

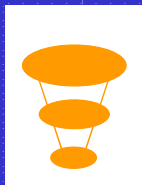
# **The Eighth International Congress of Behavioral Medicine**

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**The Soft Guidelines of NIOH, Copenhagen.  
How to go from survey to action.**

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# The Situation

**Intervention**



**Psychosocial work environment**



**Health & well-being**

**Urgent need for more and better research!**



**We do not know everything, but we know enough to act!**



# The Problem

Survey



Action plan



Intervention



Improvements of  
working conditions

It is easy to do a  
survey of the  
psychosocial work  
environment.

The next steps are  
much more  
difficult!

## **The "Soft Guidelines"**

**At NIOH, Copenhagen, we have developed 10 soft guidelines for COPSOQ. We have no way of enforcing these guidelines, but they still have a great impact. The guidelines have been developed in collaboration with the workplaces and a number of consultants.**

# The "Soft Guidelines" of the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ)

- 1. Never start a survey of the psychosocial work environment unless there is a clear intention of taking action if indicated.**
- 2. Answering the questionnaire is voluntary, but a response rate below 60% is unsatisfactory and a sign of poor psychological climate at the workplace.**
- 3. All respondents are anonymous. If scores are calculated for groups of less than 15 persons all group members should give their active consent.**
- 4. All employees have the right to see and discuss the results.**
- 5. Management as well as supervisors and workers should participate and be committed during the whole process.**
- 6. It is important to distinguish between basic conditions of work that are "part of the job" and factors that could be changed. Do not try to change what cannot be changed and do not accept what should be changed.**
- 7. There are no standard solutions to the problems. Solutions should be developed locally and integrated in the other activities of the organization aiming at increased productivity and better quality.**
- 8. If interventions are made, it is a good idea to repeat the survey after 1-2 years in order to see if the intended improvements have been occurred.**
- 9. Many workplaces will benefit from surveys with regular intervals as part of the overall concept of the "learning organization" and the "developmental work".**
- 10. The survey results should be seen as a tool for dialogue and development – not as a "grade book".**

- 1. Never start a survey of the psychosocial work environment unless there is a clear intention of taking action if indicated.**

**This is one of the most important rules.**

**Management should be clearly committed to taking action if indicated before the survey takes place.**

**A survey without subsequent action is worse than no survey. The employees will be disillusioned and the confidence in management will suffer.**

**2. Answering the questionnaire is voluntary, but a response rate below 60% is unsatisfactory and a sign of poor psychological climate at the workplace.**

**It is not a good idea to try to force employees to answer a questionnaire. It is unethical and against the whole idea of improving the psychosocial work environment.**

**A low response rate may be a sign of poor commitment and a low sense of community.**

**A low response rate will also decrease the quality of the survey. The non-responders will most likely be different from the responders.**

**3. All respondents are anonymous. If scores are calculated for groups of less than 15 persons, all group members should give their active consent.**

**At a few workplaces the employees find it natural *not* to be anonymous, but this is quite rare. In most cases it is important to protect the anonymity of the respondents. This makes it possible to give critique of the work environment without being afraid of negative sanctions from management or colleagues.**

**If groups are smaller than 15 persons, the statistical precision will be rather small (wide confidence limits).**

**If the groups are small, some employees may also feel that their anonymity is threatened.**

**4. All employees have the right to see and discuss the results.**

**A report on the psychosocial work environment is of no value if the employees do not have the right to see and discuss the results.**

**This means that the report should be available and also *understandable* for the employees. In many cases it will be a good idea that the consultant or another expert explains the results to the employees, and that the employees are given the opportunity to ask questions.**

**5. Management as well as supervisors and workers should participate and be committed during the whole process.**

**It is important that representatives from all groups at the worksite participate in the whole process.**

**A "participative approach" without the commitment of the *management* will often run into major problems with regard to resources and implementation.**

**A "management approach" without the participation of the *employees* will often run into problems with lack of support and passive resistance.**

**An approach without support from *middle managers* will often fail since these employees are key persons in any kind of change at a workplace.**

**6. It is important to distinguish between basic conditions of work that are "part of the job" and factors that could be changed. Do not try to change what cannot be changed and do not accept what should be changed.**

**This is one of the most important rules.**

**Many causes of strain should be considered as "basic conditions". Emotional demands cannot be eliminated from the work of nurses or teachers. Working alone is part of the job of many drivers. Teachers and bus drivers usually have a fixed time schedule. Firemen must work during the night and weekends. *When basic conditions cannot be changed, focus should be on the strengthening of individual and collective coping resources and competence.***

**Many conditions could – *and should* – be changed. This is very often the case with regard to social support, feedback, influence at work, predictability (relevant information), and leadership. With regard to these dimensions, poor conditions should *not* be considered as "part of the job".**

**7. There are no standard solutions to the problems. Solutions should be developed locally and integrated in the other activities of the organization aiming at increased productivity and better quality.**

**Solutions for increasing the influence of nurses at hospitals will not be applicable for welders at a shipyard. Almost all psychosocial problems have to be solved by the people at the worksite. There are at least two major reasons for this:**

- 1. The people of the worksite are the persons who have to change their own ways of doing things. They have to be their own "agents of change".**
- 2. Solutions have to take into account the local resources, conditions and barriers. All changes are context-specific. Even two "identical" worksites may have different potentials and barriers.**

**For these reasons standard "cook-books" have limited value in this field. (It is like smoking cessation: You can give the smoker some good advice, but there is only one person who can stop smoking: The smoker himself).**

**8. If interventions are made, it is a good idea to repeat the survey after 1-2 years in order to see if the intended improvements have been made.**

**One of the advantages of using a standardized instrument (such as the COPSQQ) is that it can be used for assessing the effects of interventions aiming at improving the working conditions. Usually the interventions should have sufficient time to "settle" before the second survey is performed.**

**If the intended improvements have not been achieved, it should be taken seriously. A proper analysis of "what went wrong here" should be performed.**

**9. Many workplaces will benefit from surveys with regular intervals as part of the overall concept of the "learning organization" and the "developmental work".**

**A "learning organization" is an organization in which failures and successes are used as possibilities for collective and organizational learning. Many organizations have norms and procedures that are counterproductive or hide the real problems.**

**"Developmental work" is work that includes substantial influence, meaning, and possibilities for development.**

**If a workplace is based on these two principles, regular surveys of the psychosocial work environment can serve as a tool at both levels: Increased learning at the organizational level and increased growth and development at the individual level.**

**10. The survey results should be seen as a tool for dialogue and development – not as a "grade book".**

**If a survey shows that the psychosocial work environment is poor, many people tend to look at the results as a "grade book" in school or a court sentence. This is not a constructive way to use a survey.**

**If a survey shows many "problems", it is important to set priorities. First, the distinction between "basic conditions" and "factors that should be changed" should be made (point 6 above). Second, priority should be given to a few of the most important among the "factors that should be changed". It is a bad idea to try to change everything at once.**

**The survey should be seen as a tool in the ongoing development of the organization, and "problems" should be seen as challenges and opportunities for learning.**



The End

**This presentation can be found at:  
[www.ami.dk/presentations](http://www.ami.dk/presentations)**

