**Speech Martin Cremer: Advantages of applied ergonomics in hairdressing salons and the importance of correct management skills.**

Good afternoon everyone,

My name is Martin Cremer. For sixteen years I was the managing director of my own hairdressing salon called 'Mantype' in the beautiful city of Bruges in Belgium.

Two years ago I handed over the management of the business to a colleague.

The salon continues to work with eight salaried employees.

I still come into the salon on Fridays and Saturdays to do what I love doing most which is cutting hair.

But in addition to that I also help the younger employees.

Today no PowerPoint or videos.

I believe that you communicate with your employees by example and precept. In this way, you understand each other better. After all, this is the way you work every day.

I will simply explain how we implemented one of my hobby horses – ergonomics – in the salon. Why?

Well – I joined the profession when I was fourteen years old, and I was successfully trained into the profession by my boss at the time. But that was forty years ago. Then nobody talked much about adopting the right posture and position or how you should go about doing your work.

One of the consequences was that I have suffered for years from pronounced scoliosis of the spine. Part of it is probably congenital, but by adopting the wrong posture in my work for many years it has probably evolved even more rapidly.

Fifteen years ago, I started training young hairdressers myself – with a special accent on cutting hair. I rapidly observed that the young hairdressers were complaining of back and neck pains. Luckily, my wife is a doctor, and together we started looking into what we could do to help with this problem.

We started looking at the ergonomic aspects of the hairdressing salon. One of the first things we looked at was the layout and furnishing in the hairdressing salon:

* All hairdresser chairs had to be hydraulic
* The trolleys had to be between 90 and 115 centimetres high
* Wash basins had to be height-adjustable
* Lighting had to be adapted

Further information about these points will be provided by other speakers.

The second matter that we looked at was the postures adopted while working.

* offering support for people carrying out tasks that have to be carried out in a static position, this by providing aids. Together with my wife we developed a mobility sheet with physical exercises to keep muscles and joints supple.

Once our timetable had been set up, we were able to get down to the most important aspect; namely communicating all of this to our employees, getting them involved and explaining the reasons behind the initiative.

-maintaining good health

-feeling fitter, getting more pleasure from work

-avoiding discomfort

-preventing illness and absenteeism: the cost of this for us as an employer as well for the team

After providing this explanation, we had to put it into practice – so how did we go about that?

We did that on Saturday, the last working day of the week. We stopped working at 6 PM. Then everyone stayed for at least an extra 30 minutes for an aperitif, to talk about the past week at work, to report small discomforts, or to tell amusing anecdotes about things that happened between the employees and customers.

We did this for two weeks in a row and during that half hour, we spent ten minutes talking about ergonomics – not longer.

We indicated that we would be putting the exercises into practice the following Saturday and asked that if anyone was suffering from any stiffness or pains, they should bring it up at the meeting.

That Saturday my wife was also present and listened to all the accounts of stiffness and pains and illustrated the exercises they could carry out in order to remedy the problems.

We asked a volunteer to demonstrate them, which caused considerable laugher and fun, but in the end, it provided something that could help with the problem. Everyone thus had the chance to talk about their problems and to try out the corresponding exercises.

The group dynamic that emerged from this was great.

We even carried out a number of the exercises together as a group. Starting off the weekend in this way was just wonderful.

Today all our hairdressers have exercises that they can do during their work; turning their neck a few times, or rolling their shoulders at the sink, or doing upward heel movements.

Hamstring and thigh exercises are regularly done in the kitchen during breaks and time off.

As there’s a lot of standing still when carrying out tasks in men’s hairdressing salons where the main focus is on cutting hair, the main problems tend to affect the neck and the back.

We help one another by coaching each other using a signal agreed on beforehand. For example, if one of the team is bending too far over when cutting hair for instance, a colleague will say his or her first name out loud. The person addressed will look up and the person doing the coaching will stand more upright adjusting his or her back. The colleague in question recognises this as the agreed signal and if this is done discreetly the colleague will give a little nod to indicate they have understood, and you are usually rewarded with a smile as well.

We are thus aware of each other’s pains and this gives us a simple way to give a helping hand. A great way to enhance and strengthen the team spirit.

It is always the employer’s responsibility to generate energy. It is normal that employers should take the lead, but the group can also participate in this. Although employers always retain your position at the helm.

For example: as an employer you always have to keep an eye and an ear open to see if someone is suffering from any physical complaints. What you don’t say though is: I’ve had this myself – it will go away soon enough. The best thing is to observe it and confirm that you have observed it and are looking into whether it is caused by the prevalent working conditions. Then you can work together to find a solution.

We, as employers, also get it wrong sometimes. Here is an example. Every year our employees get new scissors, this is indeed an agreement that has been made with the trade unions.

When an employee chose her own scissors, I didn’t pay any attention to the type of scissors. Two months later she complained of pain around the thumb and in the wrist. I didn’t pay sufficient attention to this. And that was my mistake.

One morning we received a phone call from the employee. She was crying and saying that she had too much pain in her hand and could not come to work. We received a medical note for two weeks’ sick leave.

My first reaction as an employer was: two weeks off sick? That person is not coming into work, leaving a gap in the staff and I am still having to pay? Anger and stress and judgement.

Today we try to do this differently. We ask ourselves where we failed. In which instances are we the cause behind the absenteeism?

When I started to think about it, I suddenly realized that it was me who gave this young employee the responsibility of choosing her own scissors.

After two weeks of rest our employee returned to work. We looked at her scissors together with her and noticed that indeed they were way too big for her, which meant that she put too much pressure on her thumb resulting in an inflammation of the thumb and the wrist.

It was not the fault of the employee. It was my fault as the employer. I was not there when the scissors were being ordered. We made sure we communicated this to our employee: "It was not your fault; it was ours. Next time you order scissors, come and ask for our opinion.” We never stop learning about how we should and shouldn’t go about things.

Today we have even gone a step further: a test.

We all wear the same sneakers with arch supports and odour insoles. We have collaborated with a shoe designer who made ‘share the passion’ pins for our sneakers.

This way, we create team spirit, customers talk about it and we tell them why we all do this together, namely: closed shoes prevent ingrown hairs and shoes without heels ensure a healthy stable posture.

We are now three weeks working on this new project. On Saturday evening we talk briefly about our shoe experience. One had back pain after a few hours; this employee now changes shoes after a half day of work. The female employees like this new initiative but don’t like always having to wear the same shoes.

We evaluate this project week by week and will see how we can develop this in the future. Every employee is free to wear the footwear he or she wants, but we have already observed that we want to be seen as a group, as a team. This is already a positive outcome.

Conclusion:

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It is the role of the employer to act as a coach.

To set the example.

To generate energy so that the team can work on these issues together.

It’s not easy, but the result of working without pain thanks to a relaxed body is greater creativity. And that feels good.

There is also less absenteeism – and that in turn means an effective team producing good results.