

Foothold

WELLBEING ARTICLE 04

CONTROLLING THE UNCONTROLLABLE

INTRODUCTION

When I reflect upon some of the key projects I've delivered over recent years, I quickly recall the subtle but pervasive levels of anxiety I began to experience daily. I remember how those challenging feelings affected my ability to think clearly, maintain efficient progress and sustain acceptable levels of personal wellbeing.

So, what caused those unhelpful sensations to arise? If you had asked me that question a few years ago I would have attributed my feelings of anxiety to the nature of engineering itself, the amount of detail an engineer requires to attend too, the variables we're tasked with controlling and how failure can result in catastrophe. Simply put, I was trying to control the uncontrollable. I had innocently allowed healthy levels of pressure to build and eventually overwhelm me, a direct result of losing personal perspective.

Now if I were you, reading this blog about 'controlling the uncontrollable' the first thing I would think is something akin to '*of course you can't control the uncontrollable, by default its uncontrollable!*' And whilst your analysis would be undeniably correct, it is quite remarkable how often we fail to see the forest for the trees when we've progressively descended into the detail of our work environments.

So, how did I learn to maintain perspective and prevent natural levels of performance enhancing pressure from turning into unhealthy levels of anxiety and stress?



NO PRESSURE, NO DIAMOND:

To start with, I started to remember that pressure was not my enemy. In many instances, I found pressure an exceedingly motivating and useful emotion. It allowed me to develop laser like focus, reduce personal entropy and crystallise project related visions. Pressure only changed state and formed stress/anxiety when I accidentally allowed it to increase beyond my personal tolerance levels, eventually reaching the point where it became more of a hinderance than an ally. So, I sat time aside and began to reverse engineering my own inner processes. What I discovered is that I'd begun to walk the path of anxiety-based feelings the minute I started to lose perspective. This was my first fork in the road so to speak.

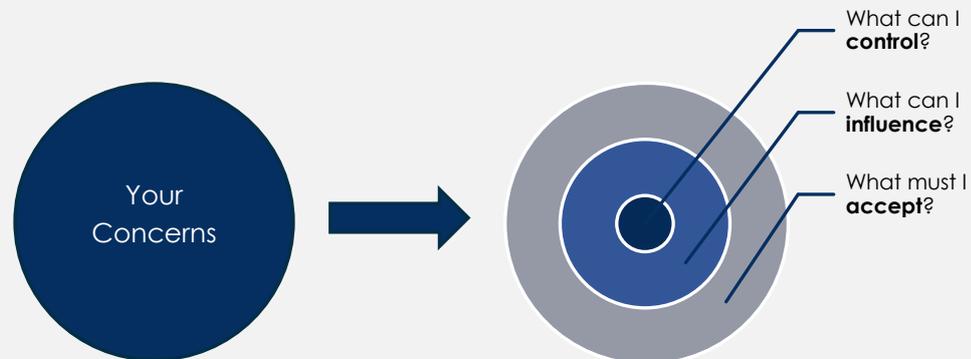
If you ever experience feelings of anxiety or notice you've started to become overwhelmed, I suggest asking yourself the following three questions;

1. What can I control?
2. What can I influence?
3. What must I accept as circumstance?

I won't quantify the full meaning of each question at this moment in time however, I will offer a brief example of how these very questions helped me in the past.

I recall being transferred onto a multi-million-pound project because a very capable colleague had accepted a new position with another company. This meant I required to 'hit the ground running' and deliver a project that hadn't gone through the usual sanitisation process with regards to engineering design. Invariably, system flaws started to become apparent and the project was already past the mitigation stages. As a result, I quickly allowed myself to become overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and stress. I was determined to ensure the project was a roaring success and worked exceedingly hard to control key elements that would result in successful delivery. Eventually however, I reached the point where long-term anxiety was starting to affect my clarity of thought, health, sleep patterns and family life. Luckily, I discovered the Control, Influence & Accept Model. By asking myself the three questions mentioned above and shown in the illustration below, I was able to orientate myself better, dissolve feelings of anxiety, regain clarity of thought and make a real difference to the project. In short, I accepted the project hadn't had the best of starts, that additional hurdles would need overcome but neither of this was a reflection upon me or my abilities as a professional engineer. It was simply circumstance. I began to understand that whilst there were hardly any areas I could control fully, despite what I aspired to control, but there were many areas that I could greatly influence.

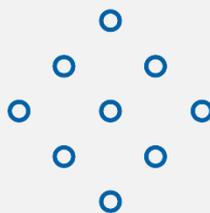
It may sound overly simply however, when I fully accepted what I couldn't control and began refocusing my time and energy into where I had influence, both the project and my health benefitted greatly. The key was maintaining perspective, and those three questions helped me to do that.



SUMMARY

- Short-term pressure can enhance your performance
- Long-term pressure can lead to stress & feelings of anxiety
- Chronic stress may negatively affect your sleep, health and relationships
- When we lose perspective, it's easier to become overwhelmed in life
- The CIA Method can help you regain or maintain a healthy perspective
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My next article will discuss the importance of sleep and offer a range of practical tips for improving the quality your sleep. In the meantime, if you've found this article interesting and would like to discuss it further, please contact us on hello@myfoothold.org or call on +44 (0)20 7344 5498



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