

# From counselling room to training room: stress workshop for managers – the course content

**Karl Gregory** and **Nicola Banning** outline a valuable course for managers

*Coming out of the counselling room and working organisationally rather than individually is vital if they (counsellors) are to be an added resource for the organisation.'*

Counselling, as we both do, in organisational settings has helped us to fully appreciate the above statement. The value in having counsellors facilitate stress management workshops specifically designed for managers is that we have a depth of counselling experience of working in this arena and an understanding of the organisational culture. We can feed back experiences from the counselling room, such as generic workplace scenarios for delegates to discuss, while protecting client confidentiality. We also have an empathic understanding of the managers' experiences when counselling our clients. Our experience creates a feedback loop in the organisational system.

From the beginning of this project we wanted to write up our experiences and share them with other counsellors. To compile this article, we saved material from the workshops' flip charts and used the delegates' evaluation forms, enabling us to capture the feedback from the groups.

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## What to include in the workshop?

From our work with clients we realised that work-related stress could create a number of emotionally driven problems in the workplace. Our observation is that managers are generally in their role because they are good at using IQ (intellect) rather than EQ (emotional intelligence). We set about designing a course that would provide a practical approach in focusing managers' skills towards emotional intelligence responses in their work with their staff. Managers within a local authority setting come from a range of backgrounds including social care, fire services, education, HR, and legal backgrounds.

## Introducing each other

We start with our introductions of who we are and what we do, and then encourage the group

to begin to interact by explaining why they chose to come on this particular workshop. We quickly begin to hear the stress in the manager's workload and other managers commenting: 'It's reassuring to know I'm not alone'.

One of our functions is to provide a reflective space for delegates to explore the reality of their working lives before offering support with how they manage their stresses. Providing a safe space for managers to be heard is a vital part of our role as trainers and our skills as counsellors are at the core of our training work. We aim for a maximum number of 12 delegates in order to maintain a sense of safety as sensitive issues are frequently discussed.

## Hopes and expectations

It has been valuable for us to find out what participants want from the course, what they do not want and also what might help them feel safe as they explore some sensitive issues. This sets the tone of the workshop, and it can be a good warm-up exercise as they get to know one another. We bring these expectations back to the main group and discuss them.

## What delegates want

Generally delegates request a definition/understanding of what stress is and how to spot the early signs. Often they request tools and practical solutions to deal with stress that will not compromise their management role. They also often want to know how to get support/understanding from their managers.

## What delegates do not want

There has been a consensus from group to group, ranging from not wanting moaning, psycho-babble, unrealistic solutions, to too much theory, or personal counselling sessions!

## What delegates need in order to feel safe in the workshop

Confidentiality is always on the agenda. As this

word is often over-used in the helping professions, we have found it useful to offer further depth. We emphasise the point that any information given by a delegate belongs to them and is their property and so should not be shared without their permission. We also add 'a health warning' asking delegates to take responsibility for what they choose to bring throughout the two-day workshop.

Delegates request a safe environment in which respect for each others' feelings is valued and adhered to, and some ask for this to be as non-judgmental as possible and a place where 'stupid questions' are allowed. We also add the 'turn off mobile' rule and ask for participants who have to be contacted (as realistically some are still on call), to do so discreetly.

We keep these hopes and expectations on a flip chart and revisit these at the end of the second day to see if they feel they have been met. With these basic ground rules in place we can proceed.

## What is stress?

We have some definitions of stress but firstly ask the group to discuss their understanding. Most managers are well aware of what stress is, describing:

- the state of mental, emotional and physical strain
- when life seems to get out of control
- functional factors
- individual experience
- and that stress has beneficial and detrimental effects.

We then flag up some definitions gained from the literature<sup>2</sup> and the Health and Safety Executive<sup>3</sup> (HSE). The useful aspect of the HSE definition brings in the difference between pressure (beneficial stress) and stress. This part of the workshop teases out attitudes in the group as they discuss and hear each other and also brings out tensions in the workplace. We name the emotions that we are hearing throughout the workshop, so that delegates feel their experience is heard.

## Symptoms of stress

We use a few Powerpoint slides to point out the effect on the organisation and the employee, again bringing out experiences in the room. We develop a systems approach to the effect of stress on others and employ a stress/vulnerability model<sup>4</sup> to explore individual responses.

We bring the group back to their own attitudes and experiences by asking them to consider in groups a provocative statement:

*'Some people see stress as a weakness and believe that managers should be strong.'*

*Discuss.*



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Most groups need 10-15 minutes to explore this statement as it brings out the stresses in their own departments which can then be explored as a group in empathic, yet challenging, ways. This statement also brings out the stigma that work-related stress can produce. The organisation's cultural aspects are often highlighted with unwritten rules made explicit, such as, 'if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen' or 'managers are paid to have the stress' and 'if your office light is not on until 6 or 7pm then you are not a good manager'.

As facilitators, we observe and reflect back to the group that two strong cultural messages come out from these discussions. One is the 'keep your heads down culture' with managers feeling that if they say something about the stress then they will get blamed for their department's failings. The other is 'hunt the personal pathology', whereby it is the person off work with stress who is ill and weak, not the system malfunctioning in any way.

We help the group to challenge these assumptions by suggesting that they do not 'shoot the messenger' and encourage them to see that the person who is off work with work-related stress may hold an important message that something is going wrong

with the system, and it needs their attention.

In the workshops we have found managers are willing to explore these stereotypical comments and do appreciate that they can arise out of not fully understanding roles and responsibilities. This leads to awareness of the need to clarify their expectations of themselves and their staff.

### Acknowledging and identifying stress in the workplace

We offer some exploratory tools for managers to use in the workplace to help staff begin to talk about stress. We start by exploring the HSE listed risk factors which are the basis of risk assessments (this will link to further training needs on risk assessment and audit).

The HSE<sup>3</sup> suggests seven broad categories of risk factors for work-related stress (WRS):

- culture – openness to talk about pressure/stress
- demands – workloads, environment, working patterns
- control – the say a person has in doing their job
- relationships – conflict and unacceptable behaviour
- change – how change is managed and communicated
- role – ambiguity, clarity conflicting roles
- individual factors – support, training, differences.

We highlight each factor and emphasise the importance of acknowledging that stress in the workplace does exist. We encourage managers to bring questions about work-related stress into their staff meetings, individual performance reviews, and return to work interviews. The work culture can then be one that allows for a willingness and openness to talk about stress issues.

We devised an exercise to demonstrate the importance of this, whereby one person speaks for 10 minutes using a semi-structured format and the other is an engaged listener (see figure 1). They need to identify their own personal stresses and discuss how they manage them. This exercise is in pairs with one person talking while the other

**In pairs, identify a stressful situation that you have been in recently (perhaps from one of the seven HSE categories).**

- Why was it stressful?
- What did you feel and think?
- How did you cope with it or not?
- When did you know that the stress was over or how do you know that it is continuing?

Figure 1: Identifying work-related stress questions

actively listens, then they swap over. Before the swap we encourage delegates to reflect in silence for one minute and to write down any personal findings/learning from the exercise. We then swap and repeat the process.

As a large group we reconvene and process the exercise: What was it like? Are there any realisations or insights that they want to share?

For some, this is a eureka moment when there is a realisation of how stressed they are by an aspect of their work, or how emotionally charged an issue is for them, or just how helpful it is to be heard, particularly if they have an empathic listener. And these are precisely the points we want managers to understand. How can they really appreciate or empathise with their staff and hear their stresses if they cannot speak about or acknowledge their own?

For many, it proves key to their understanding of how they can help themselves and their staff as they realise how much can be achieved in 10 minutes with a quality of listening. We highlight a useful phrase which is, 'don't fix it – hear it'. The minute of silent reflection is also used intentionally to slow things down (which can be particularly valuable when someone is acutely stressed); it helps develop self-awareness and models a practical way in which managers can listen to their staff.

Now they begin fully to appreciate each other in the room and we highlight the benefits of networking and mentorship. Managers also discover the need to feel comfortable with talking about stress so that they can manage it in their teams and to make it 'a live topic' which is open for discussion at team meetings/supervisions.

Another tool we introduce is the 'stress diary' (see figure 2) grading the stress on a scale of 0-5, with 1 registering the beneficial aspect of pressure and 5 registering stress that creates dysfunction. This tool allows the person to reflect and explore what has helped, if anything, including their own learning.

Once delegates have mastered these tools, we explore the value of using them in the workplace with members of staff. We encourage managers to use either the questions with their staff, or the stress diaries between workshops. We recommend that they begin this with staff with whom they have a good relationship in order to get used to using the tools and build their confidence before moving on to address more difficult issues.

### The envelope exercise

We then encourage the managers to reflect individually on a commitment/action they could make to work with work-related stress in their departments before our next workshop in a month's time. This can be anything from putting work-related



**‘We advocate first of all hearing the emotions involved – often this is enough. Ask most people in an argument and the majority are not asking for resolution but acknowledgement of their feelings’**

### A cautionary tale

This is how we refer to the legal aspects of working with work-related stress. We review some legal aspects that affect work-related stress and explore the managers’ experience of the law (which is usually quite sparse) and highlight relevant laws in cases of work-related stress.

We then look at the legal precedent set by John Walker of Northumberland County Council who took his employer to court in 1994 for causing psychological damage and was awarded £200,000 in compensation.

We provide an anonymous outline scenario of the John Walker case and encourage our delegates to discuss the case in groups, thinking about how they would manage John’s work-related stress. We ask the managers to take into account their legal responsibilities, demonstrating how they would show these had been met. This stimulates a lot of discussion, highlighting the stresses that managers regularly encounter, for example lack of resources, staff shortages and staff sickness and identifying the skills they need to work with it.

### Return to work checklist

Our experience in the counselling room and in the training room led us to believe that managers could benefit from some support in managing a vulnerable member of staff who is considering a return to work. We know that a manager’s attitude towards his/her staff member while planning their return to work is likely to have a significant impact on whether a successful return to work is achieved or not. Some managers communicate confusion about how much/how little they need to do to help staff members return to work.

With this in mind, we devised a best practice sheet as guidance for managers when managing this issue. They generally value the discussion and clarity this brings, as they may be concerned that

their actions might exacerbate the situation. Others may reflect on their own successful outcomes of managing a return to work and share this with the group, identifying what worked well or what they might have done differently.

Pulling together recommendations from the HSE and from our experience with clients, we make recommendations that aim to encourage sensitive communication and planning, open communication with occupational health and staff member and regular reviews.

We highlight the period of sick leave that a person may have due to stress and help managers to engage actively with the process.

In addition, we have produced a sheet that can also serve as a framework for managers to manage work-related stress. The framework includes offering the individual space, support and choice.

■ **Space** – It may need to be acknowledged that space is needed; for example, a period of sickness, annual leave, reduced responsibilities, or a change of job temporarily/permanently.

■ **Support** – This can come from all directions but offered sensitively and appropriately, it can enhance the manager’s or organisation’s engagement in the situation. Equally the employee with stress has responsibilities in this process and the manager can help to highlight this sensitively and appropriately.

■ **Choice** – This means the individual’s/manager’s choice in responding to the effects that work-related stress has had on all the systems both individually and organisationally.

Communication is the key with all these headings.

### Problem solving

Managers ask for tools and techniques to take back to the workplace. We offer a six-stage problem-solving process that is frequently identified as one of the most useful aspects of the workshop. Delegates feel able to take this away and use it for themselves or with their teams. It is a dynamic process and offers insight for delegates and a practical approach to addressing work-related problems.

We begin asking for a delegate to bring forward a work-related problem that they need some help with. By teaching the tool, we demonstrate the parallel process and how their learning from our teaching methods can be modelled and taken back to the workplace to use with their staff. Managers often feel they are paid to problem solve so they quickly assume this responsibility.

We advocate first of all hearing the emotions involved – often purely hearing the emotion is enough. Ask most people in an argument and the majority are not asking for resolution but

acknowledgement of their feelings – it is the ‘hear it, don’t fix it approach’. If strong emotions of hurt or anger have not been acknowledged, then these are likely to sabotage any attempt to problem solve. Once emotions have been acknowledged, we then advocate using the skills of the team and/or others to problem solve and use a six-step problem-solving approach to achieve it<sup>5</sup>.

## Dealing with conflict

At this stage of the workshop we usually have an engaged group who are well versed with work-related stress issues and who have shared and explored lots of skills and experiences. We are now ready to deal with what we consider as being a primary cause of stress in the workplace.

The HSE identifies conflicts in relationships at work as being one of the key factors in contributing to work-related stress, and this is certainly borne out by our experience as workplace counsellors and our experience of working within organisations. We begin this section of the day asking the managers to offer up the thoughts and feelings that the word ‘conflict’ conjures up for them. Their responses densely fill a flip chart page and it usually takes a while before someone states that conflict can be beneficial. We use the many negative thoughts/emotions to highlight why so many conflicts may remain ignored, buried or avoided because they can evoke such uncomfortable emotions.

We then split the workshop into small groups for participants to consider a scenario where there is role ambiguity that often creates conflict in the workplace. We offer the scenario of a female manager returning to work after maternity leave to replace a male member of staff who has been acting up in her absence. Within weeks, both appear to be unhappy and their team are reporting dissatisfaction. We ask the groups to consider the following questions:

- What do you think some of the problems/ conflicts might be?
- How might you manage this conflict in your team?
- How might you communicate your understanding of the conflict to the people concerned?
- How might you help them to find a way forward and explore solutions?

We then discuss their responses and also offer a seven-step model to ‘resolving conflict constructively and respectfully’ taking the managers through these steps.

## Giving and receiving feedback

Working with conflict brings out the struggle of how to give difficult feedback, and at this stage we explore a process of giving constructive feedback

using CORBS, which stands for CLEAR, OWNED, REGULAR, BALANCED and SPECIFIC.

We discuss this as not being a passive process. The person receiving feedback has some responsibility in asking for it to be delivered so that it can be respectfully received in the manner of CORBS. Managers are left with no doubt that the causes of conflict start and end in communication!

## Pulling it all together and evaluation

We explore an overview of the two days pulling together any loose strands and questions discussing how managers will find their resources through networking; many managers favour setting up a mentorship system to share experiences. Work addresses are shared between the members of the group, resources are highlighted in the organisation and we produce a handout of useful addresses and websites.

We have found that spending time on evaluation and feedback is worthwhile. We ask delegates to reflect on the two-day workshops first of all for themselves on a form that is not handed in. This evaluation of self asks the delegates: What have you learnt on the workshops about yourself, others and the organisation? What main points will you take away to use in the workplace? And what resources will you need to help you?

We return to the list of hopes and expectations that managers noted at the beginning of the course, along with an overview of what we have covered. Some of the issues not covered are usually the topic of other workshops, such as doing risk assessments or working with personal stress symptoms, and we can point delegates in the direction of further training. Most issues requested, we cover fully and delegates consistently complete evaluation forms that provide us with positive feedback and an indication of how much the workshops are valued. ■

## References

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## Additional reading

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