

STRESS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN THE PROBATION AND YOUTH JUSTICE DIVISION, KINGDOM OF TONGA

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Tonga today, treatment of offenders has increasingly become one of the major concerns of the authorities and the public at large. The Probation, Prison Department and the Community Agencies are at the heart and core of the justice system in terms of treatment and rehabilitating of offenders but most importantly in promoting peace in our community. It is indeed undeniable that the roles and responsibilities of these professions are huge challenges and associated with lots of occupational stress. It is particularly valuable to understand how correctional personnel manage to cope with their challenges and stresses while executing their respective duties. This paper is in two major parts. The first part contains three sub-parts addressing from where causes of stress for Probation Officers are derived. Each of these three sub-parts further outlines specific causes and proofs of stress for Probation Officers. The last part of this paper discusses stress management practices.

II. THE MAIN CAUSES OF STRESS

A. Organizational Causes

1. Understaffed

At present there are only four officers employed in the Probation and Youth Justice Division. All these Officers are posted on the main Island of Tongatapu. There are two main challenges with only four Probation Officers. The first being a lack of probationary work available on the other islands. The second is that for the past years, the need for probationary work has increased significantly. On average the pre-sentencing reports alone ordered from the Probation Office are 160 for the last three years. In the years 2011 and 2012, there were only three officers working, while one officer was on study leave. Therefore, on average, for the last two years, one officer had to complete about 55 pre-sentencing reports. These reports were on top of many other duties of each officer. These serious challenges have been with the Division for a very long time causing serious stress to each Probation Officer.

(i) Proof Points

(a) Workload

According to the job descriptions and other duties assigned to the roles of Probation Officers, sometimes it is too much for the individual capacity to get a hold on and be able to handle every task in a timely manner, and, almost all the time, it takes time to recover and to escape from stresses.

(b) Untrained Staff

All four officers of the Probation Division had never received any formal or special training before engaging in our respective jobs. Each of the Probation Officers had to learn on the job. We also had to rely on in-house training through sharing experiences from the other officers who had been in the Division longer.

2. Limited Budget

The Division is under the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice's administration section always has the last say in the Division's administration matters including the Division's annual and daily budget. This is one of the major factors that has contributed to developing stress of individual officers because the need to complete our tasks daily are either not met or they have been delayed for a long period of time.

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(i) Proof Points

(a) Lack of Facilities

We have a lack of equipment that is very much in need for our daily operations that could help to conduct our duties more effectively and in a timely manner. For example, we all have to share one vehicle, computers and a printer, for the organization has provided very limited resources. Most days we also run out of fuel for the vehicle. The vehicle is very much needed for the supervising of the community workers, home visits and so forth.

(b) Further Training

As years go by, Probation Officers need to update their skills and knowledge to meet the social changes of the community. If it was not for JICA, all the Probation Officers would have not received any up-to-date training. Therefore there is an urgent need for necessary training in other areas for Tonga's Probation Officers. These trainings should also include counselling, etc.

3. Legislation

Since the establishment of this new service in Tonga in 1994, there has been no special legal document enacted to guide the process and procedures for Probation Officers for the purpose of this division. The only legal shelter for this service is an Amendment Act No. 25 of 1990 of the Criminal Offences Act.

(i) Proof Points

(a) Lack of Legal Support

The law consists of the very important documents that every profession would look to for guidance and for security for their actions while conducting their duties, especially involving important areas that deal with legal matters and justice. In the absence of legislation, Probation Officers are often exposed to vulnerable, stressful situations in the absence of a piece of legislation for Probation work.

B. Work-Related Causes

1. Communication Breakdown

Communication has become a significant problem that triggers an immediate stressful reaction in some situations. The Probation Division is a part of the law enforcement unit of the justice system, and our responsibilities are relying on court orders that are strictly constrained by time limitations. Very often the Probation office receives court orders very late and close to their due dates resulting in officer stress.

(i) Proof Points

(a) Increasing Workload

Task allocation to each Officer has mounted up, and they are subjected to further stressful situations. This may also result in probation officers working for unpaid over-time during or after working hours and on week-ends.

(b) Inability to complete tasks in a timely manner

Inability to receive court orders in a timely manner results in the inability of the Probation Officer to prepare the required reports on time. This causes bad relationships between all concerned parties such as the courts, community service supervisors, offenders, probation officers and so forth.

2. Lack of Leadership and Management Skills

The Probation Division authority had a lack of management and leadership skills in organizing and controlling the daily operations of the division. This is a factor that sometimes contributed to more stressful situations.

(i) Proof Points

(a) Line of Duty

There is no management system in place for the division of labour and tasks of each Probation Officer. Sometimes one Officer is frustrated and cannot control stress especially when another Officer is absent from duty.

(b) Delegation of Authority

There is no system in place to decide who is responsible to check on each employees and their performance in conducting their duties. Also there is no clear delegation on who is to look after what job within our Division. This sometimes resulted in one officer making a decision on the same matter that another officer had previously made a decision on. The clashes in decision-making sometimes cause bad relationships between some of the Probation Officers.

3. Threat of Offender Violence

The nature of work where one has the authority to control and manage others and the way to behave, and the others are obliged by the law to comply with the direction given by authority, creates stress. For example, on many occasions only one Probation Officer is assigned to do the supervision role of community service workers of more than ten (10) offenders. At most times, offenders were allowed to use working tools to assist in carrying out their work.

(i) *Proof Points*

(a) No Security System

There has never been any system or any specific training for security purposes to protect Probation Officers from suffering as a result of an unexpected incident while conducting their duties.

(b) Tonga is a small country and basically everyone knows where everyone lives and works. Sometimes officers meet the offenders working in the community in shops, towns or elsewhere. Fear of being attacked mostly causes stress to the officer.

4. Poor Data Collection System

Technology helps reduce stressful norms of the workload of today's job and has changed many things in a positive way, but our manual system of storing information and data collection has dragged individuals into stressful situations.

(i) *Proof Points*

(a) Slowdown Work Progressing

This is one of the factors that has contributed to the stressful effect of workload. For example, when a record of an offender is needed, it takes a lot of time to go through manual system to update the information.

(b) Statistical Accuracy

There have been possibilities of inaccurate information when referring and using statistical data in constructing reports as the system puts pressures on itself, especially at times when an officer is experiencing heavy workload. This is a result of not having reliable and updated computerized data.

C. Other Causes

1. Lack of Public Awareness

Since the establishment of the Probation Service in Tonga, the workers keep changing over time, and new recruitment comes in. There has been little attention to educate the general public how important the Probation Service is or its role in the community development.

(i) *Proof Points*

(a) Misunderstanding

There is a misunderstanding by some of the community members as to the roles and responsibilities of Probation Officers, which in turn leads to a poor image of the Probation Officer to the general public. For example, some of the offenders and family members who were interviewed for the purpose of preparing Pre-sentence reports for the courts had the wrong idea that the Probation Officer has a say on what sentence the court will impose on each offender.

2. Probation Officer — Offenders' After-Working-Hours Relationships

Because Tonga is a small country, you could easily recognize and meet someone very often. It is a challenge that causes stress when meeting offenders at places outside of work.

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(i) Proof Points

(a) Post Threat

It is always difficult to escape the feeling of insecurity when meeting offenders. As previously mentioned, Tonga is such a small country, and fear of your family members being attacked also causes much stress for Probation Officers.

3. Lack of Cooperation of Inter-related Agencies

There has been no proper network system in place to support cooperation between the inter-related agencies.

(i) Proof Points

(a) Information Exchange

In some of the key agencies such as the Prison Department, we experience very poor communication regarding important information about offenders. For example, information about discharging dates of prisoners who are to be on probation after discharge from prison. Not knowing these dates causes more stress to Probation Officers since the Division has to go looking for the offender and sometimes to no avail.

III. STRESS MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

To be frank, occupational stress is ignored widely in the Tonga correctional system. The problem has never received serious attention or been a matter of priority in the organization's operational strategies. It is evident from the type of work done by Probation Officers, described in previous sections of this paper, that stress is a huge challenge in this line of work. Accordingly, it is important to highlight the stress management strategies that are in place that help the Probation Officers cope with stress while conducting their duties.

In the organizational system of work there has never been a formal stress management mechanism to help with the employees' stress management. Therefore each officer manages his stress personally. The way that these officers deal and cope with their stress is simply something that they have learned from their past experiences. In my view, there are four main ways used by Probation Officers to manage stress.

The first is through discussions with other Probation Officers. Probation Officers often discuss their cases and workload with colleagues. This sometimes occurs in a situation when an Officer is experiencing very excessive workload or possible threats from community workers. Through discussions, the concerned officer may feel less stress.

The second is seeking further assistance from former Probation Officers or from other professions such as State Prosecutors, Magistrates, Judges and so forth. This is in particular when it comes to legal issues. Clarifications are sometimes sought from appropriate professions as mentioned above.

The third is the delegation of the community-work-order supervision role to community agencies. This also includes enrolling offenders in rehabilitation courses conducted by several community agencies and non-government organizations. This is considered one of the very effective stress management strategies that reduces work-related stress of Probation Officers.

The fourth stress management strategy that proves its long-term effect to reduce the current trend of stress is that Probation Officers pursue further studies. As previously mentioned, one of the officers underwent further studies in one of the universities in 2011 and 2012 in sociology. The knowledge and skills brought from this officer contributed very much to correcting uncountable misunderstandings in the Division.

It is also worth mentioning in this paper that the various experiences that each officer has encountered contribute so much to their managing of each of their respective stress levels. In some situations when one officer does not want to discuss challenges that he faces, the officer has to find a

way outside work to work it out on his own.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, at present Probation and Youth Justice has no organized stress management system. Despite the undoubted benefit the Kingdom receives from the Probation's services, the mental well-being of its staff is the least of the Kingdom's concerns. We can never eliminate stress from our daily lives at our workplaces, but many studies have proved that there is much we can do to reduce it. Therefore, the onus is on the principal organization to take actions in developing its own stress management policy. For a better Probation service, establishment of a stress management system is very much needed immediately.