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Cultivating vulnerability and authenticity at work
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My work

I'm a doctor of psychology with 25 years in the field.

My first doctorate was in performance psychology and for the majority of my career I have worked with sports people and other high performers on 'performing-while-being well' and building cultures that genuinely support performance. This has included stints with both Australian and English national and local teams across sports, probably most notably the English men's soccer team across the transformation for the Russia world cup in 2018 where they learnt to have fun again and stay cool while taking penalties.

My second doctorate is in the relatively new field of eco-psychology, and the best way I can describe that is that it is about considering how we perform and think more 'naturally', less destructively and more sustainably.

The combination of the two leads me to a few strong underlying principles that I apply to my work:

PRINCIPLES

- 1) We do best when we **don't fake**, hide or disguise ourselves, because bending ourselves out of shape is always going to get a second rate outcome over time.
- 2) The way you are 'on the pitch' or in the office, is **the way you are**. Despite our valiant efforts to compartmentalise our lives and our roles, everything is connected in reality and the stress and strain we feel in one area of our lives will not stay 'ring-fenced' for too long.
- 3) Our whole lives **are run** by our ideas about what it takes to **fit in and** also to **stand out**

I'm here today to talk about authenticity, vulnerability and fear and their role in us being able to show up as we really are, especially in times of change.

Change & VUCA

If you or people that you serve feel a bit vulnerable at the minute, that is no random surprise. It's hard to recall a time in recent history where there has been such a felt sense of volatility and uncertainty in our lives. In society we have the big 4 factors of human health (post pandemic), unabating political instability, division and war on multiple fronts across the world, the realities of a changed climate and the uncertainty about what AI will mean for our collective futures.

Social researcher **Brenè Brown** describes this as '**living beyond human scale**'

These things can each seem so big and overwhelming that we might want to turn our faces away and downplay their role in our own daily lives, feeling the need for 'normal' and familiar ways of being and turning off the news channel. But whether we consciously or unconsciously look away, our nervous systems are nevertheless responding. We are collectively a bit more frazzled and uneasy, even when we do remain hopeful about the future. This is a time of enormous social transition, and therefore a time of increased vulnerability for individuals *and* for organisations.

Economists and organisational psychologists have described this as a **VUCA environment: volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.**

Some of the ways that organisations might respond to VUCA environments is to inadvertently increase what I call **'Push-Rush'** culture, where urgency rules and it feels just, well.. impossible to get any headspace. In a Push-Rush culture we feel that it is not OK to say 'this is too much' or 'we are moving too fast' or 'we don't have this right' because at some level we feel that things are not 'normal'; we are in weird and unusual times. Maybe we feel that speed-to-results is the one variable that cannot be moved when we are looking for sure-footholds. It can feel **hard to be truly honest with ourselves in that culture**, and so we keep on grinding and coping and performing. We **'keep positive'**. We **keep those feelings neat and 'tucked-in'**.

Fear and authenticity

Prime among those feelings that we 'keep tucked in' at work is fear. The more we hide fear, the harder it is to be truly authentic, to show up as your whole self.

All of us are driven by fear, it is just a question of how much room we are prepared to give it.

We all recognise the feeling of fear. It feels like a jolt of 1000 volts of electricity up through your chest. It comes when we feel physical threat or psychological exposure of some kind. That kind of in-the-moment fear is actually necessary, normal, and fleeting for most people in 'normal times'. But there is another kind of fear too, which is much more insidious, hidden and sneaky. This kind might show up when we are drawn into comparison, perfectionism, jealousy, scarcity and criticism, or winning just to beat the other guy. This kind of fear I call not-good-enough-fear. This kind of fear is *not* natural; it is shame-based and culturally recycled all the time. **NGEF is always about the future or the past.** It gets its energy from feeling like failing or being seen as a failure will be the end of us somehow, and from the dreaded feeling of disappointing another person. NGEF is an absolute joy thief.

Why is fear so ubiquitous? Well, because we are wired for it. As I mentioned, we actually need it - just not quite so much! Our fear system is self-protective, designed to keep us alive and safe. It mobilises our brains and bodies to react to threatening situations and amazingly, it is fully developed while we are still in the womb - way before language, logic or the ability to understand much of what's going on. It is an exceptionally well practiced and sensitive system.

Alas, in the very initial response to a situation, our fear system does not distinguish so well between say, a knife fight and being late because you're stuck in a traffic jam. Between 'I am afraid I have terrible news about your child' and 'It's time for your annual performance review'. This is a bit of an evolutionary design flaw. Our 'thinking brains' (our prefrontal cortex) processes information just a portion of a second slower than our 'reptile' or limbic brains where the amygdala fear centre is. Over the long course of human evolution our brains became more and more sophisticated and discerning, but you could say that we did not get a full 'upgrade' of the limbic brain to match contemporary life including traffic jams and performance reviews. This means that we get ambushed by fear responses super quickly before our rational brain has a chance to boss those response back into place and say 'hey stay cool, it's no big deal'.

What this means for you is that you **MUST** 'run interference' and get in the way of your 'not-good-enough' fear responses if you want to avoid them looming large and keeping you feeling not fully safe or feeling the need to hide or 'mask' some of yourself at work. Unlike the fleeting jolt of ITMF, NGEF will not go away on its own, it is sticky and stubborn and really does need to be bossed.

So between our neurological wiring, the VUCA environment we find ourselves in, and performance cultures that constantly offers up circumstances that we might respond to with fear, it's pretty easy to see why we want to avoid feeling vulnerable. The problem is that it costs us a lot of mental rent and suffering to 'keep it all tucked in'. Inauthenticity is really expensive.

Workplaces and conformity

So this tug-of-war between your rational self and your fear response is all going on constantly in the background all day, every day, around 70,000 times. And yet we have an idea that when we walk in to work, we have to be ON, positive and in-role. We have to be consummate professionals who keep their feelings tucked-in. That polished and partial persona that shows your shiniest side and an endless drive for results, whatever is happening in your nervous systems or your broader life.

We expect so much from ourselves...

Let's take a look at our ideas about 'professionalism'. Wiki describes professionalism as a set of standards that an individual is expected to adhere to in a workplace, usually in order to appear serious, uniform or respectful. And although what constitutes professionalism is hotly debated and varies from workplace to workplace and between cultures, it is typically defined as a mix of professional ethics and dress code. It actually has its origin in the Christian church and the expected standards of 'good' Christians.

We can make some pretty quick judgments about professionalism based on wildly superficial things like hairstyles, whether a person has tattoos, what footwear and clothing someone is wearing, or perhaps their accents. But we can also hold some pretty strong judgments on how much a person is prepared to sacrifice, over-work, prioritise organisational results over other commitments and *do what it takes to win*.

Conformity can be a short updraft from professionalism. Conformity is about compliance - with standards, rules, expectations and regulations; behaving in accordance with and being rewarded for socially accepted conventions. When we conform at work we tend to align our attitudes, beliefs and behaviours with those of the people around us, especially those in positions of power.

Both professionalism and conformity are an oft subtle, unconscious form of pressure or influence. They allow us to feel like we are 'inside' the tribe and accepted. On the surface this keeps our NGEF in check but actually that safety is pretty superficial because it is based on managing the impression other people have of us and ensuring that we stay 'tucked in and tidy' and never drop the ball.

In my own career I can think of many occasions as a younger woman where I have fretted over what to wear to appear serious but not scary, competent but warm in front of groups of 40 or 50 men in football clubs, all wearing exactly the same thing. Should I wear the tracksuit even though it looks horrendous? Does that make me look like a pretender or a wanna-be? Does that suggest I think I have 'earned my stripes' even though I am still new here?' In board rooms, god forbid should I be wearing something more.. formal?? Do I sound too Aussie or too English?

I have also wrestled with myself about how much I should pretend to be a die-hard football fanatic to let others feel at ease that 'I'm in' and I will be able to find passion and sacrifice in the way that they are willing to, or maybe the way that they expect.

I can think of examples where my own 'bending' away from authenticity extended into riskier territory, for example where I have adopted a quick problem solving style that I feel will be heard and accepted but ignored gnarlier ethical information that was going to take 'too long' to work through. Don't be the handbrake. The drag net. Get onboard.

We love to see ourselves as better than that. To see ourselves as always acting in accordance with our values and when there are big value moments, we likely do. But the day is made up of many more small moments and the truth is we might not even notice that we feel a little

inauthentic. This is ever more true to faster we go and the smaller our windows of space are at work.

For me, being 'myself' isn't as straight-forward as it seems because I, like you, can morph to fit in and it is in that morphing that we might lose ourselves a little. That pressure to conform is extraordinarily strong and fitting in feels *great*. It's a fine line though between the joy of belonging and the felt-need to conform. We all want to feel like we belong in the tribe.

How we cope with the gap between what we think we're supposed to be and who we are

We especially don't want people to see if we are overwhelmed, behind schedule, over-worked, afraid of failing, or feeling like an outsider. And so we put the mask on. We buckle-up, smile and get on with performing.

'Masking' is the process in which an individual voluntarily camouflages their natural personality or behaviour to conform to social pressures. It is a subconscious coping mechanism. It happens when people are trying to manage and avoid escalating feelings of harassment or abuse, but it also happens when we are trying to avoid rejection or fit in. Masking is very connected to maintaining 'performative' behaviour within social structures or cultures (including workplaces).

When we mask, we hide those emotions and aspects of ourselves that we think others might find unacceptable. Shakespeare referenced masking in his fictions long before it was something we studied in psychology. Frantz Fanon is credited with defining masking in his 1957 *Black Skin, White Masks*, which described masking behaviours in race relations in post WW2 USA where African-American people were shown to adopt the characteristics of white people in order to please and appease white people, to avoid too much power challenge and therefore to feel safer.

Masking starts as early as pre-school and we get better at it with age. We mask differently in different contexts like work, family, romantic relationships, and social settings, depending on what we think will give us the most safety or status. All of which is managing NGEF.

We use masking mostly to conceal our negative feelings like sadness or frustration and anger. Women mask even more often than men which psychologists and sociologists attribute to the greater need for conformity that women still feel.

Neuro-divergent people might be especially adept at masking at work.

When we mask, we put ourselves in the position of tolerating so much more than we really can without meeting consequence. We fake-it-til-we-make-it and pretty quickly that becomes a mantra and a way of life.

But the truth is that masking-to-cope might work for say, the second half of a game if you are facing adversity. But I'm here to tell you that it does not work as a way of life. Game-Face is a short-term response to a big day.

The cost

Henry David Thoreau said 'The cost of anything is how much of yourself you exchange for it'

Again, masking and inauthenticity are expensive....

Loss of enjoyment, loss of realness, dissonance between who we are and who we present to the world, dissatisfaction, loneliness, emotional and physical exhaustion, inability to form deep connections, loss of or inability to develop a full identity and 'getting smaller' in our risk-taking appetite.

Inauthenticity and masking contribute significantly to the build up of symptoms associated with burn out, which is currently at epidemic levels in the workplace. I suspect this is particularly high for leaders working in People Departments

43% of people in over 100 countries have experienced burnout.

79% of people in just the UK report burnout, with 35% reporting extreme burnout.

8% of all occupational illness cases worldwide are due to burnout.

So whats the alternative?

Authenticity at work is a joint venture between person and organisation.

For the individual, this task is about auditing and editing how you are showing up on any given day, and for the organisation this task is about creating the conditions for people to feel belonging, safety and the courage to be vulnerable and real while performing.

It takes work to get to authenticity. To feel like you can be honest, real and whole at work.

Authenticity's key features are:

- Being willing to be seen as you are, imperfections and flaws included. You feel able to do this because you know that you are worthy and good enough even if you make mistakes
- Feeling comfortable in your own skin without 'editing' the impression you make, especially around power. You feel able to do this when you feel safe, appreciated and welcomed.
- Identifying and then expressing what you really mean. You feel able to do this when you also invite and offer truth (including challenge), when you can say and accept apology and when you feel that your voice and the voice of others is worthwhile.
- Being able to say no when you don't want to do something or yes when you do want to do something. You feel able to do this when you have good and well considered boundaries.
- Feeling like you can be 'whole' and not just 'role'. You feel able to do this when there are diverse and varied ways of being that are visible in the environment and this diversity is embraced as positive
- Feeling like you can express what you value and care about openly without hedging, hiding or feeling humiliated. You feel that can do this when compound experiences demonstrate to you that you can trust the culture.

Developing this kind of authenticity is sometimes described as 'a competency' but for the individual I see this more like an optimal energy, or even a frequency we can operate at on any given day. Authenticity is a moment-to-moment process of choosing and responding rather than a set point.

We shift rapidly all the time depending on who is in the room, how much pressure we feel, how much importance we place on something, what amplifies our social and cultural experiences, and even just whether we got a decent nights sleep.

Our job is to recognise where we are at, which of the authenticity features might be flagging on any given day, and what we can do right now to try and step towards realness.

We can step towards realness by first by noticing what 'realness energy' we are bringing to a room. Like all things related to being more present, and real, we start by noticing how we are thinking and feeling in a given moment. We can then begin to see patterns, or reactions we may have in certain situations. Self knowledge, brings self awareness.

As Tara Brach says: Recognise, Accept, Investigate, Nourish. And by noticing how much of ourselves we are being in workplaces - perhaps asking where we were in this four-corner model (professionalism / conformity / vulnerability / authenticity) in a given meeting, workshop, or project group -we awaken to possibility of choosing to be real in moments we feel confident to be so. We might ask; was I highly professional or conformist in that team huddle, keeping it all nicely tucked in? Or did I role model vulnerability for the room a little, and in doing so, maybe opened a gateway for others to feel more themselves, and feel more welcome?’

Organisational courage to allow people to be real

I mentioned that authenticity is a joint-venture...

I want to note how brilliant the work is that many organisations are doing to encourage realness and wholeness at work in 2024. It’s exciting to see. There is clearly a recognition of both the need for the individual and the value for the organisation.

But I suspect that some people still have some unspoken old ideas about work in the psychological bedrock that are worth examining. These ideas or narratives include:

- If we pay you, we own you / your time
- Productivity comes first, authenticity second
- We are open to your input and honesty, but respect the pecking order
- People like this (people like us), do best
- People are getting a bit soft and making excuses, this is a workplace not a therapy room (deal with your ‘stuff’ elsewhere and show up shiny when you are here)

I believe that the number one thing that leaders and organisations can do to cultivate authenticity is examine and refresh these narratives. We live in stories, and if these are some of the work-stories that we live in, even the bravest efforts of individuals will not result in a workplace where people can truly show up as themselves.

Ideas and narratives should be thought of like garments in your wardrobe. Some are classics that you’ve had for a long time and that never fail you. Others are kind of out of date and although you wouldn’t want to be seen in them, you haven’t cleared them out and made room for anything new. The most courageous organisations are up-cycling and refreshing their narratives and ideas about what and who works, at work.

Leaders are giving permission for realness, modelling and inviting realness, and more importantly they are rewarding realness as in the story of the brilliant autistic leader which I share earlier. But perhaps one of the most transformational things that the people leaders in this room might do is to help their organisations to shake out and re-imagine their most deeply held narratives about work. Could you do an audit? Could you challenge and re-wild the organisational thinking about conformity and professionalism?

The second most powerful thing we can each do is model the vulnerability that it takes to show up honestly and perform from authenticity. Imagine asking your CEO;

‘What question do you hope no-one ever asks you about your abilities?’

Maybe ask yourself;

'What is the one thing you don't want anyone at work to know about you, and what do you fear would happen if they did?'

When you find the courage and vulnerability to ask these questions, you offer yourself the chance to grow from an honest place and grow in an authentic direction.

We know that culture is alive. We make it every day through what we resist, what we reward and the quality of our relationships. What if we trusted ourselves to be real?

The sum-up is that both person and organisation need to be aiming for 'whole-being' as often as possible, the reduction of compartmentalisation and 'over-performance' at being something other than you, and the embracing of being whole and human. It is a question that is right at the uncomfortable edge of people and HR work right now, where in the era of AI and machine learning we will all be asking ourselves, 'what does it mean to be human?' And 'what does it mean to just be me?'

The payoff

The Mentoring platform BetterUp shows that in their research, showing up authentically at work, when partnered with inclusive leadership can lead to:

- 54% Lower Turnover,
- 140% improvement in employee engagement
- And 150% improvement in perceptions of the sense of belonging. <https://www.betterup.com/blog/authenticity-at-work>
- Additionally, researchers at the London School of Economics have shown that the cost of biases at work that automatically reward conformity towards a narrow selection of characteristics, can lead to employee self-segregation, and code switching. They draw attention to how inauthenticity at work can be psychologically draining and resource depleting, and note how the relationship between wellbeing, authenticity and traditionally measured work outcomes such as productivity, is now well-established. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2022/04/11/rethinking-authenticity-at-work/>

Authenticity is also a key variable in the development of felt psychological safety and trust. Perhaps most importantly though, for all of us who go to work and care, being able to show up as ourselves can completely change the experience of work and careers. And we all deserve that.