

Press Release

8th April 2021

'We must seize this opportunity to change the nature of work and of society'

The International Stress Management Association (ISMA^{UK}) proudly hosted an exceptional webinar on 25th March, featuring two eminent speakers - Professor Sir Cary Cooper CBE, ISMA^{UK} patron and a world-leading expert on workplace wellbeing and Professor Lennart Levi, Director of the Division of Stress Research at Sweden's Karolinska Institutet and a member of the World Health Organisation's Expert Panel on Mental Health.

The theme of their discussion, *Resetting the Button: wellbeing and sustainability in the changing world of work*, was very timely as the UK emerges from the global pandemic. Professor Cooper began by speaking of the 'tsunami of change' that the pandemic is bringing about - yet some good things are coming out of it. He said the most valuable resource we have is the human resource – not in the HR sense, but in how people perceive quality of life. He added, 'We are becoming more aware of our value systems, in which financial reward comes lower and relationships are at the top. The pandemic is teaching us to take time and think of others more than in the past'. Professor Levi agreed, saying, 'We need to think ethically, not with our wallets'.

Professor Cooper went on, 'We need people skills – not just tech skills - in the workplace and they should have parity. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is the quality managers really need, and those with natural EQ should be the leaders of the future'. He added, 'It may take 5-10 years to get the right leaders into the top positions and ensure the entire food chain has the same value-laden approach, but it will transform the workplace. A culture in which a CEO can demand that employees put in 80-100 working hours a week is no longer tolerable'.

Working long hours you will become ill

Professor Cooper continued his theme by saying that the 'command and control' approach has not helped productivity – we are at the bottom of the G7, with Italy. 'If you work long hours consistently you will become ill - you don't need five days a week to get the best productivity out of people', he said, instancing young millennials, who think 'Do I like my job?' and decide to leave: even in bad times, they aren't prepared to tolerate a poor quality of life. Service-based companies can easily adapt to flexible working - some are already enabling employees to work partly from home, to suit their circumstances. 'Implicit in this is trust', said the Professor, 'it's about enabling the employee: "Leave it up to me to achieve the objectives"; "Value me, believe in me, and I will do it" '.

Professor Cooper made it clear that, 'It is up to companies to manage and give their own guidelines, encouraging flexible working and "the right to disconnect" '. He instanced Technostress as a new field as the tech culture interferes with family life and people are Zoomed out. He added that one major bank has announced Zoom-free Fridays - others may follow! Finally, he said that all organisations need wellbeing as their base, and we need more chief wellbeing officers. Gross National Wellbeing, not just GDP, should be a key metric, a move which is backed by 79 member states of the UN.

If universities adjust their curricula, we can change the future

Professor Levi echoed Professor Cooper's comments, stating that education is a major part of the answer: 'The emphasis should be on training in universities, as well as business schools, to be compassionate and have empathy, and to train a different breed of manager'. He mentioned that some schools are trialling experiential teaching methods based on how different behaviours affect others, and suggested that perhaps an organisation such as the [International Association of Universities](#), serving the global higher education community, could help? By encouraging universities to adjust their curricula, and if students acted on the new ways of learning, we could change the future of the world. 'But', asked Professor Levi, 'can we change things in under 10 years? The UN's Agenda 2030, agreed by all 193 members, set 17 sustainable development goals: now is the time to act on this mandate'.

Teach decision-makers and the rest will follow

Professor Levi continued, 'Leaders meeting at the World Economic Forum in Davos identified not just one or two problem areas but 16 high-risk areas in their global risks report. We need action on these, and maybe a new breed of politician, trained to act on the mandates. Such action requires us to combine critical thinking with emotional thinking. If we teach decision-makers what they need to know, the rest will follow. As the Japanese proverb says, "Words do not cook rice"!'.

Professor Cooper and Professor Levi concluded by saying that, with more senior leaders becoming aware of the importance of wellbeing as a metric, and with universities and colleges teaching emotional intelligence, not just knowledge, we have a golden opportunity to change the nature of work and of society. This will stand us all in good stead, especially in the recessionary times that are forecast to follow the pandemic.

Feedback from attendees

"So great to hear from these eminent leaders in their field of expertise. Their knowledge and promotion of sustainability and wellbeing in organisations was inspiring. They gave us an insight into the bigger picture and highlighted the importance of training the next generation of leaders, so they will be equipped with the right ethical and emotional intelligence to manage and protect employees going forward."

"What a privilege it was to listen to their in-depth experiences and personal accounts at high levels of office. It really has made me think about resetting the button and how the workplace will hopefully change in the future. I also really appreciated the emphasis given to how we must support the next generation in the 'reset' workplace of the future. Thank you."

"Let's keep the conversation going. I can feel a collaborative reverse mentoring movement emerging between Education - the Next Generation and Global Influencers - to truly make a difference. Walk this way to broaden the reach!"

- Ends -

Notes for Editors

Professor Sir Cary Cooper CBE is 50th Anniversary Professor of Organizational Psychology and Health at Manchester Business School. As an expert on occupational health and workplace wellbeing, he has written or edited over 250 books on these subjects. He is a founding President of the British Academy of Management, President of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), and President of the Institute of Welfare. He was awarded the CBE in 2001 for his contributions to occupational health and a Knighthood in 2014 for his contribution to the social sciences. He is also a Patron of ISMA^{UK}.

Professor Lennart Levi is Emeritus Professor of Psychosocial Medicine, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, and a former Member of the Swedish Parliament. He is Founder and Director of the Division of Stress Research at Karolinska Institutet, and the National Swedish Institute for Psychosocial Medicine. Professor Levi is a member of the World Health Organisation Expert Panel on Mental Health and has written over 300 scientific papers and books. He was awarded the Royal Swedish Medal of Merit for pioneering achievements in stress research.

To find out about ISMA^{UK}, visit www.isma.org.uk. As a registered charity and membership-based organisation for over 30 years, ISMA^{UK} exists to promote sound knowledge and best practice in stress management, both nationally and internationally, providing advice to a wide range of individuals, businesses and voluntary organisations, while supporting the Health & Safety Executive in delivering their requirements for Stress Risk Assessment. For more information contact Carole Spiers, Chair, at chair@isma.org.uk.