and emotional wellbeing. I make this point to stress that everyone has a role to play in the psychological care of a workforce, and equally that this consideration cannot be outsourced and thus negated by management. The provision of the best employee assistance programme (EAP) service for example, will not counteract bad management in a company.

There appear to be three different strategies that we observe in organisations. At one end, the employer does not provide any mechanism by which their staff can gain support. A 'head in the sand' approach exists in many firms, where there is a belief that people go to work to act within the scope of their job description, and that they must leave their personal life, and indeed their personality, outside the factory gates. Anything that impacts on their ability to perform their duties should be dealt with away from work and should not impact on the productivity of the business. Such attitudes, although archaic to many, are still prevalent in many UK businesses, even if the company external profile suggests otherwise. They appear to involve an ignorance of the consequences of poor physical and psychological health on the individual's ability to contribute fully in the workplace. More fundamental still, perhaps, there is a fear that addressing a person's wellbeing will open a can of worms that the employer is not able to deal with.

Others will provide support services through outsourcing, such as an EAP service or a stress helpline. One of the key intentions behind such offerings is to allow employees access to a listening and advice service in a safe and (crucially) anonymous environment. The employer should get a report periodically stating the level of usage of the telephone-based service, with no information that

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