

Introduction to The 'CUSP'[™] framework for Managers

This is a very simple framework that works equally as well in terms of prevention of stress as it does in helping someone who is not coping. In other words you can use 'CUSP'[™] proactively and reactively. Here, we look at using 'CUSP'[™] proactively to prevent stress.

This framework can be applied to any situation where pressure is present. What it does is get you thinking about your options in a structured way. There are always options, because the experience of stress is individual and depends largely on perceptions. If you can change or influence someone's perceptions, the way they think about a situation, then the stress can be prevented or reduced.

'CUSP'[™] stands for:

- **C**ontrol
- **U**ncertainty
- **S**upport
- **P**ressure

Control

We have known about the links between stress and control for many years now. Indeed, psychologists have based whole models of stress around the concept of control. If we feel that we don't have any control in our working environment, this can be very stressful, especially when combined with high pressures or demands. Indeed high demands + low control can accurately be described as a perfect recipe for stress. If we also feel unsupported at the same time this recipe is even more of a risk. We have to be careful when considering this. We are dealing with subjective perceptions, with the way people see things and feel about things, not just with 'objective' reality.

There are major implications here because, as managers, we can influence both perceptions of control and enable actual control. Thus we have the capacity to influence stress levels positively or negatively. In fact, the negative side of this is worrying. It suggests that if we are ignorant of the importance of control or do or say things that lessen perceptions of control then we may be damaging people. We may inadvertently be causing them severe stress and increasing the risk of depression. We may also be causing damage to their immune system, increasing the risk of colds and flu, and in the long term, of cancer and heart disease. See below for some tips on enabling control for your staff.

Uncertainty

Feelings of uncertainty are also strongly associated with stress. In recent years, our working environments and cultures have changed markedly into ones where there is a lot of uncertainty. This is one reason for increases in stress levels across all sectors. The pace of change has increased and is still increasing, none more so than in our workplaces. High uncertainty is associated with feelings of insecurity and anxiety, causing us to feel stressed. In periods of rapid organizational change, feelings of uncertainty increase and control decreases, a double whammy in terms of stress. This makes organizational change a high risk factor for stress-related injury and illness. The most important factor in minimizing/maximizing the risk is communication.

Support

Probably the most robust result in all of Social Psychology is that support acts as a buffer against stress. What this means is that if we have the right kind of support, we can cope with more pressures or demands without suffering from stress. Put another way, the more pressure there is the more important support becomes. Research appears to show also that in terms of our social networks, if we have good supportive networks at work and away from work, such support actually boosts our wellbeing whether or not we're under pressure.

As managers, you are in a unique position where support is concerned because you can provide both social and practical support to your people. However, you must be careful not to make assumptions about what support people need. If we offer people the wrong kind of support or offer it in the wrong way we can end up causing stress rather than preventing or reducing it.

Pressure

If you can identify, then tackle, the specific sources of pressure (stressors) in your team's working environment, you reduce substantially the potential for stress-related illness amongst your staff team. No two working environments are the same, so all are likely to have their own specific stressors apart from the more general, organizational sources of pressure.

It is important to acknowledge that there will be sources of pressure outside of your (and your team members') control. In terms of minimizing stress risk it is important to identify and target what you do have some influence over.

There are overlaps with the C, U, and S above, but this part of the framework is about thinking about what specifically could cause stress in your area, and what you could do to address those potential causes.