The relationship between control and stress levels

Early in my working life I suffered from stress at work, and looking back on it the cause was a lack of control over what I had been tasked to do. I liken the experience to sitting on the motorway to the airport in a huge traffic jam with the minutes ticking away to my flight.

I am not alone; it's a very common problem. Recent research commissioned by the Health and Safety Executive indicated that:

- about half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill
- up to 5 million people in the UK feel 'very' or 'extremely' stressed by their work
- stress-related illness is responsible for the loss of 6.5 million working days each year
- costs society about £3.7 billion every year

Just as I experienced, much of this stress is caused by:

- a lack of control over what needs to be done, how it will be achieved and the timeframes associated with doing it. The experience of pressure is strongly linked to perceptions of control. Lack of influence and consultation in the way in which work is organised and performed can be a potential source of pressure
- minimal personal decision making authority
- limited control over the resources required to perform a job effectively, or only in control of part of the overall process
- a lack of control over pay (lifestyle) and work-life balance
- overbearing or unreasonable management pressure.

As a coach I have developed the diagram below to aid discussion on how stress levels can be better managed by acknowledging and accepting the sad state of affairs that exist in most hierarchical and functionally organised companies. My message is a simple one; only focus on the important things where you have some control or influence. Ignore everything else, and certainly don't stress over it!
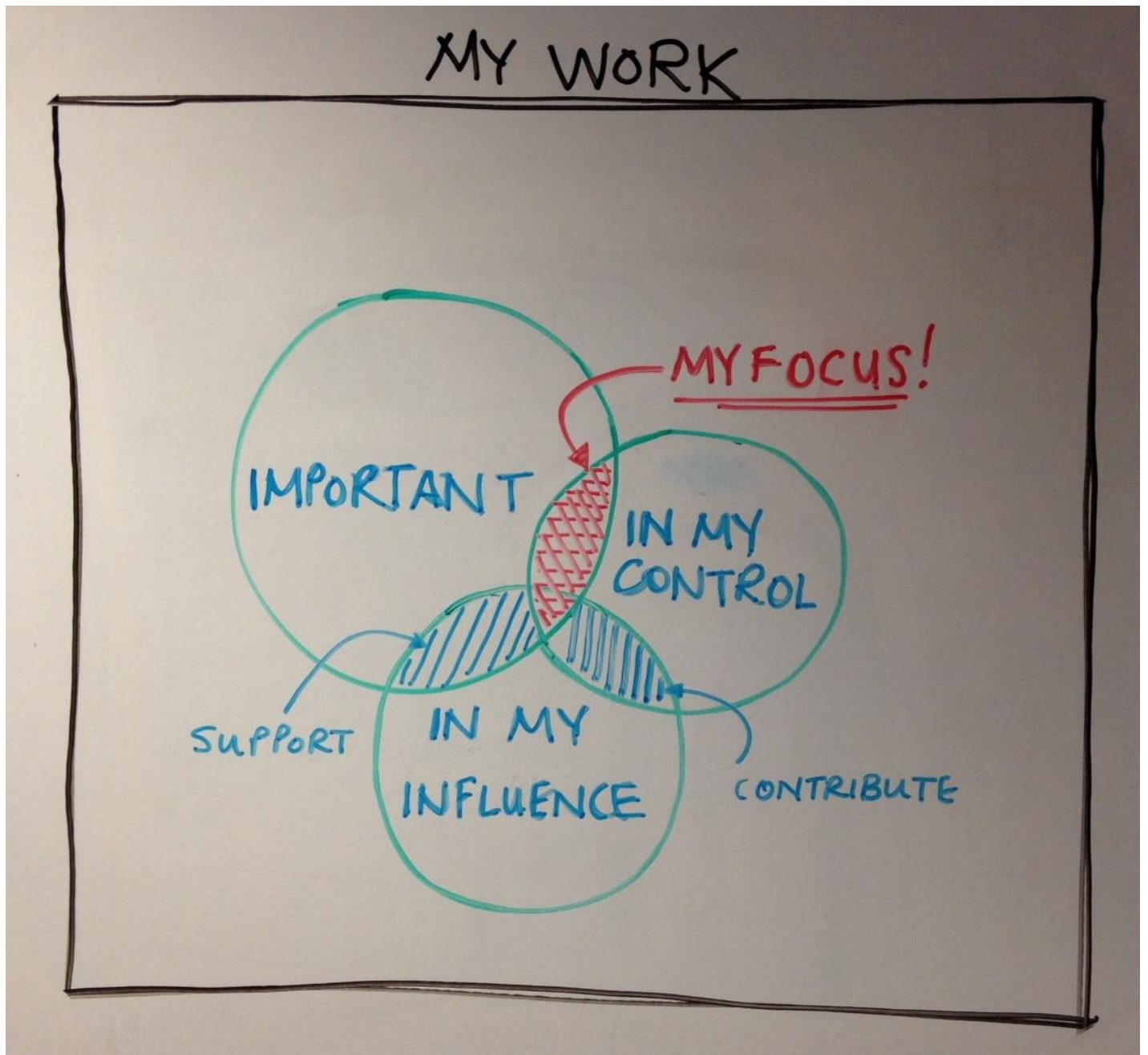
Let's compare this with an SMO where individuals have full control over what they do, the resources (including the money) and the decision making.

In an SMO, what's important to doing the job and achieving the outcome is absolutely in the person's control and influence. A major source of stress no longer exists.

We must acknowledge that there are other stresses and pressures of working in an SMO, but a lack of control is not one of them.