1. Principle?

Stress should be seen as the outcome and the hazard being pressure. The key to understanding stress as an issue is by understanding how and where it is caused. All workers react differently to pressure: while one may adversely react to a source of pressure, another could react in a positive way to the same stimulus. Individual susceptibility is therefore a key factor. Employers must also be aware that individuals may suffer stress reactions from stimuli at home rather than it arising purely from work-related activity, which can also affect performance and well-being at work.

Sources of stress at work include excessive demands, individuals feeling little control over their work, poor support from line managers and colleagues, ineffective or conflict-based relationships, poor definition of role and responsibilities and organisational or work change.

2. How does this affect your organisation?

Business decisions can cause pressure. There is both good and bad pressure. Stress is a generic term for a range of illnesses or conditions that affect a worker's well-being. The effects can result in both mental and physical symptoms e.g. weight loss, irritability, sleep disruption. If the stressor(s) are not addressed this can lead to serious and life changing consequences. Those workers on stress-related sick leave are often away for weeks and months. This obviously impacts on the cost efficiency of the business and increases pressure on remaining colleagues.

3. Who has to do what?

Managers should reflect on the rapid change that is often experienced in modern businesses. If this is not handled well it can be a significant contributor to stress.

Managers should identify the key stressors in the workplace. These include excessive demands from the amount of work or adverse working conditions such as temperature, space or distractions. They also include poor control of work flows, ill-defined or undermined roles or ineffective communication from management. Workers themselves can feel isolated or unsupported. However, the biggest cause of stress is poorly managed change.

Excellent communication and developing a robust and genuine team spirit are fundamental to reducing the perception of pressure and significantly mitigates stressors. Humour, encouraging enjoyment and celebrating success are key mitigators of stress.
There are four things for managers to focus on. Firstly prevention. Organisations have to take tough decisions, but poor planning, flawed execution and lack of support would be guaranteed to produce unnecessarily adverse levels of pressure. Good management of change is essential to avoid this.

Secondly, identifying early signs and symptoms in workers. Knowing the team and its individuals is vital to identifying signs of stress. Identifying stress related changes in individual’s behaviour and health at an early stage will provide opportunity to find ways of recovering the situation.

Thirdly, recovery and rehabilitation. If the organisation has failed on points one and two, then this will be necessary. It will normally need some form of medical intervention and the counselling of the individual. It takes considerably more effort to rehabilitate workers than it would have to manage the stressors better and have avoided stress related ill-health.

Fourthly, avoid repeat. It is vital to identify what stressors were present in the workplace that led to the worker being off work. Action must be taken to manage these stressors better otherwise a recurrence of the ill-health is likely. A back to work interview and an agreed adjustment to role or work is usually required. Do not let the workers workload build up during their absence.

4. What training is required?

Good management and understanding the factors that lead to unmanageable stress. While first aiders may be trained to provide initial help, mental health is a complex and difficult area to treat and counselling is better left to health professionals.

5. What documents and records do you have to keep?

Some organisations carry out stress assessments to identify the stressors that exist in their workplace. Once identified appropriate management controls can be devised and implemented. Their identification also facilitates better monitoring of stressors and improved communication with teams and individuals.

6. Where do you go for more information?

www.hse.gov.uk/stress/

7. What else might you have to consider?

The management and leadership style applied in your organisation. Ensuring that workers are appropriately competent to carry out their roles and they have the right resources at their disposal to carry out their work tasks effectively. Good counselling services accessible to all and with details communicated to every employee.