



EMOTIONS

A publication by Neela Bettridge Ltd

Workplace psychology: a guide for leaders

This is a sample of the blogs I've written in the past few years on various aspects of workplace psychology, ranging from anxiety, passive aggressiveness and unconscious bias to emotional intelligence and resilience. I hope you find something here that you can adapt to your own leadership and life.

When you're falling, dive

I've always liked the rather Zen-like phrase, *When you're falling, dive*. It's the title of [a powerful self-help book](#) (of sorts) by Cheri Huber.

It's how I try to approach the current climate of change and uncertainty. In certain ways, we should give into it – the harder you clench and brace, the harder it will be. Don't try to take control of something you can't control.

Taking this step back helps us see things more clearly, too. You might notice that the more uncertain things become and the more the landscape changes, the clearer your sense of your own core qualities. As it becomes less and less possible to forcibly adapt yourself to the pace of change, which is now nigh-on giddy, the opportunity to accept our own inherent capacities is presented to us. More than accept, in fact: cherish. These are the qualities that set us apart. The happy byproduct of accepting this in your career is accepting ourselves a bit more as a person, full stop.

Uncertainty can make us freeze. The positive flipside of freezing is to dance with the change, to front up to its movement with our own response, which does not seek to copy but rather to complement. In other words, if change doesn't freeze us, it can supercharge us creatively.

How do we meet uncertainty in this manner? By welcoming it and even evangelising for it. That way we dissolve its power to frighten.

We might also tell ourselves and our teams that we don't need to have the answer, the readymade solution. And that should not frighten us either. For so long, the pace of change was manageable. It telegraphed its arrival. Because we had time to prepare, we were supposed to have solutions. Not so now. With the evolution of technology, disruptive change can arrive on our laps in an instant. We are not expected to have the answer to it straight away – but we *are* expected to respond creatively. And remember too that everyone's in the same boat. When nobody has seen the problem before, nobody has a head start. Allow that thought to create space.

Keeping creativity flowing in the face of uncertainty is a tricky skill for leaders. On the one hand, it is harmful to organise a creative project with lots of admin and structure, which are stifling factors. Yet on the other hand, being too hands-off can lead to aimless navel-gazing. *Some* structure is needed and that structure should be in the form of the leader's regular, encouraging, understanding, curious voice. A voice that does not seek to steer the creative project but does try to provide a clear narrative thread that becomes a reinforcing mirror of what the project is doing.

A few other little pointers for leading amongst uncertainty and change –

- Believe in your team. You cannot fix all this on your own, though if you regard uncertainty as a crisis, you might find yourself tempted to try and do so.
- Believe in your team's diversity. One of the reasons that the challenges facing business are mounting in number, variety and complexity is that the digital world means that the number, variety and complexity of human beings is represented more and more. Embrace the number, variety and complexity of your teams to meet these challenges.
- Be honest about what you know and don't know. You might find you don't know what you thought you did and know more about what you thought you didn't!
- Connect with all levels of your workforce. If you're a few managerial levels away from people, they know things that you don't.
- Embrace the truth that communication is not just a tool, it is part of what makes a leader a leader. Elevate its status in your own mind.

Anxiety in the workplace: what leaders can do

There is anxiety everywhere in your office. However many breakout spaces you install, socials you organise and old hierarchical formalities you do away with – the anxiety is still there.

Why? To answer that, we have to acknowledge the different types of anxiety. First there's the more common kind: people feeling anxious about their performance and whether their job is safe. The other type of anxiety is more serious: it has no obvious cause.

So what can a leader do?

Remember to praise

However calm and confident people appear, a good portion of them live their working life waiting to be pulled up for something. Impostor syndrome affects a huge number of us. Sometimes it just takes a simple positive comment to defuse this and reassure people that you're not brewing some terribly negative appraisal of their performance.

'Model relaxation'

In *The Art of Communicating*, Thich Nhat Hanh says that one form of leading-by-example is to 'model relaxation' – that is, to present a relaxed demeanour to your teams and to demonstrate that you are committed to nurturing that kind of environment. You might be known as a student of meditation or breathwork, for instance.

Normalise and contextualise feedback

Even negative feedback. Presumably you work hard to nurture a positive, supporting environment where employees are reminded of their value and of how much they are wanted. Within this context, critiquing performance does not become catastrophic. It is about a minor

tweaking of an employee's methods or approach, rather than a wholesale dismantling of their worth. Give feedback often and with a light touch so that it is taken the right way and does not knock the employee into a bout of grave soul-searching.

In any case, as [this HBR piece](#) reveals, people would rather have constructive negative feedback than a boss who undermines their development by sugar-coating everything.

Do away with presenteeism

According to this [Fast Company article](#), Asana and Dropbox run a system where "Employee hours are not set or tracked, and they are encouraged to work a schedule that is best for them and their families. There is no limit on time off but [...] employees are asked to be mindful of team goals and commitments". This might be a step too far for your business right now (particularly if you're a start-up) but it's worth bearing in mind the priceless value of taking ownership of your output – not to mention of being away from the office with loved ones.

Explain that you value output over input

Anxiety can lead people to overwork and to put in ineffectual effort. [This Entrepreneur article](#) makes the excellent point that, as leaders, we should make clear that we value the output, not the input – it's what you produce with the hours you work that counts, not the hours you work themselves.

Righting unconscious bias is a lifetime's work

The concept of unconscious or implicit bias is coming more and more into the mainstream. It's a deceptively neat phrase, one that can *appear* easy to grasp. As if we can pick it up and turn it round, examine what it entails before ticking off that box: unconscious bias, understood, done.

But while we leaders who don't suffer from anxiety and depression might have familiarised ourselves with the basics of, say, mental health awareness quite enough to make a real difference to our teams, unconscious bias is a very different beast. Why? Because it is huge and it is deeply coded into all of us – it is part of the fabric of our minds. Decoding and unpicking it is a lifetime's difficult work.

As [this fascinating Guardian article reveals](#), unconscious bias may well have evolutionary roots:

Scientists believe that stereotypes in general serve a purpose because clustering people into groups with expected traits help us navigate the world without being overwhelmed by information. The downside is that the potential for prejudice is hard-wired into human cognition.

For me, there's the rub. Unconscious bias comes naturally to us. So my take is that we should not beat ourselves up for it existing in us – but we *should* challenge ourselves to combat it. And doing that will be a lifetime's work, because unconscious bias is a 'natural' part of being human. We will always be battling ourselves.

So are we up for it? We must be. It would be easy to pretend it isn't happening, but it would be shameful to do so. If you've not engaged with unconscious bias, you could [give this test a go](#) –

but bear in mind that much of the unconscious bias testing has been criticised for its scientific rigour.

Still, that's not to say unconscious bias doesn't exist. Far from it. Its sheer insidiousness might well account for the difficulty of successful testing. It's on all of us to look honestly at ourselves. We cannot depend on research bodies to come up with neat and efficient ways of eradicating our unconscious bias.

I could make the business case, as I often have done, for inclusion and diversity but I feel that would be a sweetener: the fact is that if we leaders engage with this issue as we should, our life just got a whole lot harder.

Why helping your team combat anxiety will bring wide-ranging benefits

People are hungry for tools to combat anxiety. And those tools are tools for life. In other words, help your workforce with anxiety and you help them with a whole lot else – and that's only going to help your business.

I read [this Time article](#) the other day. I was struck by a quote from an expert on self-harm, speaking of the causes of our current anxiety epidemic amongst young people:

It's that they're in a cauldron of stimulus they can't get away from, or don't want to get away from, or don't know how to get away from.

The overstimulation of today's work culture – 24hr connectivity being the big one – is only going to exacerbate things. So what can we do? Here are a few simple tips.

Promote mindfulness

Much is claimed for mindfulness, but one thing it can (absolutely, inarguably) produce is stillness. And stillness is the opposite of overstimulation. Do you have the means to allocate a meeting room to mindfulness sessions once a week? Could you invite a skilled practitioner (even one of the team) to lead the sessions? I've heard of #mindfulness Slack channels being wonderfully fertile places for teams to communicate and share ideas. Even if you're only offering an occasional window of stillness, it can help team members get a taste for the power of stillness to quell anxiety.

Act as a role model

One of the triggers for workplace anxiety is the sense of being watched by your boss at all times. If you feel like your boss is never offline, it can be hard not to feel guilty about going offline yourself. As leaders, we should avoid sending emails at weekends, for instance. Lunch hours should be taken outside, not al desco. And chat casually about out-of-the-office matters – this is a way to remind your team that you are not a work machine.

Youper

This free app is gaining more and more word-of-mouth recommendations. People I've spoken

to talk about it being useful as an alternative to or continuation of for anxiety and depression therapies like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). But it's also a good way simply to monitor mood. Even if you don't want to actively promote it, having it installed on the main screen of your phone would send out some good signals should anyone spot it!

The ever-increasing importance of emotional intelligence in the workplace

Recently I came across [this Fast Company article](#) that claims hiring managers and HR professionals are starting to value 'emotional intelligence' over IQ.

The article points out possible reasons this might well be the case: staff with emotional intelligence cope better under pressure, take feedback well and have 'people skills'.

Frankly I think the author might be identifying an oversimplified chain of causation here. It cannot be as clear-cut as leaders wanting workers who, say, cope better under pressure, take feedback well and have 'people skills' – and then identifying 'emotional intelligence' as the key personality trait to look out for in candidates to secure those other qualities.

After all, 'emotional intelligence' is an incredibly complex – [and somewhat nebulous](#) – set of characteristics.

But while I don't quite buy its thesis, I *love* that this article has been written. Why? Because I think it has bubbled up organically from the current, very healthy climate of heightened awareness around mental matters. We're now recognising that our workplace toolkit needs an emotional element. The fact that the surveys quoted in the article even happened are also testament to society's new openness around these things.

For leaders, this new transparency around such matters is going to be a challenge (even if 'emotional intelligence' translates to good feedback-takers and pressure-copers!). As society becomes more and more open about our internal worlds, particularly the darker sides of them, things are naturally going to get a little tricky at times. What was once not allowed to exist in the workplace is now being ushered in – there's bound to be confusion.

Even if there's a bit of bandwagon-jumping with all this, that's fine – it points to momentum, and this is one bandwagon I want everyone to jump on.

Avoiding emotional burnout

We're starting to move at the speed of technology.

Technological fixes are helping us to do things more efficiently – sometimes exponentially so. And there's no way of opting out of adopting these tools. We know everyone else is looking at them too – and getting left behind is not an option.

Natural human efficiency is increasingly enmeshed with the technological tools of efficiency. It's blurring the lines between what can reasonably be expected of a human and the kind of productivity that is machine-based.

So all of a sudden we're operating at warp speed, partly held up by technology, partly dragged unnaturally along by it. The upshot can be burnout. Here are a few suggestions for how to avoid it.

Build in a culture of logging off

One aspect of today's advanced technological environment is 24hr connectivity thanks to mobile devices. Resist! And encourage your teams to do the same. Don't fire out emails at the weekend, even if you occasionally allow yourself to work then.

Earth your mind

Our brains are whipped into a frenzy by technology. Sitting for five minutes in a meditation session can do wonders for stilling the crackle. And if you think 'What can five minutes achieve?', try it: even five minutes can be chasteningly difficult.

Setting the pace is not always necessary

It is important as leaders that we set a good example and sometimes that involves keeping things progressing at an intense pace. But only sometimes. While an intense pace is appropriate at certain times, it is entirely inappropriate at others. Don't crack the whip out of habit. And if you can't help it, ask yourself if you're afraid of something. What do you think will happen if you let this project develop organically?

Avoid the set piece 'How are you doing?' question

Don't make 'How are you doing?' a question that you only roll out during 1:1s because 1:1 protocol requires it. Checking in about our team members' state of mind and wellbeing should enter the casual currency of your dialogue with them.

Take the time to prep even when things are hectic

When things are already hectic, verging on chaotic, it can seem like an easy time win to immediately assent to a request without properly assessing its extent. You just optimistically hope it'll be OK and, hey, you haven't wasted any time weighing it up. Big mistake. Assessing the size of the task – the nature of the beast – is always going to be part of the task anyway. So you're making a start by doing so. And even if you decide you can't take it on, you can help ensure it is assigned to the right person with enough bandwidth

Keep on delegating

A little like the previous point, we can sometimes feel we're too busy to delegate and that explaining the task will take as much time as doing it yourself – or longer. That's panic talking.

Fill your social calendar

And that includes weekday evenings, not just the weekend. If you make social commitments, you simply cannot be working. And that is so important, because work will seep into everything if you give it half a chance.

Dealing with passive aggressive behaviour

One of the problems with passive aggressive behaviour is, that by its very nature, it can be hard to detect, never mind fix. Passive aggressive behaviour is anger repressed and then expressed indirectly. It can wreak havoc without you necessarily understanding how. But if we feel in our gut that something is a bit 'off' with someone's response, there's a chance we're being faced with an instance of passive aggressive behaviour. Here are a few suggestions for how to deal with it when it skulks shiftily, sulkily to the surface!

Summarise what your interpretation of their message is

Passive aggressiveness can be in part fear of honesty – a person's lack of courage about being open with their anger. If you do it (calmly) for them, it will help things.

Avoid fighting fire with fire

Recognise that passive aggressive behaviour is often done unintentionally. This person may have grown up in a household where it was not OK to express negative emotion. Many of us did. Try to be compassionate in the face of it. Mindfulness techniques come in very handy here, in that they help us check our own responses before automatically acting on them.

Understand the role of hierarchy

The nature of workplaces – particularly insofar as they involve hierarchy – means that passive aggressiveness is more likely to rear its head. Anger is generally not OK in the workplace, and certainly not towards your superiors. One way to address this is to make your business a (relatively) safe space for the expression of anger. You can do this by framing it professionally as the eradication of ambiguity: ambiguity is simply poor communication and bad for business, and passive aggressiveness is just one form of ambiguity.

Read body language

As a leader, get adept at interpreting body language. What is a report's body language saying that their words are not? Don't let people withdraw sulkily from arguments, which is classic passive aggressive behaviour. 'Honestly, it's fine. Don't worry about it' – this is about as *unfine* as it gets, and their body language is probably screaming that fact.

Recognise when 'not doing' is being done passively aggressively

Sometimes there's a very good reason that something wasn't done. Sometimes it is a passive aggressive act. If you eliminate all the good reasons, then passive aggressiveness is quite likely to be the cause. That said, make sure you've discounted reasons around emotional struggles that have nothing to do with passive aggressiveness.

Workplace wellbeing: why leaders emotional resilience as well as emotional intelligence

As the noise around workplace wellbeing increases, it's patently obvious that leaders need emotional intelligence – but emotional intelligence is not much good if a leader can only

demonstrate it in favourable circumstances. It's no use being a calm, sage, empathetic presence if you turn into someone else entirely when the pressure's on or things aren't going your way.

No, a leader must demonstrate emotional intelligence with *consistency*. To do that, emotional intelligence has to be allied to emotional resilience and fitness.

Our society has got very good at selling quick-fix calmness and yo-yo lifestyles. By that I mean dry Januarys that let you binge in December (and possibly February). Super expensive, hyper intensive HIIT classes rounded off with a green smoothie and a motivational pep talk about taking the good vibes from the class into the day ahead – good vibes that last about five minutes, until you have to use public transport or get stuck behind a slow-moving tourist or cannot resist checking your email on your phone (while slurping the dregs of that kale smoothie).

What I'm saying is that we cannot *buy* a healthy mindset or consistent emotional intelligence. Mental health in all its forms is a long-term business. It is not found in the bottom of a plastic cup of kale juice. It can't be generated – with any longevity – simply by busting a gut in the gym. It cannot be created out of thin air by a session or two with a leadership coach like me – I can only set things in motion for my clients. It's up to them to embody the things we work on and make them a habit not a quick, short-live fix. The difference sounds quite subtle but training in emotional fitness is not a *remedy* to stress or a binge lifestyle – truly embodied, it is a genuine alternative to them.

Are you emotionally resilient as well as emotionally intelligent?



P: +44 (0)7771 726 971

E: neela@neelabettridge.com

W: www.neelabettridge.com