

First published in ReSource Magazine Edition 15, September 2008

<http://www.resourcemagazine.co.uk/>

Getting back on track

By Ann Lewis

There is a taboo in the workplace. I call it "alright-ism". It stops us from acknowledging and taking control of experiences at work that sap our confidence, lower our self-esteem and batter our resilience. Things may be going really pear-shaped, and we still feel obliged to say "it's alright" because to say anything else feels like failure and admitting failure feels both painful and dangerous.

The good news is that if your confidence is compromised by what is going on in your working life, you can do something about it, and you can emerge stronger. You may not be able to change the circumstances, but you can choose how you respond to them.

So I believe it is time to break the taboo, for the sake both of individuals and of their organisations. I am alarmed to see good people being written off by their colleagues when they hit a bad patch. This is wasteful both for the individual and for the organisation. How much better is it to take the situation in hand, take responsibility for it, and come out of it with your confidence restored and your resilience increased?

The triggers for losing your balance might include:

- being bullied
- a difficult relationship with a boss, colleague or team member
- being under-resourced or under-skilled for the work in hand
- being in the wrong job
- constant, ill-thought-through change
- poor communication
- a mismatch between your personal values and those of your organisation.

In my early days as a coach, I was struck by the enlightened attitude of one or two of my client organisations who asked me to support key managers through a proverbial battering at work. However, even in less dramatic coaching assignments, confidence is a perennial theme, and helping clients to build or rebuild it is a major part of my work.

After several years working with people whose confidence had temporarily deserted them, I published *Getting Back on Track – regaining your confidence and presence at work*. The book acts as a virtual coach, encouraging you back towards self-belief, confidence and the positive emotions that will fuel a full recovery. It helps you understand what is going wrong, and get really clear about what you want from the situation and from your life.

Getting Back on Track benefits from the experience of real people who have recovered successfully from really challenging situations. Some were my clients, others were colleagues and friends. All were generous in sharing their strategies for recovery and the insights they gained along the way. They helped me to illustrate a seven-step process for getting back on track that I'd like to share with you here.

Step 1: taking charge

From a position of responsibility, what do you want to change about your situation? And what will it take?



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This step is potentially a very uplifting one. Not only are you building a strong vision of your own future, you're also getting back in touch with your creative energy. This is the energy that keeps children endlessly inquisitive and inventive. It is light-hearted and allows the possibility of fun. It's also the energy you bring to work when you are playing to your strengths, and doing what comes easily to you and which others admire.

How you retrieve and use that creativity will depend very much on how you like to express yourself. You can create a story or a poem, a collage or a picture, on paper or as a recording. If you don't feel comfortable with metaphorical coloured paper and sticky tape, make a list, create some goals, or make a plan. It really doesn't matter, as long as it gets you back in touch with what you want.

Take time to relax again before you start, then get out your coloured pencils your favourite fountain pen, your paint box, or even your mobile phone, and get thinking.

Step 2: understanding what is happening

Now you have a good idea of what you want to change, it is helpful to establish in more detail exactly what is happening now. Your new vision will have started to restore your sense of perspective, and you will now be able to be a little more objective about the present situation. Below you will find more questions to help you work things out. Before you start this exercise, please consciously relax and slow your breathing. It will help if you can be relatively calm for this work.

You can think about what's happening alone or with a supporter, and I'd very much recommend that you do find a supporter. Choose someone neutral – a mentor, a coach or someone else uninvolved, whom you trust. When you are stressed, it is likely that you will go home and dump your negative feelings on the same person every night. By choosing to work with someone outside your home environment you will prevent that toxic energy polluting your home and your relationship.

Some questions might include

- What's actually happening?
- How are you feeling?
- What dominates your thoughts?
- How does this show in your behaviour?
- What is your attitude to those around you – your boss, your team, the organisation, your colleagues – and how do you behave with them?
- How is your home life affected?

Step 3: reconnecting with yourself

When you know what you want to change, and you know what is happening, it's time to connect with and restore the powerful human being you truly are. The purpose now is to build a picture of you, what you stand for, what matters most to you, what motivates you, and how you can best use your talents and abilities. Remember yourself at your very best, recalling what helps you to stay balanced when you are feeling good about yourself.

When you look at your strengths, successes, achievements and joys then you are defining what you are proud of, and what gives you real self-confidence. A former client of mine once commented that, early in her coaching, she found it hard to name one thing she was proud of. However, she persevered, and found some real insights into her own uniqueness that changed how she saw herself.

Step 4: reflecting for the future

To help you move into a stronger space, you've built a clear idea of what has happened and what you want to change. You have a positive sense of yourself, your values and your strengths. You also have knowledge at your disposal to help you decide how you might respond to a similar situation in future and you have the basis for a strong emotional bond with yourself.



If you want to stay on track, you'll need to use this knowledge to assess what you would do differently to give yourself a good chance of not repeating the pain. I've certainly found that life has a way of sending me the same challenges until I get the message. So what do you need to learn from this episode in your life?

Laura, a contributor to *Getting Back on Track* says:

"Be true to yourself. No matter what job you are in always check your contract carefully, and have a plan of what you would do and who you would contact if the worst happened. There is always another life, other things to do and other places to take your skills. There's a time and a place where you are the best fit ... but that can change so be aware of it and consider how to manage it."

Step 5: preparing to move on

Now you're ready to start getting back on track. You can treat this stage as though you were planning for a holiday or business trip. When you are travelling, you'll decide who is going with you, book tickets and accommodation, make sure your passport and inoculations are up to date and get your visa if you need one. You might buy maps and guide books. You might also talk to other people who have visited your destination and take their experience on board too. Eventually, you will pack your bags and set out. You can think of moving on in the same way, and with a sense of self-confidence.

So use your thinking to help you work out where you want to go. Ask yourself who can help you. Update your CV if you need to. Assess whether you want or need to learn new skills. Do you want to take time out first?

Step 6: Making the most of synchronicity and intuition

If you have a dog, you may be so used to its jumping up immediately you *think* of taking it for a walk that you hardly give it a second thought. Biologist Rupert Sheldrake¹ has meticulously researched telepathy between humans and between humans and animals, providing a wealth of evidence for what he calls our "seventh sense".

Developing this sense can really help you get back on track. It shows up in two key ways that matter for us here: through synchronicity, and through your intuition. If you can make use of both, and set off with a sense of curiosity about what will happen next, fascinating things start to occur.

From the foundations you've laid down, choose to believe that you can succeed, set out with a clear intention about where you're going, and watch out for the myriad small clues and coincidences that begin to happen. Stay positive, keep out of your own way, and allow things to unfold.

Step 7: Living with passion and purpose

As you become clearer about the life you want to create, get into the habit of evaluating everything you do, and everything you consider bringing into your life. How do you feel when you think about it? Does it bring you joy, or does your heart sink? Do you feel good about it, or do you drag your heels and see it as a "should" or an "ought to"? Does it use your best strengths, experience and inclinations? Does it stretch you or leave you feeling empty and unfulfilled?

Listen to what you are saying to yourself as you build your purposeful life. Treat yourself as you would treat others and want them to treat you. Acknowledge and celebrate the wisdom that has brought you to this point, and the experience you can bring to the world.

¹ Sheldrake, Rupert, *The Sense of being Stared At*, Random House

