Climb every mountain

We are told to play to our strengths – but we all have weak spots that can sabotage a career. Here, three people confront their fears and learn the skills that they need to prosper...
Accountant, Susan Pierce, let her fear of bullies drive her out of the office

I’ve encountered my share of workplace bullies, and my decision five years ago to become a freelancer came partly from a desire to avoid them. But, looking back, I can see that the majority of my colleagues were lovely, and I liked working in a team. I resent that I allowed my fear of a few awkward types to restrict my options.

Coach Annie Ashdown, an expert in dealing with difficult people – ‘These are my busiest talks!’ – asks questions about my childhood (punitive), and points out the internal dynamic that this created: ‘bad girl – shame – trepidation – fear’.

If someone criticises me, or is angry with me, I assume it is in some way justified and slip into a shame response. This is common, says Ashdown. ‘We think they must be right. But, 90 per cent of the time, these people are just throwing their unprocessed crap at us.’

The first front for development is self-confidence, which shortcuts this response and the bullying dynamic. ‘Be very clear that it is not you who is defective, and then shame will pass through you. Often it is about saying to yourself: “You do not speak to me like that.” The person we really have to convince is ourselves.’

Survival mode – putting up with it by minimising or denying what is happening – is common, but doesn’t work. ‘Every time we let someone do this to us, we are crushing our confidence and self-esteem. You have to work out and be clear with yourself what is acceptable. You need bottom lines – you cannot do this. Also, top lines – “I will treat myself with respect; I will be treated with…’
“I’ve always been the quiet one”

Ellen Tout, Psychologies’ editorial assistant, was scared to speak up in meetings

For as long as I can remember, I’ve been ‘the quiet one’ – at school my reports would say, ‘Ellen should speak up more’. I loved to write but, when it came to contributing ideas out loud, my fear of getting it wrong meant I’d sit in silence. My first job didn’t involve speaking up and I became comfortable typing away behind my screen.

When I joined Psychologies, my work dynamic changed. It was a dream job and I felt overwhelmed – surrounded by confident and successful women. I’d sit quietly, overshadowed in meetings.

So, having never spoken to a coach before, I contacted Kay White. In my first session, we talk about my frame of mind and what I believe will happen if I do speak up. I feel confident on a one-to-one basis, but talk myself out of contributing in meetings; questioning that my ideas are not good enough.

White suggests that I imagine everyone has an ‘invisible sign’ around their neck which says ‘make me feel important’. She points out that people are more interested in themselves than in spotting my errors. This helps me to understand that, if my idea isn’t taken up, it isn’t personal, and I find myself able to start thinking of meetings as a discussion, rather than a room full of people waiting to trip me up.

Often, I am so busy listening to my internal chatter that I miss the chance to take part. White says: ‘A great tip to use in meetings is to repeat, in your head, everything that people say. That way you’re present in the conversation and can react. Listening is a powerful tool for speaking up.’ I find this allows me to focus and respond more naturally.

I explain to White how I struggle...
“I can’t turn my ideas into profit”

Carly May, a client director at a PR firm, struggles with the basic maths of business

When I was seven, my teacher told me I was hopeless at maths. My lack of belief in my mathematical acumen has haunted me ever since. Despite heading up a £2million business, I struggle with ‘imposter syndrome’. People glibly bandy about figures and my brain freezes.

You’re not alone, says Faye Watts, one of the founders of fuseaccountants.co.uk, who has launched a campaign to encourage young women into financial careers. With a recent report* showing that 15-year-old girls underachieve in areas such as mathematics, science and problem-solving compared to boys, Watts is determined to do something. ‘It’s not surprising that women are put off potentially lucrative, interesting and fulfilling careers. While this needs to be tackled at grass-roots education levels, much can be done to help women get to grips with understanding money,’ she says.

Watts challenges me over the idea that I was ‘hopeless at maths’. World-renowned psychologist and researcher, Carol Dweck, from Stanford University, has found that people are more likely to be successful with a growth mindset – that basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work, versus a fixed mindset – that talent alone creates success, without effort.** ‘Anyone can learn to be better at understanding maths and money. We start working on a real example, as I have to present a new business plan to the board of my company. Watts asks me to create a basic plan. She tells me to briefly state what the business will be doing and how it will generate a profit. ‘Describe in a few sentences what the values as a business are, what you hope to achieve, the purpose of the business and how it will make sufficient money. Some people have a great idea, but don’t think about how it’s going to make them money over three to five years,’ she says.

She tells me to write down a few sentences about what the business goals are. She says to be clear about the target market and who our current customers are; to put them into categories and where they came from, so that we can analyse our best breed of client/consumer. Then, I must review who pays what and how long it takes, and whether there is any further opportunity for upselling or repeat business. I must look at our sales strategy, marketing and advertising, and be specific.

Watts instructs me to set feasible financial targets for monthly and yearly income streams. ‘Be realistic and set the goals that you want, knowing that you can achieve them with hard work,’ she advises.

Finally, I create an end goal. I did feel initial trepidation but focusing on my ‘growth’ mindset, I broke it down step by step and wrote a business plan and projection in a few hours. Watts says: ‘You see! You can do it. One mindset tweak has made you more confident and has potentially created another income stream in your business.’

I presented to the board a week later. They loved it. ‘Understanding money is empowering and anyone can learn how to do it,’ she says.

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