



Singapore Psychologist

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TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

LIFE COACHING | GENERALISTS AND SPECIALISTS |
ORGANISATIONAL LIFE | WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS |
EMOTIONAL LABOUR | GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT IN THE
WORKPLACE | MINDING YOUR OWN BUSINESS AND MANY MORE

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TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

EDITORIAL

Denise Dillon | Editor-in-Chief
Annelise Lai | Associate Editor
Nicole Chong | Associate Editor
Juanita Ong | Associate Editor

DESIGN

Charmaine Wah | Lead Designer
Andrea Ong
Alexandria Rodrigues
Jasmine Chuah
Jessy Yong
Junyang Lin
Nicole Yeo

CONTRIBUTORS

Asha Gizelle Mariadas
Hazel Lim Mei Ling
Janice See
Jonathan Ee
Jessy Yong
Michael Thong
Mitali Kothari
Paul Patinadan
Shawn Ee
Yap Rae Yi

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Business is commonly defined as a commercial activity or a person's regular occupation, profession, or trade. But business can also refer to a person's private concerns or an activity that someone is engaged in. When I first proposed the topic, some people asked what I meant by "taking care of business" in a personal sense. That prompted me to reflect on what it meant to me and how I intended to convey that meaning to others, including our team of writers. In our call for items, I suggested some focus on issues dealing with taking care of business in a psychological sense, through psychological work, either in the workplace itself or elsewhere. For me, taking care of business includes the development of strategies for processing trauma (be it in the workplace or elsewhere), helping clients or oneself work through emotional processing of unpleasant memories, or practices relating to psychologist self-care.

As a result, articles in this issue consider taking care of business from various organizational and personal viewpoints, and thereby broaden the perspective well beyond viewing business as commerce or trade. Even for the latter, our writers remind us that a business represents human labour that involves both physical, cognitive and emotional investment of each individual in the workforce. Our first set of articles considers the individual as a person in flux, full of potential if only able to nail down for themselves what it is they can best contribute while finding a sense of personal fulfilment. A second theme concerns group dynamics in the workplace and the emotional labour that can come into play based on situational and interpersonal factors. Finally, two of our writers explore the effects of mental toughness and stoicism with some cogent reminders of the qualities that we can all draw on as we continue to survive and thrive while taking care of business.

Read on to explore.

Dr Denise Dillon
Editor-in-Chief



VICE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

The notion of business is closely tied to the values of pragmatism, decisiveness, and far-sightedness. When we *talk* business, we envision highly successful, highly intelligent executives engaging in all-important conversations and complex strategies with a view towards getting things done. These ideal executives are excellent communicators to external stakeholders, effective leaders to their subordinates, and possess a strong sense of business acumen. There seems to be a prosociality to being able to take care of business—of course, taking care of business typically translates to prestige, promotion, and pay.

In organisational psychology literature, we see an abundance of research clustering around performance, leadership effectiveness, and resilience. It seems that everyone wants to know how to move from high performance to peak performance in order to achieve professional goals and drive organisational results. In systems-thinking, *success* to the *successful* is an archetype that establishes a narrative of sorts: When a person is successful, they are more likely to be increasingly successful as more resources are allocated to them in a reinforcement loop. And so, we strive to be busy for the sole purpose of this notion that we are taking care of our business—for idling is antithetical to success.

But whose successes are we speaking of? Would they be from our personal goals or are they actually organisational ones? There is an urgent need to distinguish between these two as the line between work and life (i.e., work-life balance) is increasingly blurred as work continues to encroach into our personal space and identity. Perhaps it is time to rethink the traditionally-conflicting priorities of work-life balance by removing the simplistic choice of *either* work *or* life and embracing the fact that *both* work *and* life must coexist and complement each other instead (see "both/and thinking").

As Singapore ramps up its efforts to tackle mental health through the Interagency Taskforce on Mental Health and Well-Being and moves towards a greater emphasis on preventive healthcare (i.e., Healthier SG), we must recognise these national efforts as a call for us to look inwards and take care of our own business—our physical and mental health—at the workplace. To do so, workplace wellbeing must be perceived as equal and complementary to workplace performance, rather than supplementary. The measure of success should move beyond performance and include wellbeing. This requires deep conversations and comprehensive policies that can lead to actionable outcomes for employees. It is time to think about why we are busy rather than what we can busy ourselves with.

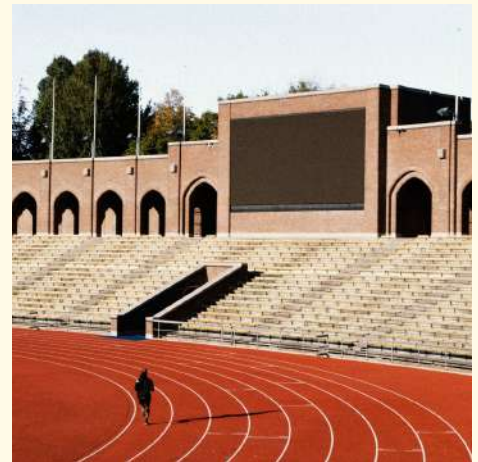
Read on and get psyched!

Mok Kai Chuen
Vice President (Outreach)

Moving Forward with Life Coaching to Enhance Life Experience

*By Hazel Lim Mei Ling and
Jonathan Ee*

At various stages of your career, you will experience unexpected or expected work-related demands and stress in your jobs. It can be a promotion, shift of priorities in life, a retrenchment, conflicts with coworkers or burnout at work. Scientific research shows that these slow burning physical and mental tensions can take a toll on you and cripple your chance at success and happiness. Similar to physical fitness, our mental well-being requires time and effort to allow growth and development. A life coach can help you to navigate the challenges by offering support and guidance which encompass life skills, emotional intelligence, decision making or personal growth.



Anthony M. Grant, founder of the world's first coaching psychology unit at the University of Sydney defined evidence-based coaching as this (2003, p.254): "Life coaching can be broadly defined as a collaborative solution-focused, result-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience, well-being and goal attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, non-clinical populations." Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates and Justin Bieber are among the most successful people who have turned to life coaches to help them along their path to success. Other than their popularity, these public figures are no different from any of you who will also face roadblocks in your life or internal battles.



A huge misconception about people with a life coach is that they are facing issues or have a hard time managing their lives. While that can be true for some, most people with life coaches are those who enjoy their achievements in life but want to strive for more growth towards self-actualization both personally and professionally. The idea of self-actualization comes from the final stage of development in Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation. It is based on one's ability to seek self-fulfillment and the pursuit of personal growth with an open mind of accepting their limitations and embracing others for who they are.

Another commonly held misconception about life coaching is that it is another form of counseling and therapy. This is because they do sound similar due to their common mission of helping people progress in various areas of their lives.

While they do share some overlapping functions, there are very distinct differences between them. Counseling is designed to help you resolve current personal or psychological problems while therapy helps you heal from your past mental and emotional wounds. Coaching is designed to help improve your present in order to achieve future success through goal setting.

A number of scientific studies have been conducted that clearly demonstrate the value, efficacy, and positive impact of life coaching in a number of contexts. The International Coaching Federation (ICF) survey shows that those who hire a life coach experience an extensive range of positive impacts in their lives. 80% of people had increased self-confidence and over 70% benefited from better work performance, effective communication skills and improved relationships. 67% highlighted that they achieved a better work life balance which helped improve overall mental health and quality of life.

Scientific research overall grouped the significant outcomes of life coaching into four main categories:

1

Improved Self-Awareness

According to research led by Tasha Eurich, they revealed that 95% of people think they possess self-awareness, but only 10 to 15% actually do have it. Self-awareness is defined as the ability to perceive your inner self and how you relate to others and gain insights from the world around you. It is believed that true self-awareness is a rare quality to cultivate. A life coach will help you unleash your true potential by equipping you with self-awareness for personal growth and development of good interpersonal skills. It is the key that will lead you to stronger relationships with people, better work performance and a higher sense of fulfillment and well-being to share their experiences on this topic.

2

Living Your Dream

Living your dream helps you harness your true potential and unlock your brilliance. It is the belief that you are living a life aligned with your passion and purpose. A life coach helps you to identify, clarify and set achievable goals by fostering focus, motivation and a strong sense of purpose.

3

Personality and Behaviour Change

Personalities are described as habitual patterns of behavior, thoughts and emotions. The Big Five Factor Model has been widely accepted and used to assess and measure one's personality traits. The five traits described by theory are Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 1992). Research indicates that higher levels of subjective well-being were associated with higher levels of Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, and with lower levels of Neuroticism (Winzer et al., 2021). Martin et al. (2012) suggest that life coaching could lead to desirable personality changes that will help contribute to growth behavior.



4

Improvement in Wellness and Quality of Life

It has been suggested that working towards your goal attainment can be associated with enhanced well-being and improved quality of life (Francis & Milner, 2006). Life coaching helps you to become more connected to your intrinsic motivations and make purposeful changes in your life to reach your desired goals (Gordon-Bar, 2014).

While evidence from researchers has presented the many aspects of positive impact, life coaching is not for everyone. It is specifically for people who are willing to invest their time and want to commit to making changes in their life from the inside out, taking ownership of their own actions and choices. Life coaching is a long term collaborative relationship that allows you to unlock your true potential to attain greater life fulfillment.



Jack of All Trades, Master of One

Generalists and Specialists in Modern
Organisations

By Jessy Yong



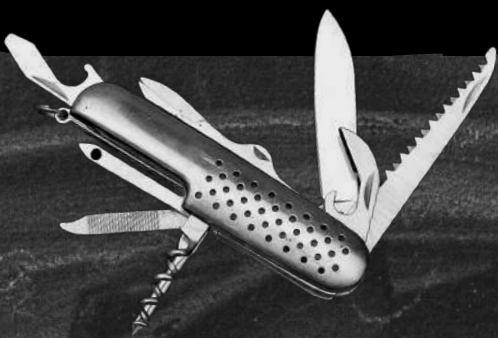
In hindsight, I was definitely an overly ambitious kid. My childhood dream job was to become a doctor; such as the likes of my family doctor, the paediatrician who gave me lollipops, as well as Dr House, a fictional TV series character who diagnoses obscure illnesses, simultaneously.

My bubble quickly burst when I learnt that the "doctor" I wanted to be was actually made up of multiple people—they could be a general practitioner, a doctor with general specialties (e.g. geriatric medicine), or a specialist who practices a specific area in medicine like a psychiatrist (Ng, 2017), but they were hardly ever one single person.

Of course, as I approached adulthood and went on an intense job hunt, this concept continued to haunt me. It was clear from the hundreds of job openings I sifted through that today's organisations also employed their own different types of "doctors", more broadly known as the *Generalist* and the *Specialist*.

The Generalist (Jack of All Trades)

A person with a broad expertise
and a wide array of knowledge



The Specialist (Master of One)

A person who is highly proficient
in a smaller number of areas



This is quite a well-known concept, with a Google search of "generalist vs specialist" garnering over 70 million results and employers explicitly using these terms as they hire for a "HR Generalist" or "Marketing Specialist".

But with the popularity of certain literature, such as David Epstein's 2019 book, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World* (which even made the list of Bill Gates' favourite books for 2020), the terms "Generalist" and "Specialist" are no longer just words in a job title. They have become a point of contention, making us question if one is truly better than the other.

The Rise of Generalists Versus Specialists

So why did these two terms become so contentious? Epstein's book surely had some degree of influence, but Ivanova et al. (2019) also argues that this contention is due a shift in the aims of modern organisations. They observe that businesses want to save training resources by increasing a person's job scope and want more employees to be involved in the decision-making process, in addition to how there is a higher demand for leadership in management. The defining idea, however, is not these listed business goals, but rather that employers tend to believe generalists (compared to specialists) can help them better achieve these goals (Ivanova et al., 2019).

As a result, there are many generalist-related roles around us. For example, in Singapore, there are now numerous management associate programmes where candidates take on multiple job rotations across the core business functions (Ng, 2020). Their training even includes such a generalist tone.

In healthcare, this can be seen in the NHG (National Healthcare Group) Healthcare Management Associate Programme:

“

Our MAs [management associates] will be exposed to a **wide spectrum of healthcare operations** through three different rotations, each spanning a period of 7 to 8 months. (para. 2)

Even so, there are still many specialist roles currently available in the market. Just in the month of April 2022, there were over 9,000 specialist-related jobs on JobStreet, including IT Specialists and Operations Specialists, among many others.

With the seeming pervasiveness of both generalists and specialists in the job market, are generalists really better than specialists? Or is it merely a faddish idea?



Who Triumphs: The Jack or the Master?

For starters, scholars in organisational psychology found compelling evidence that specialists find it especially difficult to communicate amongst themselves (Heath & Staudenmayer, 2000). Conversely, generalists possess transferable skills such as effective communication, giving them greater job mobility and more career opportunities (Ivanova et al., 2019).

Similarly, Epstein (2019) writes in his book that specialists only thrive in what psychologist Robin Hogarth calls "kind" learning environments, akin to playing a game of chess where there are defined rules, readily available information, and pattern repetitions. However, Epstein asserts that their work is at risk of being automated. Thus, he instead advocates for generalists, who do well in "wicked" learning environments, where patterns do not repeat, work is spontaneous, and knowledge can be transferred to solve new problems. He argues that these workers learn strategies to adapt well to the dynamic nature of certain work.

Finally, there are even material differences between some generalists and specialists. Datta and Iskandar-Datta (2014) did a study using data on Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) and found that generalist CFOs commanded higher salaries compared to their specialist counterparts, especially if the generalist had elite education credentials.

Should We All Be Generalists?

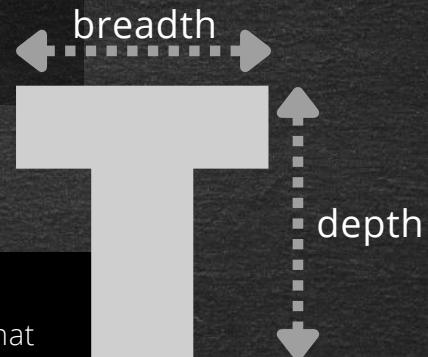
While things are not looking so good for specialists, they certainly have their redeeming qualities. Ferreira and Sah (2007) argue that broader expertise does not equate to greater talent or better ability to find solutions to difficult problems. An extraordinarily talented person who quickly resolves a complicated issue that virtually no one else can is also as valuable as a generalist who can lead the company.

As a result, businesses have found ways to combine the best of both worlds—by creating a hybrid between generalists and specialists.

The first method is to nurture a T-shape competency, which is for employees to know a bit of everything, while being highly specialised in one. We see this in many of Singapore's management associate programmes, which were mentioned earlier. For instance, Singapore Tourism Board's programme (2022) clearly demonstrates a generalist and specialist hybrid:

“

The Management Associate Programme is a 12-month programme that offers you the opportunity to **gain exposure and build knowledge in various aspects of the tourism sector**. Using these 12 months to identify the best fit for yourself, you will then be permanently deployed to one of the divisions in STB to **develop in-depth knowledge and expertise in a specific area** of support for the tourism sector.



The other method is to create the *Fantastic Four*. Inspired by Taylor and Greve's (2006) management psychology research, if you cannot find the *Superman* (or generalist) who has multiple powers, then you can find the next best thing, which is to assemble a team of people who can join forces and combine their diverse knowledge (Epstein, 2019).



With these new hybrid types of employees, the modern labour force is no longer a dichotomy of generalists and specialists. More so, as even doctors think that the line between a medical generalist and specialist can be blurred (Ng, 2017). So as businesses continue to transform, the age-old saying of, "Jack of all trades, master of none. But oftentimes better than a master of one." may well soon become a mere mantra; as businesses shift towards a multi-dimensional labour force with a mix of generalists, specialists, and superheroes, or continue on their search for the "most optimal" labour strategy in this free market economy.





Why is Everyone's Pasture Greener than Mine?

By Janice See

Wow! Congratulations! I am happy for you and your achievements! How I wish I am able to get that soon too!

This is usually how the conversation goes when someone you know has just shared about their achievement with you. This triggers us to start thinking about ourselves for a short moment. When life gets tricky, we tend to compare it with people around us and wish we could have a life like theirs. However, when challenges pass, we are back to our "busy bee" lives.

Articles have been reporting how successful people set aside time in the morning to exercise, which provides them with some

"me" time before they kickstart their days. What about the majority of people who do not exercise in the morning and/or throughout the day? "Too tired", "Not enough time" are the more common reasons brought up. Status, corporate achievements, children's achievements have taken much higher priorities over our own physical and mental wellness. Typical days start with a list of tasks and firefighting once our eyes are opened. Day after day tasks get stacked up and we get overwhelmed. As time passes by, mental, physical, and psychological wellbeing goes downhill. Usually, all these signs that our bodies have been signalling to us are ignored until burnout, depression, anxiety and physical illness get to a point where medical assistance is required.

Who Have We Been Living our Lives As?



Children/Students: When we were young, was there sibling rivalry where we fought for attention from our parents and teachers? "My elder sibling is doing so well and I must ensure that I beat him/her." If you were the eldest sibling, you would be setting high standards with the hope that your younger siblings will not be able to surpass you. This would likely result in you going all out to be better by taking on lots of extracurricular activities in addition to schoolwork so that your parents would be proud of their all-rounder child.

Employers/Superiors: As we grow older, it becomes a popularity contest. We are constantly trying to prove how smart we are and to reach the top of the corporate ladder as soon as possible.

Parents/Grandparents: Living in a "kiasu" culture, parents work hard to gain corporate achievements so that their children would be proud of them, and parents are likewise able to brag about their children's achievements during gatherings and on social media.



When will we finally live our own lives? What has been holding us back? In accordance with the conformity theory, we tend to conform to things that are happening around us in order to protect ourselves, in hopes that we will be able to gain a smoother life journey. However, how smooth can it really be if one is living the lives of others rather than oneself? With the disruption from the pandemic, new norms have been forming, and people are looking for new aspirations and values. Maybe it is time to step back to find our own purpose and meaning in our lives.

How Do We Define and Measure Greener Pastures?

Social media usually only shares the successes of individuals and seldom about the failures that were faced, and the resilience of those who persevered. In our Asian culture, we have been trained since young to only showcase the best and presentable parts of our lives. Let's set aside some time to review and reflect on our life thus far. What were some challenges we had faced? How did we overcome the challenges? How many dominos in our life did we knock down with skills and experiences gained along the way? Maybe when we start to reflect, we would be even more amazed by our own achievements rather than just admiring what others have achieved.

Happiness is appreciating and being grateful for what we already have instead of joining the rat race and chasing after others. After all, how valuable will it really be for us to blindly chase after things for the sake of it? Eckhart Tolle mentioned that acknowledging the good you already have in your life is the foundation for all abundance.



What About Taking Baby Steps?

Stephen Covey mentioned that, "The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities."

Let's take ownership of our own lives by taking our first baby step to understand what we truly want for ourselves till the end of our lives. Although it seems to be a simple question, it can be rather sophisticated. Having been born and raised in a competitive world, most individuals would probably think of retirement as the next milestone. Most individuals feel helpless and worthless when they relinquish their corporate titles. Is our amygdala perhaps too hardworking such that we become so conscious of our surroundings and anticipate threats that are not present?

There are so many things we can do to add value to the lives of others. We can help ourselves by forgiving others for things in the past and move on. It is essential to review our purpose of life by letting go of what may not be valuable, not within our control and start to appreciate the people around us and enjoy what we can do and what we do have. Let's take care of our mental wellness by forgoing the negotiation of a few cents at the market when hundreds of dollars are being spent at restaurants monthly.

Time to go for our dreams and start living for ourselves! Enjoy our own green pastures that we have and perhaps beautify them along our life journey to make them more suitable and feasible going forward!

Silent Knights of Success

by Janice See



Success, growth, promotion, development, acquisition, merger, expansion and diversification are words that are very close to the hearts of business stakeholders. Children growing up in Singapore are trained to be competitive to attain the best in life in both academic and non-academic endeavours. "Jack of all trades and master of none" is not applicable in the Singapore context where high expectations of demanding parents are common. After starting work as young adults, Singaporeans are often competitive in order to address such expectations that materialise through pointed questions during festive seasons among relatives and social gatherings with friends. The measures of success during adulthood are mainly position titles, properties, cars and wealth. Therefore, tremendous efforts are invested in trying to prove ourselves.

Living in a Singaporean environment with typical behaviours of "kiasu" (fear of missing out) and "kiasi" (unwilling to take chances for fear of things not working out well) in order to avoid being "paiseh" (embarrassed) in front of people, individuals often develop to be very competitive.

With a strong emphasis on results, efficiency, profitability, status and competition in corporate environments, many managers seek the most efficient and effective strategies to promote and encourage employees to produce results without considering the challenges faced by working from home. Challenges include but are not limited to ensuring that the welfare of extended family members are taken care of while working. This has intensified further since the start of the pandemic to ensure sustainability of businesses. It is unfortunate that the heart which is the most critical component in employees' lives is being neglected. With reference to issue 10 (Okayness) item, "W.H.A.T. are Your Priorities?", despite being ambitious employees may need to bite the bullet during these critical times to achieve their higher priorities (e.g., their hygiene factors) in accordance with Herzberg's theory and Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. As a result, employees would try their best to ensure they conform to the requirements/directions of their manager even though some of the requirements/directions may not be aligned with their own values.



With COVID-19 being one of the longest pandemics in this century, each and everyone's lives have been disrupted in one way or another. With reference to a Harvard Business Review article, "The Great Resignation is a Misnomer", people are now aspiring to what they want by leaving organisations that no longer inspire them. This is a great opportunity for organisations to attract, engage, motivate and retain employees who are aspiring to grow in alignment with the organisation's business directions.

People do not live in isolation. In order to achieve success, teamwork, collaboration and coordination are required. At the heart of organisations and teams are people. How do we pump the hearts by taking into consideration the psychological needs of the people? By taking charge of the welfare of the employees, trust is being built. With trust, managers are only required to check in with employees instead of checking on them to ensure timelines are met. A more collaborative approach can result in more cordial relationships and a more conducive work environment. Indirectly, a collaborative approach can help reduce or avoid unnecessary stress and tension, and attain better psychological states of all individuals.

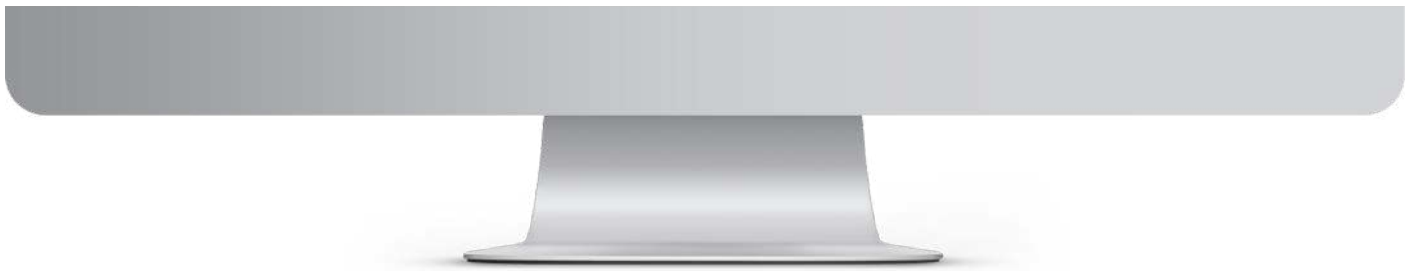
What is the Difference Between a Manager and a Leader?

The word leader has been used loosely although there is a vast difference between a leader and a manager. A leader inspires; followers aspire to learn and they follow leaders voluntarily. Leaders are agile in spotting trends and mitigate risks before they happen. A manager merely follows instructions from senior management and instils fear in their reports to achieve results. Most of the time, managers emphasise their own achievements by directing and accepting what they believe will make them successful. In times of crisis, leaders are the ones who have followers supporting them despite challenges, and relationships are developed for the long run.

What is Success?

Success is generally achieved when all parties are aligned and congruent in their direction and shared goals. Traditionally, success used to be employees conforming to the requirements of the managers to get work done under an assurance that their appraisals would be favourable.

A more current perspective is that managers need to have global thinking and technological savvy in providing efficient ways to resolve issues, build alliances and attract partners to share values and discuss options before final decisions are made. Mutual agreement is required pertaining to responsibilities. Managers have to accept the fact that it is common that some employees are more knowledgeable than them and work on ways to manage and help them to succeed in their roles.



What are the Barriers to Success?

- Fear of failure
 - Managers who are successful would feel that they are successful because their ideas are good. Hence, they may ignore their team members' proposals and/or amend them until they accord with their own ideas.
 - By doing so, the tension between the manager and team members is very high.
 - Employees may no longer be interested in providing suggestions and recommendations going forward.
- Managers constantly seek to prove that they are right.
- Communication
 - When communication is truncated, employees may be working on things that may not be required which can lead to inefficiency and cost. Misunderstandings can cause relationships to be strained.
- Delegation
 - At times managers might feel that it is faster to complete the task themselves instead of spending time to train and communicate with their subordinates, which may take up more time. This could be short-sighted action as managers thereby deprive their team members of professional development and burden themselves with unnecessary stress instead of sharing the load.
 - Training and delegating tasks to the right employees at the right time at each level is necessary for employee development and to boost the morale of employees which indirectly leads to retention.

- Some managers are worried that they may lose their authority by delegating tasks to employees. Despite delegation, decision-making remains the responsibility of the person who has the authority to make decisions.
- Suggestions
 - Depending on the culture of organisations, some employees may take suggestions from management as orders. Therefore, managers have to be careful to frame suggestions clearly as options rather than as ultimatums.



How can I Help You?

Executive coach Marshall Goldsmith recommended a 6-question process to promote 1-1 dialogue with direct reports in embracing and encouraging accountabilities.

01. Where are we going?

02. Where are you going?

03. What do you think you are doing well?

04. What are some suggestions for improvement?

05. How can I help?

06. What suggestions do you have for me to be a better manager?

What's Next?

There comes a time to embrace the notion that each and every individual is different and to groom the gems. Leaders can empower by encouraging their silent knights to be accountable for their own projects and help them to leap forward—to flourish together.

Peter Drucker stated that our mission in our life is to make a positive difference and not to prove how smart we are or how right we are. If I do not make a positive difference, what does it matter how smart I am and how right I am?

As a leader, we can appreciate that the silent knights in the teams are able to provide good ideas. We can recognise the efforts that are put in by the silent knights while managers have more time to focus on developing the silent knights. To quote Simon Sinek, "Invest in people, not ideas. A good idea is often destroyed by bad people, and good people can always make a bad idea better."



Anyone can be a great leader when times are good. A great leader is a great leader when times are tough. I just witnessed it recently. I was a mentor for a group of students participating in a sustainability challenge. A passionate teacher requested twelve groups of three participants each to participate in the challenge out of a class of forty students. The objective was to boost the confidence level of the students and prepare them for their internship by participating in the competition. This particular class of students is considered the "weakest" in their entire level of education. Through my conversation with the students I learned that some of them did not sleep the day before the competition for fear that they may report late at the venue for their planned 6am meeting time to prepare for the competition. It was unfortunate that none of the teams made it to the semi-finals. The most touching part was the students' first reaction, which was to apologise to the teacher for disappointing him; the teacher was very worried about the morale of the students and immediately consoled them. The most encouraging part was that, despite the defeat, the students told the teacher that they wanted to continue to

participate in any other upcoming competition. What are the teacher's leadership qualities that inspired his students in going the extra mile for him?

How does this beautiful incident compare to the recent announcement of employees, including senior executives, resigning because they are required to return to office to work for a day per week?

Sometimes, it is just about empowering the people around us, and about embracing the differences amongst individuals with both our heads and our hearts. When the heart (employees) of the organisation is being cared for, the business will naturally be cared for.



Making Sense of the Pathology of Organisational Life Through the Lens of Systems Psychodynamics and Group Relations

by Shawn Ee



In this article, psychoanalytic ideas are briefly presented as a way for leaders, organisations, organisational consultants, and administrators to conceptualise how easily and strongly groups set up defenses to avoid the painful realities about their primary work tasks, relationships with other groups, and performance. Psychoanalysts Wilfred Bion and Melanie Klein's ideas on group dynamics establish group behaviour as a means of dealing with the anxieties of individual members (Hinshelwood & Fortuna, 2018). This view that groups as a whole can develop collective defensive practices is based on the basic idea that if anxiety and conflict are shared with others, there is also an opportunity and permission to collaborate together (or rather, to collude) in defensive practices too.

This underlying dynamic is rampant in organisations that may possess pathological but wholly unconscious ways of operating; some examples are idealisation/devaluation of colleagues, leader/follower betrayal dynamics, and "scapegoating". It follows that attempts to heal these issues require an in-depth understanding of the organisation and its unconscious functions before some intervention can be crafted. To understand how these mechanisms play out in organisational life, we look to some psychoanalytic theory.

Understanding Group Relations and the Formation of Psychological Defenses

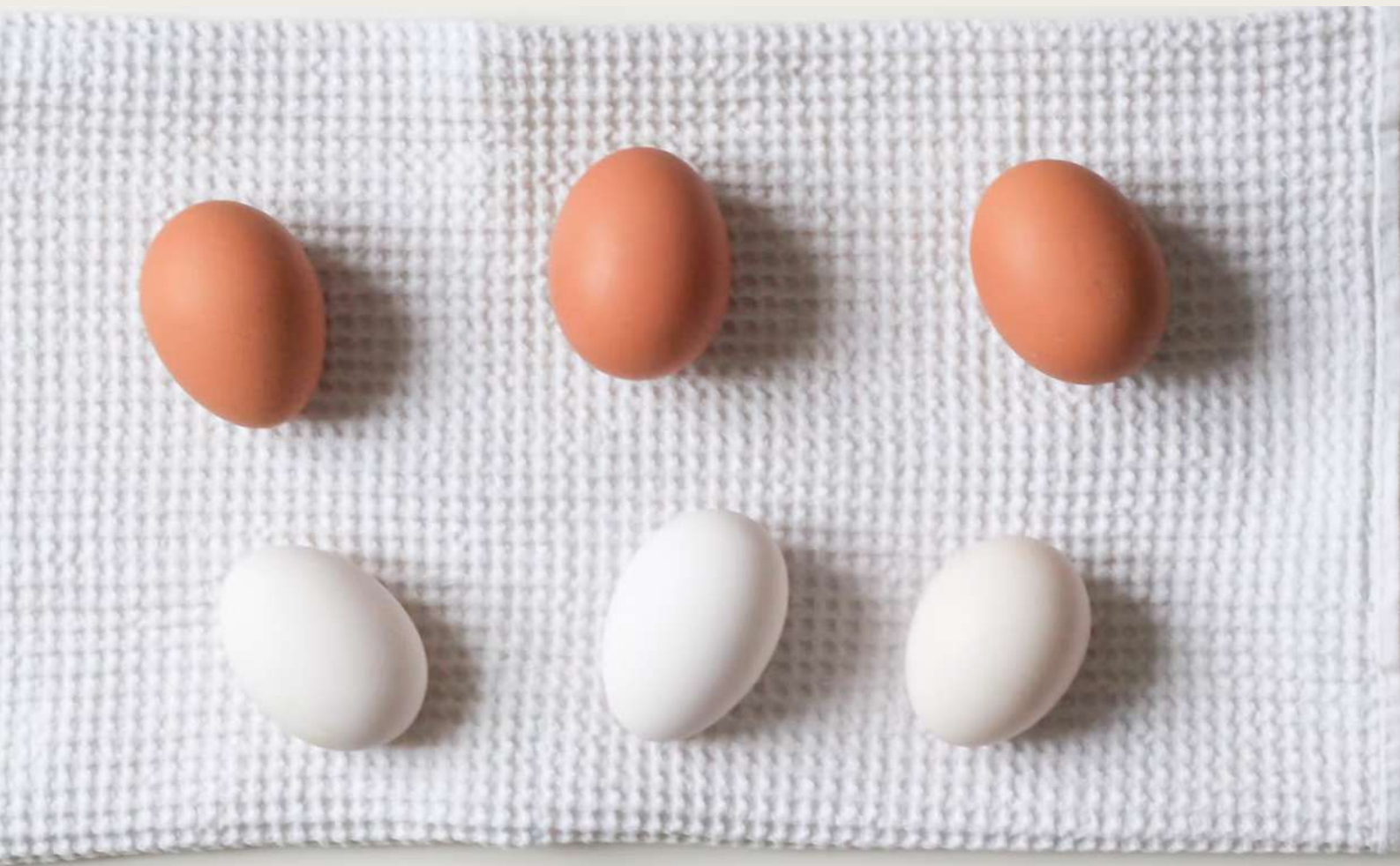
Differences of opinion can lead to disputes that arise within the individual as *internal conflicts*, or in groups in ways like the complex dynamics of organisational life. Following the work of Sigmund Freud's ideas on *repression*¹, Melanie Klein investigated other coping methods that offer us a theory of how our minds respond to the experience of conflict and anxiety: *split-off ego functions* (Hinshelwood & Fortuna, 2018). Klein postulated that when our mind splits, a part of its functioning seems to disappear (Quinodoz, 2005).

Clinically speaking, in a case of a family with an aggressive father and a subjugated mother where a conflict could not be resolved, the child deals with the distress by simply eradicating one side of the conflict. The part of him that had understood his mother's comments about his father was dealt with by obliterating all emotional connection with his father—it was split off. This serves a defensive or protective function so that the boy and his mother can live a safe, separate life since the part of him that could feel affection and live life with his father was lost. This process is both preservative but yet, destructive.



¹ A psychological defense mechanism that allows for the substitution of something innocuous for something else more acceptable.

Meanwhile, for Bion, he noticed that two distinct tendencies come to the surface within a group when individuals are brought together to accomplish a primary task: one subgroup tends towards accomplishing the prescribed task, whilst the other seems to be working against it (Quinodoz, 2005). In other words, this work activity is being counteracted or interrupted by a *regressive* process. The regression which takes place among members of a group can be explained by the fact that a "group mentality" is created (Bion, 1961). The group would begin to function unconsciously to express its opinion and the will of its members, but without the members of the group actually realising it.



Managers and leaders are often caught in the rip, being pulled in opposing directions by the competing demands of the institution, novelty and continuity, and personal needs (Krantz, 2006). Additionally, possessing an emotional investment in existing social structures and interpersonal relationships inevitably establishes deeply held, but often implicit, expectations and agreements about organisational behaviour, political choice and obligations (Krantz, 2006). These powerful currents may produce the conditions in which betrayal is inevitable, whereby leaders compromise organisational demands or betray an aspect of the interpersonal. In other words, either leader or follower subgroups begin to see the other as inherently bad and begin to work against each other with caution, in a bid to avoid some real or perceived threatening outcome. Psychoanalytically, the individual or group can also split-off previously held good parts of relationships and act out potential revenge fantasies onto a perceived aggressor.

Manifestations of Unhealthy Organisational Functioning

It has long been recognised that in groups, an individual may suspend certain parts of his mind. For example, an individual in a large crowd could temporarily lose a moral part of himself and participate in acts that range from in- or out-group bullying/bigotry to violent gang-related activities. Considering the psychoanalytic idea that we can be pulled in two different directions, we may also conceptualise the developmental scenario of the infant who initially does not recognise that the mother who feeds and the mother who sings are one and the same person (Hinshelwood & Fortuna, 2018).

When we regress, we take up defensive positions to ward off threat and its accompanying anxieties. It means we are unable to think, reflect and make meaningful sense of our experiences. Anxiety is an insidious force, sapping energy and damaging health, undermining job performance, and stifling innovation and creativity. Like individuals, organisations can also suffer from symptoms of anxiety. In the long run, anxiety can reduce an enterprise's strategic adaptability and effectiveness (Gould Wilkinson et al., 1998). Lacking in some capacity to contain our anxieties, we lose an important basic dimension in human experience—the way in which we experience, avoid, manage, deny, keep in, or pass on our feelings so that they are mitigated or amplified. The capacity to think about anxiety in individuals, groups and organisations is related to the capacity for the containment of anxiety (Bion, 1967).

In the case of organisational betrayal, one can realistically imagine that the anxieties

surround the experience. Even the potential of betrayal in collaborative relationships stimulates persecutory anxieties and heightens mistrust and blame (Krantz, 2006). The resultant splitting process can diminish reflective thinking and compromise one's ability to relate. "Once bitten, twice shy", many leaders and followers would have to depend on each other since they have to continue working together, bounded by obligation and shared purpose. However, many employees or followers may instead begin to become paralysed by their own persecutory anxieties and go into defensive withdrawal, adopting avoidant postures in the anticipation of any recurring impact of hurting people with whom they work. The self-defeating nature of this response is underscored by how this may protect leaders from the suffering and consequences of betraying their own colleagues and followers. This disintegration continues to fragment and split the organisation, and is often accompanied by psychological denial and projection, which thereby compromises both the individual's and organisation's effectiveness.



Understand the Defenses Against Anxiety and Promote Thinking

We must first recognise that our defenses against anxiety are there for legitimate reasons and that these defenses are inextricably a part of organisational life. These systems psychodynamics relate to the way individuals and groups use the culture, social structure, working practices and boundaries of any given organisation in a defensive way to ward off anxiety or conflict (Sher & Lawlor, 2022). These defences against anxiety then become a part of the organisation's system and culture, and any attempts to disarm those rigid structures can be exhausting or futile at the individual level. Organisations will also resist efforts to change them, as change processes expose their staff more directly to the persecutory anxiety that they are defending against. Besides, protecting the individuals and groups from persecutory anxiety usually makes the defense more strongly entrenched.

Instead, it is useful to consider that the defense itself is in the structure of the system, so helping organisations think about the defensive system is usually done through working with groups and teams (Sher & Lawlor, 2022). A spirit of inquiry or reflection gives the opportunity to step back and carry out some self-observation. Through this process, organisational members in the system can begin to consider how the structures that they have in place either hinder or promote the carrying out of the primary task.

For instance, in the example of betrayal, the trauma of those betrayed both in early childhood (e.g., DePrince & Freyd, 2002) and by organisations (Galford & Drapeau, 2003; Koehler & Gershoff, 2003) have been well documented. The focus would be to make interpretations about these dynamics and bring conscious awareness to the existence of these disturbances, so perhaps the pain and disturbance of betrayal is felt to be less personalised, and hence the anxiety and distress can be more easily contained by individuals and the group.



As summarised by Lawlor and Sher (2022), a systems psychodynamic approach involves "an examination of conscious and unconscious conflicts (which might be the result of a team's history and unconscious motives), unhealthy splits between team members or exclusion of team members, problematic relationships with leaders or authority figures, integrating diverse individuals into the team, and difficulty in understanding self and collective anxiety, defenses and irrational behavioural processes in the team" (p. 217). The goal is to assist the team in exploring its conscious and unconscious processes as team members relating with each other and leadership, and "to work on inter-team and organisational relationships with other parts of the system, making sense by interpreting behaviour in the here-and-now, without presumption of coincidence, and without memory or desire" (p. 217).

This article serves to briefly highlight the importance and utility of psychoanalytic theory to provide another perspective to make sense of complex organisational issues that are frequently ignored, as they are difficult to understand and hence, to resolve. Topics that are useful for further reading but beyond the scope of this article would include: Bion's "Basic Assumptions", "Work-Group" concepts of Group Relations, as well as Melanie Klein's central notions of Schizoid Mechanisms (Quinodoz, 2005). If you have never been exposed to psychoanalytic thought, a gentle introduction would be to understand the basic concept of *Projective Identification*² and its various functions (e.g., *unconscious communication*³). Lastly, I recommend conducting the exercise below to kickstart thinking about the issues inherent in your own organisation and to consider the reference, *An Introduction to Systems Psychodynamics: Consultancy, Research and Training* by Mannie Sher and David Lawlor (2022) to learn more.

Suggested Reflective Exercise: On Social Systems and Defenses Against Anxiety

Briefly ask yourself and list:

1. What are the core anxieties inherent within the nature of my work?
2. What are some of the defenses or mechanisms I use in relation to these anxieties and the pressures that accompany them?
3. Would a colleague recognise others that I might be aware of?
4. What collective defenses operate within the organisation in which I work, in relation to these anxieties?

² In Klein's definition of projective identification, there are several potential aims: "getting rid of an unwanted part of oneself, a greedy possession and scooping out of the object, control of the object, etc" (Segal, 1979, p.118).

³ "The motivation to expel parts of the self or internal objects—a wish to be rid of the undesired/unwanted aspects of one's mind; to communicate through placing those aspects in the mind of our external objects; a wish to control the mind, behaviour, and actions of our objects, and to stop them from thinking their own thoughts separately" (Hinshelwood & Fortuna, 2018, p. 108).

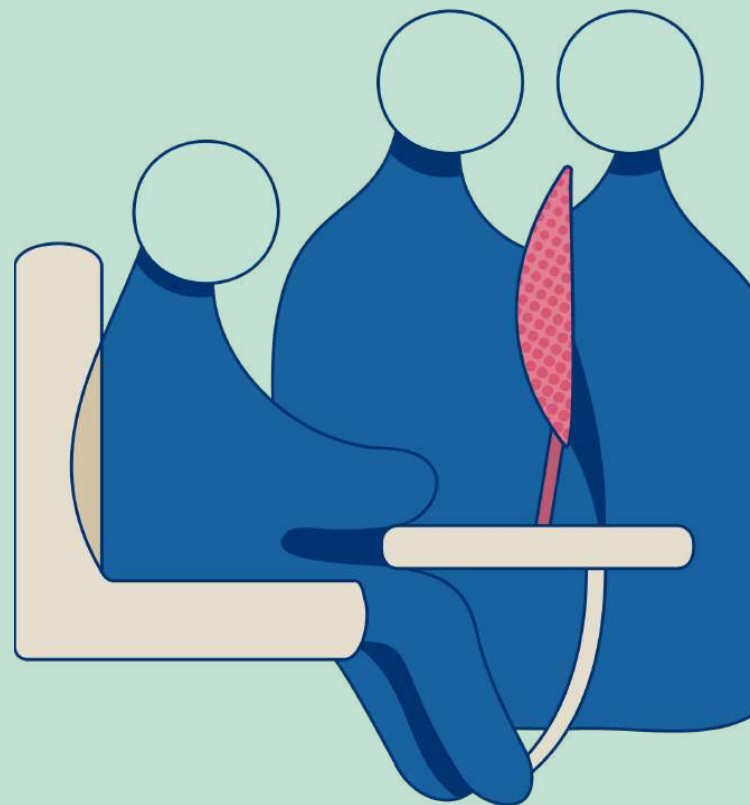
Attachment Styles and Workplace Relationships

By Mitali Kothari

Humans are hardwired to seek attachment. Attachments form the basis of our interactions and experiences with individuals and environments (Sroufe, L. Alan., et al.). Based on their childhood experiences, individuals develop different types of affective bonds and proximity-seeking scenarios. The types and intensity of attachments that we have early in life influence our functioning later in life and effects are witnessed in workplaces, homes and communities at large (Vîrgă et al., 2019). "Taking care of business" is not just limited to professional duties, but it also means adapting to our environments based on our genetic makeup and brain networks such that we thrive in our interactions with other individuals and the world around us. Therefore, attachment theory is a relational framework for understanding interpersonal relationships and behaviours at work (Vîrgă et al., 2019).

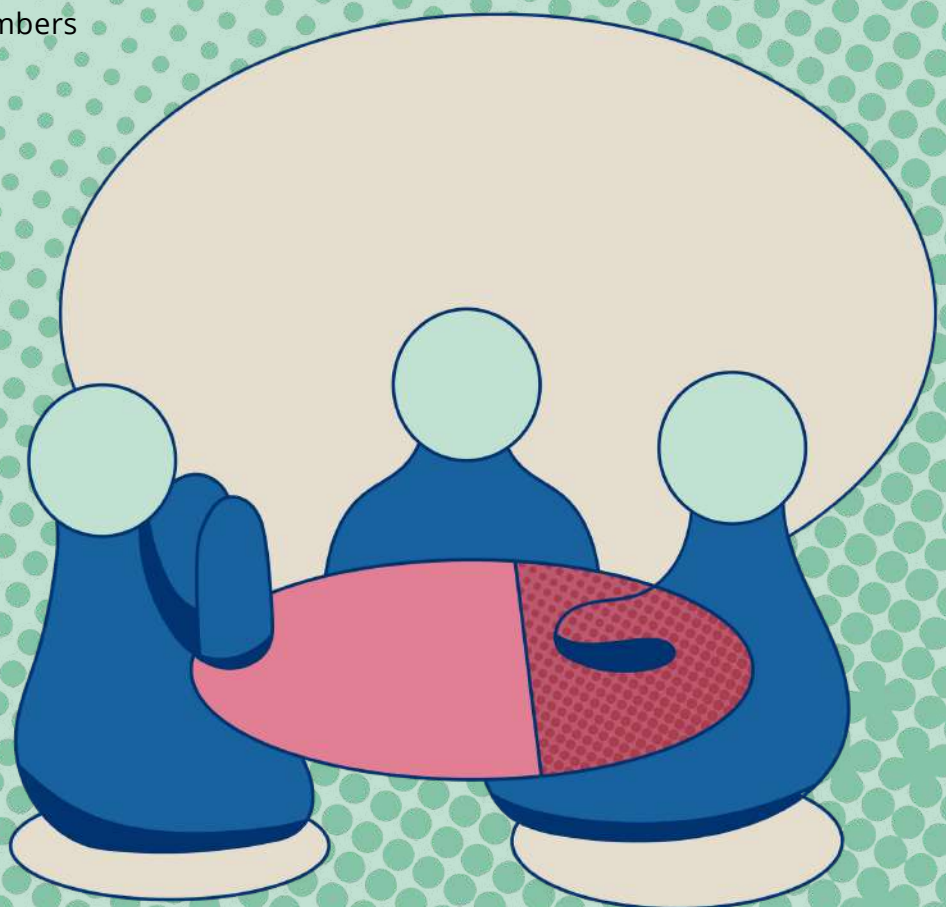
It is important to understand our attachment styles and the way we relate to the world to best thrive in our professional lives. Through self-awareness and engaging in reflexivity, we may be able to leverage our strengths to best interact with those around us. John Bowlby (1958) proposed that individuals could be categorized according to 4 different attachment styles: Anxious (also referred to as Preoccupied), Avoidant (also referred to as Dismissive), Disorganized (also referred to as Fearful-Avoidant) and Secure.

Anxious attachment is rooted in a fear of abandonment and concerns of being underappreciated. At the workplace, these employees may face personal and interpersonal challenges as they constantly seek approval from their colleagues and managers (Richards & Schat, 2011). For those with Avoidant attachment styles, even if they receive sensitive responses to their needs and distress, they may not perceive them as such. As a result, they tend to become very independent, both physically and emotionally. This type of attachment style is related to higher turnover intentions and lower levels of organizational commitment at work (Vîrgă et al., 2019).



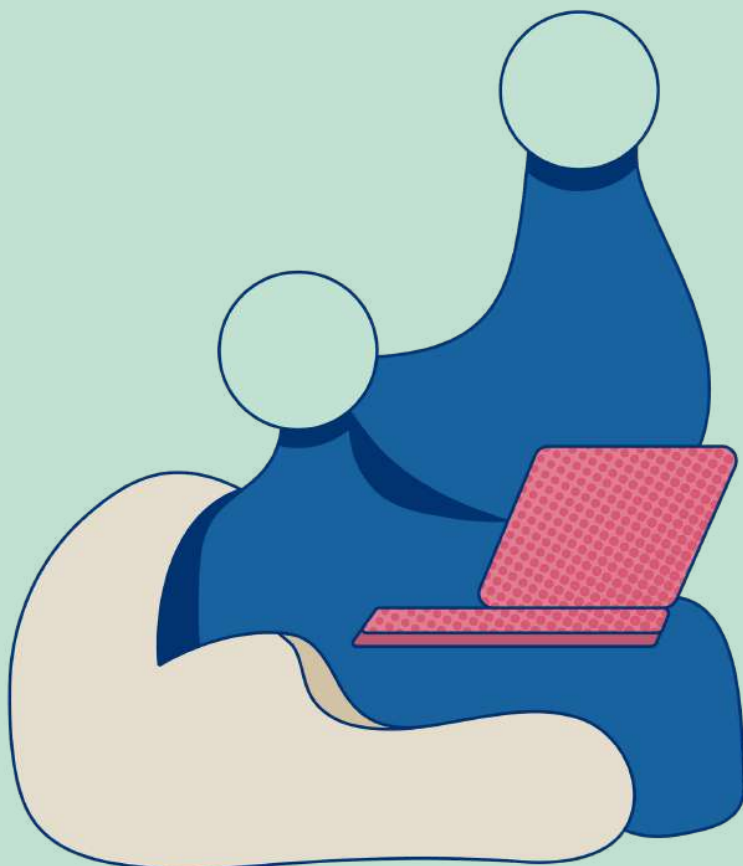
Disorganized attachment styles stem from the consistent failure of parents to respond to their child's distress. As a result, they do not have a consistent or straightforward way of engaging with others as adults. At the workplace, such individuals can switch between high anxiety and high avoidance. As a result, the way they interact with others and their overall behaviour in the workplace may be ambiguous and contradictory (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, UK). Secure attachment is often referred to as the ideal attachment style; individuals who display secure attachment have had their needs adequately met and are confident in their abilities and relationships with others. At the workplace, they display traits of high self-esteem, seeking out social support and taking calculated risks. They are good at forming bonds with others and getting high quality work done on time, and others in the workplace generally perceive them as valuable group members (Little et al., 2011).

Through self-awareness and engaging in reflexivity, we may be able to leverage our strengths to best interact with those around us.



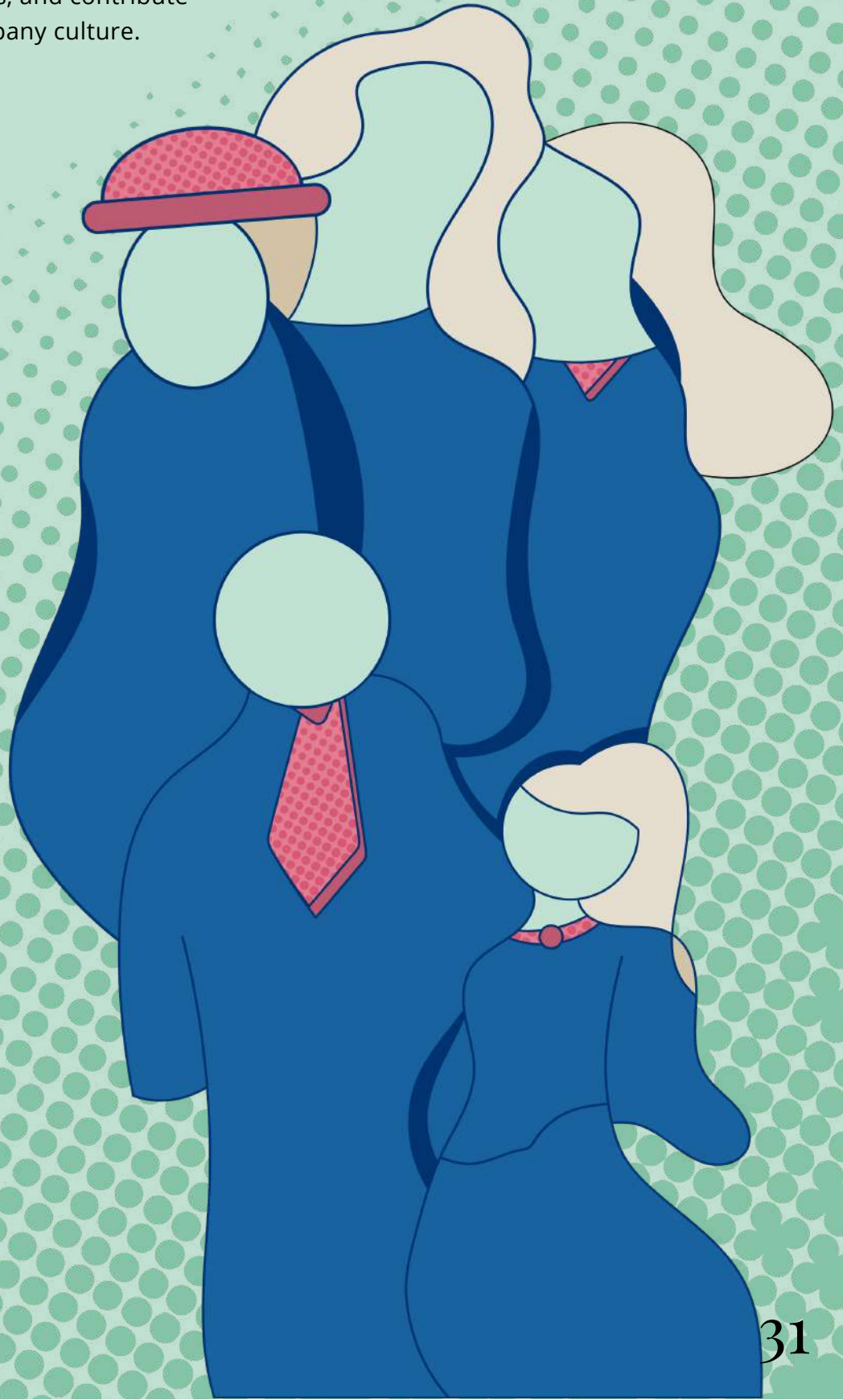
Sharadazad et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between personality traits, attachment styles, and adolescents' life satisfaction. Results showed that there were significant relationships between most of the personality traits with attachment styles, leading Sharadazad et al. to conclude that individuals who were satisfied with their lives had personality traits of extraversion and openness, as well as having secure attachment styles. In the digital age, there are multiple mobile applications and platforms available that can give us a deeper insight into our own attachment patterns, individual preferences and working styles. Through algorithms and user input, guidance can be generated based on different domains. For instance, the DISC personality test is a tool that allows individuals to determine and categorize their personality type into 4 factors: Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Caution (Puccio & Grivas, 2009).

The results help individuals make sense of how they respond to conflict, their motivations, triggers for stress, problem-solving ability and communication patterns. Recognizing the communication needs of oneself as well as one's team members could help improve relationships at work. For instance, those who score highly on the "S-Steadiness" domain display traits of being genuine, down-to-earth and reliable. They can hence be trusted to get tasks done and remain calm in the face of conflicts. They are also very supportive and willing to help those in need. They work best with individuals who score highly on "C-Conscientiousness." They display traits of diligence and high self-awareness and are good at planning, designing procedures and prioritization of tasks for a team (Puccio & Grivas, 2009). Hence, it could be beneficial to group together individuals with similar personality types. Of course, the validity of the DISC and other ipsative personality measures has been called into question so results of such tests need to be interpreted with caution.



Individuals who were satisfied with their lives had personality traits of extraversion and openness, as well as having secure attachment styles.

Nonetheless, attachment styles and personality types can serve as a valuable blueprint for HR professionals and managers when planning bonding activities and team allocation. This can help to ensure a good working environment whilst simultaneously maximizing learning, development and productivity. This could be a good indicator of success in projects, form the basis of positive interpersonal relationships, and contribute to an overall positive company culture.



*** Everybody Fakes it Sometimes: Emotional Labour in Professionalism



By Yap Rae Yi

I recall moments as an art therapy trainee where I would find myself shutting my eyes and almost immediately falling into deep sleep after conducting a therapy session. Not being sure why that happens, my first instinct was to "level-up" my self-care, since that was emphasised time and time again from Day 1 of training. I put in more effort to ensure that I had enough sleep every night and enough nutrients in my diet. That helped a bit, but I still found myself feeling exhausted after therapy sessions; more so with certain clients. A sense of guilt started to breed in me as I grew to doubt my competencies as a therapist.

Being that it happened way more than once, I thought that it was only appropriate to "confess" to my supervisor at that time

about my repeated lethargy. This confession resulted in me receiving one of the most important pieces of advice not only for my professional career as a therapist, but also for life in general—"Don't underestimate the amount of energy it takes to hold someone". Here, holding refers to emotional and mental holding by being consistently present and attuning to another's emotional climate.

That advice was supplemented by other stories of therapy trainees also feeling exhausted or extremely hungry after their sessions. I felt very validated at that moment, and it was also the beginning of me being more conscious about the link between my emotional and physical health, and the concept of emotional labour.



What is Emotional Labour?

Hochschild (1983) was the first to coin the term emotional labour, defining it as a situation where service providers put in the effort to manage and display organisationally expected emotions to customers, colleagues, and managers. Emotional labour is definitely not exclusive to therapists and exists in almost any other profession and professional setting. It is more or less a part of any job, and is not necessarily a bad thing unless it becomes unmanageable. Examples of situations that require you to put in emotional labour are when you are trying to maintain your composure in a stressful job interview or when attending to a rude customer.

To manage emotional labour, Hochschild (1983) introduced the strategies of surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves solely the display of an expected emotion without internally feeling or adapting to that emotional state. Deep acting, on the other hand, involves the adjustment of internal feelings to produce the expected emotions (Grandey, 2000). Putting these concepts into an example, if a person working as a customer service officer has just experienced the death of a loved one and is grieving, the facing of customers would require them to put in more emotional labour than usual as we assume the person would be having feelings of sadness in a work environment that values an enthusiastic and bubbly demeanour. Employing surface acting would mean that this person goes through just the motion of lifting their cheek muscles and smiling while they serve customers, and employing deep acting would mean that the person attempts to adjust their internal feelings of sadness to happiness to display a genuine smile when serving a customer.

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) realised that genuine expression is also possible, where a person does not need to engage in any acting, surface or deep, to manage emotional labour. Genuine expression refers to cases where a person's internal and expected emotions match. Because emotional dissonance is not experienced as frequently with genuine expressions, a person would consequently experience less strain at work (Kwak et al., 2018). The definition of genuine expression reminded me of Carl Rogers' (1959) concept of congruence, where he believed that self-actualisation, or being a "fully functioning person", happens when there is an alignment between one's ideal self and their actual behaviour.

Genuine expression does seem like the best strategy to manage emotional labour but, as we are navigating in this world of uncertainty, it may not be in our control to have emotions aligning with our job demands all the time considering how we also have personal events happening outside of work. Similarly, it is almost impossible to avoid emotional labour if we want to maintain positive relationships at the workplace. Fortunately, there are ways to mitigate the negative effects of emotional labour.



Ways to Cope with Emotional Labour

one

Embrace your selves

As explained above, the negative effects of emotional labour are enhanced when there is a conflict between how you are feeling and how you are expected to feel. According to Winnicott (1960), we develop false selves as we behave in socially conforming ways and these behaviours can often cover up our true selves, where expressed behaviours tend to be more spontaneous, in-the-moment, and authentic. The development of false selves, like Jung's (1966) concept of the development of personas, is part of healthy development. It only becomes problematic when we dominantly express our false selves or become our personas, as doing that may leave us feeling unsatisfied and empty in life. Understanding this helps us to realise that acting in ways that are not authentic does not necessarily mean that we are being untruthful to ourselves or others. Instead, the purpose of faking in some situations has the function of protecting our vulnerable true selves and helps us to fulfil the social roles that we take on. In fact, the healthy development of false selves and personas is important for emotional regulation.

Find your tribe

To ensure that we do not only express our false selves, a conscious effort can be made to allow our true selves to be expressed and seen. Being around people we trust and can be vulnerable with is a great way to ensure that we have avenues to express our true selves. Workplaces are not always able to provide this space for us, and we should also remember that we have large amounts of time outside of our jobs that we can use to recharge and re-balance emotionally. Seeing a therapist is another avenue that allows the expression of your true self.

two



three

Recognise the source of emotional labour

Paying close attention and noticing which aspects of your work require emotional labour might help you prepare better for them. Ask yourself if you often experience a mismatch of internal and expected emotions, and evaluate how you normally cope with the mismatch and identify the resources that are available to you.



Do remember that even though the experience of emotional labour is mostly inevitable, some cases of emotional labour arise in disproportionate amounts; especially when it exists because of discriminatory and/or abusive practices at the workplace. It was found that amongst some groups of people, specifically minority groups, the amount of emotional labour expended at work is significantly greater because of prejudice and discrimination (Grandey et al., 2018). It is important to realise when to report and seek help from other parties when this happens.





Conclusion

Emotional labour is a part of every job but an aspect that is commonly overlooked and underestimated because of its silent nature. Bringing more awareness to the concept will allow us to be more mindful of how we respond in social situations, especially in a professional setting. It also allows us to be more appreciative of services we receive. Inner work is an ongoing process that allows us to grow into our most authentic selves and even though it is a personal process, we must remember that we can always reach out to others for support.



Quiet Cubicles, a Silent Pantry, and Awkward Lunches: Understanding Grief and Bereavement at the Workplace

By Paul Victor Patinadan

With Singapore's aging population, it becomes easy to observe the greying that now occurs at the workplace. As people push back their retirement, deliberately or otherwise, workplaces begin to see parallel changes reflective of its employees' life course. Grief and loss, though they can touch individuals at any stage of life, occur in greater frequency at older ages. It becomes more likely that today's workers will experience grief in some measure; be it a colleague's, or someone they are caring for (O'Connor et al., 2010). Unfortunately, academic consensus is that most workplaces adopt a muted culture where grief is not necessarily recognized and thus acknowledged (Vickers, 2009). Employees cannot realistically be expected to leave their emotions at the office lobby or factory gate. To effectively support and ensure optimal interactions with their jobs, workplace grief must be understood better, and its embedded culture reconstructed with compassionate policy and workplace activism.

Tehan & Thompson (2013) observe that losses in the workplace can affect everyone in that setting including (i) *employees*, who make the bulk of the workforce, and in larger companies can constitute towards numbers similar to a small town; (ii) *managers*, who are often overlooked as they practice a professional detachment from the main workforce (they are, however, not detached from their own humanity); (iii) *clients*, a general term encompassing customers, students, patients, or others who receive services from the organization and who may bring their own grief into the organization or be affected by it from the direction of a grieving worker; and (iv) *other stakeholders* including suppliers, partners and associated individuals. The authors go on to document both open and hidden effects that grief might have. Expressions of distress and general recognition of bereavement behaviours constitute towards such open effects, while reduced levels of concentration (dangerous in some work settings), poor work quality (due to increased rate of errors), reduced productivity, and increased tensions that may lead to communication issues are more socially occluded, hidden effects (Tehan & Thompson, 2013).

An elegant qualitative study by Wilson et al. (2020) on the lived experience of 19 bereaved workers across various occupations uncovered three major themes, reconciling the general literature on the topic. The first theme, *Grief is universal but individually impactful* observed participants discussing the unique high-intensity and chronic nature of grief and their vocational reactions; some needed more time (upwards of a year) to feel ready to return to work, but others took much shorter breaks in an effort to "feel normal again". *Accommodation is needed to assist the return to work and to regain work abilities*, saw the immense value that organizational accommodation (implemented workplace changes to enable work return and assistance towards the person's capacity to perform work) had for participants. Such accommodations included shorter or fewer workdays, changes to workload, and even bosses allowing workers use of their personal office space for privacy when needed. Finally, *Impediments to working again* saw multiple areas that made the return to work post-bereavement especially difficult. These included a lack of organizational knowledge on bereavement processes, an incongruity between needing time to heal and the organization requiring work completed, and a lack of official support structures. The most salient impediment had consisted of uninformed, unsupportive, or unsympathetic managers, co-workers, and HR personnel, who sometimes provisioned unhelpful advice.



Pitimson's (2021) sociological investigation, in a similar vein, found narratives of disenfranchised grief, a fear of being judged for showing strong emotions at work, and needing to hide feelings to continue "playing the consummate professional" as core areas of difficulty in work-return. Moreover, they detail the awkwardness, pain and power of silence, as colleagues held (at best) uncomfortable, "normal" exchanges (not focusing on the grief) with the bereaved or provided no conversation at all. Pitimson (2021) posits the notion of an explicit "permission" being required in order to communicate the loss experience and relevant emotions, with most at the workplace bypassing this to avoid awkwardness. Most importantly, however, individuals in the study had discussed how the few colleagues who had braved breaking the silence created immensely powerful and important exchanges that aided them on their grief journeys (Pitimson, 2021).



Lattanzi-Licht (2002) highlighted the significant pressure that the workplace, more than any other setting, might exercise on

individuals to be silent and hidden with regards to their grief response. Such cultures of silence, however, are as potentially destructive to the company as they are to the individual, especially if they result in poorer performance or increased absenteeism as the bereaved try to cope in solitude (Pitimson, 2021). The perpetuating discomfort of discussing grief can lead to a tendency to "give people space" at the workplace, ironically, at a time when human connections are the most needed (Tehan & Thompson, 2013).

Systemically, organizations cannot operate on the assumption that the workplace is grief-free, as they risk negatively impacting their employees' wellbeing. Appreciating the diversity of grief experiences, having clear and accessible grief policies, and demonstrating broader engagement through dialogue past compassion being merely a form of a 3-day leave protocol are manageable first steps that workplaces may take in supporting their workforce. Just as social support can make a significant difference to the experience of grief, the workplace, with its familiar faces and respected connections, can (and should) be a potential setting for deep healing.

Mental Toughness Lessons from the Entrepreneurial Person

by Michael Thong

1.0 Introduction

There is a type of person who, when faced with adversities and challenges, is not only able to withstand the pressure, but is also able to look for gaps, solutions, and a way out of adversity. I am not referring to athletes; rather, I am referring to entrepreneurs.

Being a psychologist is tough, especially when you are in private practice. Not only do you have to ensure that you have sufficient emotional resources to provide meaningful support to clients, you will also need to be responsible to grow your practice. In fact, as long as you are working or existing in any society or life in general, regardless of whether you are a professional, business owner, or an employee, at some point in your life, you have probably felt that "life is tough".

Discussion about mental toughness usually leads to an understanding of athletes competing at high levels needing mental toughness to excel in competitions. It is rare to see a relationship being defined between mental toughness and entrepreneurship. Despite the common knowledge that entrepreneurship requires a lot of grit, determination, hard work, and resilience; mental toughness is not frequently celebrated alongside entrepreneurial pursuits.

2.0 Mental Toughness in Entrepreneurs

The mental toughness that entrepreneurs possess is somewhat different than that of athletes. Though both entrepreneurs and athletes require grit, determination, positivity, and a "never give up attitude"; entrepreneurs would require mental stamina as entrepreneurial pursuits are rarely short-term events. To withstand mental, emotional, and psychological onslaught without certainty of success, and to combat naysayers, self-doubts, and ever-changing external threats is not a feat that most individuals could put up with, let alone enter by choice.



One thing, however, is certain: Long-term entrepreneurial pursuits are much like dealing with life's unexpected challenges, uncertainties, ups-and-downs, unpredictable threats, and fears — specifically fear of lacking resources (a.k.a. money). This means that adopting some entrepreneurial qualities and mindset might help in managing how we look at life's challenges and suggest methods to overcome them without taking major emotional beatings.

Taking a closer look, there are several qualities that successful entrepreneurs such as Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Jack Ma, and Steve Jobs share consistently. The top nine qualities are as follows: (1) accept constraints, (2) focus on fundamentals, (3) maintain consistency, (4) develop self-awareness, (5) be pragmatic and see things as they really are, (6) accept failure and do not fear it, (7) be optimistic, (8) embrace uncertainty, and (9) be willing to learn, expand or change.

These qualities have been touted as critical ingredients for their success as entrepreneurs as well as overcoming hardships through their journey to the top. It is precisely the benefits that such qualities would bring to a person that warrants real consideration to adopt them into our lives.

3.0 Entrepreneurial Qualities

Adopting some of the entrepreneurial qualities and mindset may in fact have immense positive benefits for anyone; especially those who are in the midst of adversity and challenging circumstances.



Accept constraints. Many unresolved frustrations, disappointments and dissatisfactions arise because of the inability to accept constraints and challenges. When faced with difficult situations that are undesirable or unplanned, people tend to bargain, struggle, deny, reject, and fill themselves with immense emotional frustration which is often unproductive. Most entrepreneurs are able to take constraints in their stride, and work with whatever they have to yield the best positive results. Instead of always hoping that the environment will change to become favorable for action, why not just act anyway to find the most favorable course of action amidst unfavorable conditions?

Focus on fundamentals. Developing a solid foundation by repeated drills of the basics helps to maintain discipline, rigor, consistencies, and habits that will help implement a methodical approach to improve life situations. It is often that people react to threatening circumstances through panic actions, bargaining, and choices made out of desperation. However, the entrepreneur would double down during a crisis situation, and return to basics, focusing on the basic drills and working their way out through sheer hard work, wit, and determination. Focusing on fundamentals also helps to remove distractions that are unproductive.

Develop self-awareness.

Being self-aware is critical to managing adversity. Knowing the state of our emotional well-being would allow us to make informed decisions on establishing an effective self-care routine. However, being aware of our vision, mission, position, and goals helps us to stay focused, hopeful, and determined as we trudge through adversity.

Pragmatic and seeing things as they really are.

Some would shun pragmatism, viewing it as negative and lacking in positivity. However, a mentally tough person does not tell themselves stories to keep themselves comfortable or hide the actual problem that they are facing for fear of inability to face up to the truth—which may be harsh. Mentally tough people accept the experience as is—much as most successful entrepreneurs accept reality as it is, and solve challenges one by one.

Maintain consistency. Mentally tough entrepreneurs are rarely born tough; most are regular people like you and me. Their toughness is developed through consistent, repeated exposure to hardship, challenges, and adversities. They maintain consistency in their stance to overcome adversity step by step; resulting in an effective, mentally tough outcome developed through consistency.

Accept failure, and not fear it. Mentally tough entrepreneurs look at failure differently from most other people. While most would either shun, avoid, or fear failure, entrepreneurs often see failures as learning experiences, training opportunities, and growth stimulants. Mentally tough entrepreneurs view failure as inevitable and, although the experience is unpleasant and defeat may prompt you to question your competence and your confidence, failure contains lessons and experiences, as well as fresh perspectives—a trajectory for success! Remember this mantra when facing possible failures: "Fail your way to success!" Failure is not a destination, it's a journey.

Optimistic. Hope keeps people moving. Without hope, it is difficult to motivate ourselves. Most people who struggle with negativity or drive and are in perpetual emotional toxicity lack hope. The mentally tough entrepreneur hopes for a better future and moves towards the goals identified. If we do not see hope in succeeding before we do anything we have already failed.

Embrace uncertainty. Most people are concerned about predictability, certainty, and safety. From an evolutionary perspective, such desire for safety is completely natural and understandable. However, the mentally tough entrepreneur understands and accepts that 100% certainty is a myth. No one who is mortal is able to ensure certainty. The belief that certainty is achievable is a delusion. Instead, the mentally tough entrepreneur accepts uncertainty and focuses on possible contingencies to prepare for unexpected outcomes.

Willing to learn, expand, and change. Being curious, open minded, and willing to learn to figure things out are positive traits that help entrepreneurs tackle adversity productively. Such traits also help to develop a tough mind for them to keep focus in the midst of challenges. Mentally tough entrepreneurs read, experiment, learn, and reflect on situations. They are constantly learning, expanding, evolving, and changing. Even when defeated, they bounce back to take on a new challenge and keep moving forward.

So now that we see the benefits of such qualities from mentally tough entrepreneurs, how can we start internalizing these qualities, and develop them as a part of our individual traits?

4.0 5 Ways to Develop Mental Toughness Like an Entrepreneur

Doug Strycharczyk, Peter Clough, and John Perry (2021) in their book, *Developing Mental Toughness*, define mental toughness as the capacity for an individual to deal effectively and productively with stressors, pressures, adversities and challenges, and to perform to the best of their ability regardless of the circumstances they are placed in. While genetics does play a role in a person's ability to be mentally tough, it is also possible to acquire mental toughness as a personal quality through training and modifying some basic principles of anyone's lives.

Here are five of their recommended ways to develop mental toughness.

Way 1: Believing in yourself. Henry Ford, the founder of Ford Motors once said that, "whether you think you can or you think you can't, you are right!". He was trying to illustrate the power of self-belief, self-talk, self-perception, and self-fulfilling prophecy. Most people underestimate the power of negative self-talk and negative self-perception. To be mentally tough, we need to reinforce more positive self-talk, positive self-behaviour, and positive self-perception, and believe that we have what it takes to achieve the goals that we set for ourselves. Believing that we have the competencies and capabilities would help to drum up the mental fortitude that is so critical in living a healthy, productive life.

Way 2: Be consistent. According to James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*, mentally tough business leaders are typically more consistent with their behaviours. They are focused, goal-oriented, and consistent. They do not let naysayers, failures, negative people or unproductive feedback stop them from continuing with their routine to achieve their goals. Much like how athletes train themselves through routine training and consistency, once a productive behaviour is identified, it is helpful to internalise it through consistent practice.

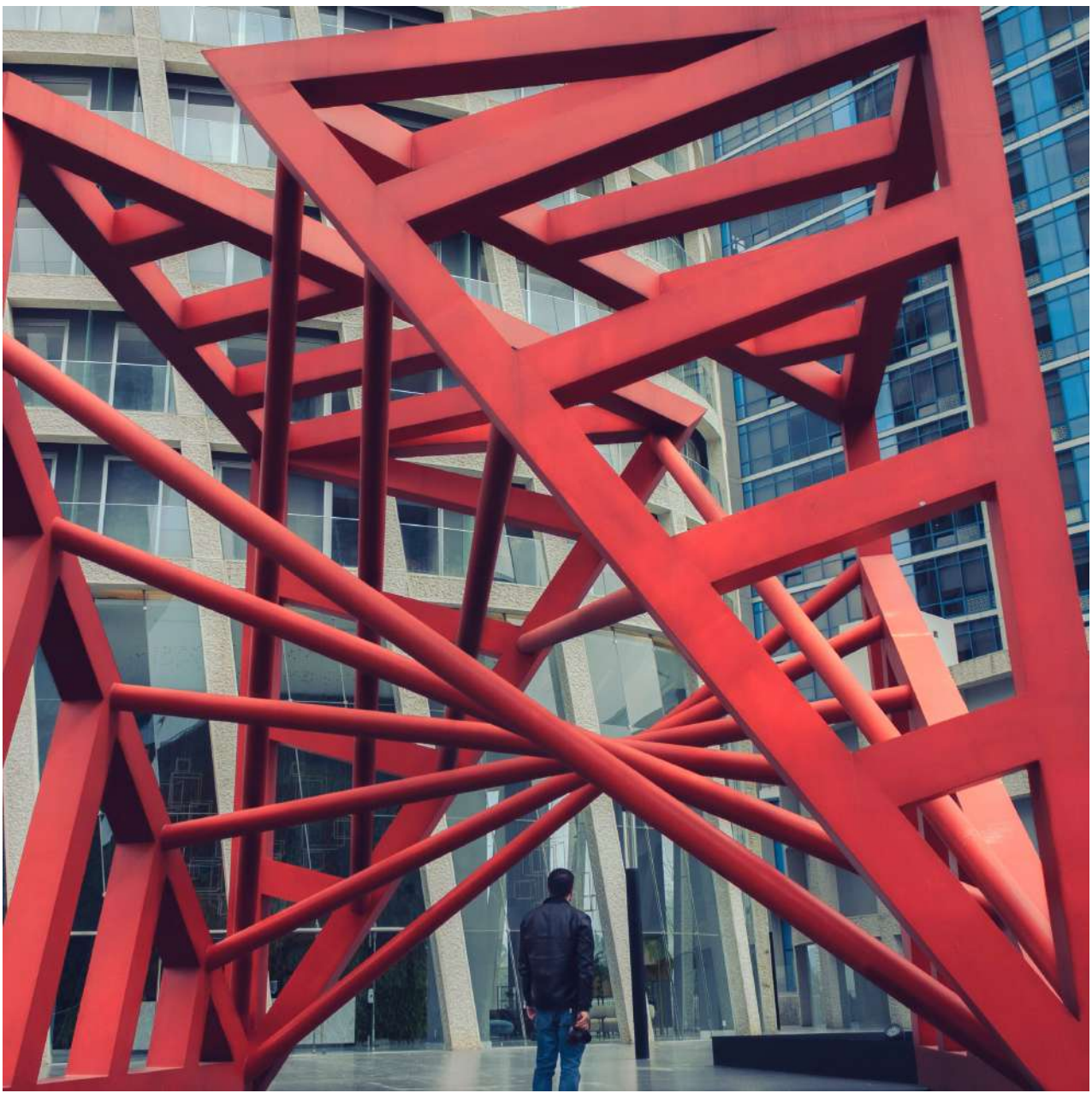
Way 3: Focus on your strength. With focus, there will be dedication and energy. Focusing on your strengths would magnify those strengths, boost your confidence, and empower your self-belief to achieve greater productivity and happiness.

Way 4: Build good habits. Building good habits is a positive way to ensure that productive tasks are structured in such a way that routine and consistency foster continuous practice. When adversity strikes, good habits are helpful to regulate and anchor an individual to keep on moving forward despite circumstantial hindrances.

Way 5: Embrace challenges. Being mentally tough means that we need to accept challenges and take them in our stride. We can start by exposing ourselves to simple challenges and subsequently progressing to higher level challenges. It is seldom a wise approach to avoid challenges and take an easy way out. With a change of mindset to look at challenges and failures as ways to learn, improve, and upgrade, as well as basking in the potential of success, we can train ourselves to be more mentally tough and resilient.

5.0 Closing

There is much that can be learned from mental toughness qualities exhibited by mentally tough entrepreneurs; however, nothing is easy and good things can never be achieved without hard work, effort, and some levels of sacrifice. So perhaps if we want wellbeing, productivity, and the hardiness to overcome adversity, it is indeed time for us to push ourselves to focus on our strengths, be ready to learn and change, internalize new positive habits, maintain consistency, and take on new challenges without giving up.





Unbothered and Thriving

By Asha Gizelle Mariadas

Bring about a world of difference to your mental well-being by caring less to live more. Let's explore the power of stoicism, an eudaimonic virtue ethic, in a post-pandemic world to create shifts in your personal and professional spheres.

I couldn't help but laugh out loud as I stumbled upon this quote while languorously scrolling through my Instagram feed, "Hey, I found your nose. It was in my business again." I was trying to deduce if the quote leaned more towards being a response or a reaction. My laugh was the response. Forwarding the quote to another would possibly be a reaction.

Stoicism Today

In Stoicism, a practical philosophy hailing from the Hellenistic period, impression refers to the gap between an event and one's reaction.

It wasn't until recent times that I fathomed: the more reactive one is, the further they discredit themselves. And what's more, a real stoic isn't as unfeeling as one may perceive him or her to be. Achieving mastery over emotions is what the credo pivots on. In a zeal-saturated world that commands reactions to practically everything, the stoic creed may be deemed as incongruity, especially in an epoch of over-sharing.

Personally, it took me eons to discern between responding and reacting to people and situations alike.



It wasn't much of an "aha" moment when I acknowledged the art of being unbothered as an essential skill to adopt in order to live in zen. My journey was dubbed as an unhurried but evolutionary process before I eventually did veer towards taking charge of my overall well-being. I simply chose to mind my business and this paved the way for a massive shift in my mental and emotional health. And here I am today, thriving and basking in the energies of staying detached on both personal and professional fronts, owing to a comforting prospect that was born out of a very recent turmoil.

Rediscovering Boundaries in the Post-Pandemic World

Who would have thought that being barricaded in at home with our gadgets and loved ones would pan out as something synonymous to happiness? Most of us would have become acquainted with the term work-from-home by now. The COVID-19 situation has also lent a brand new perspective for all to revisit the concept of work-life balance, thus leading us to prioritise self-care and mental health over work. The pandemic situation's enlightening effect has certainly rubbed off onto us and has led us to rediscover our boundaries and the importance of self-care.

On the adverse, with the blurring of work-life boundaries with work-from-home arrangements, even remote jobs could be troublingly interspersed with mental and emotional demands too. In a survey conducted by a human resource software company, Employment Hero, in March 2021, about one-fifth of the 1000 respondents based in Singapore were

reported to have experienced high levels of stress at work (Oh, 2021).



The Social Animal

It is part of human nature's default mode to be social. The need to belong is innate and irrefutably powerful. Possessing an amicable and accommodating disposition is touted as one of the most sought-after qualities, especially in an occupational setting. On the contrary, being described as aloof, detached and indifferent is virtually an analogy to being a dismal failure when it comes to dealing with people at or even off work.

The usage of the term "unbothered" that has grown prevalent in recent times, may suggest austerity, emotional repression or fortitude even. Practising an act of unbothered-ness, which may at times be exceptionally challenging, emphasises the primacy of inner freedom. As aforementioned, us being social animals makes us crave a cohesive professional space and a sense of belonging. Having said that, however, one needs to be on familiar terms with the fact that experiencing the magnitude of belonging at work doesn't equate to selling yourself short.

Rather than waiting on events that come in the guise of rude wake-up calls for you to re-examine your own values, take the reins by executing the following to recognise people and situations that you can't control.

Be bothered to be unbothered.

It is perfectly all right to have your own nose in your business. At the end of the day, it is us who needs to take accountability for our actions and overall well-being. Be particularly discerning when it comes to reacting and responding.

Claim emotional superiority over a situation by not reacting to a situation that you are expected to react to.


Embrace the event that you have perceived to be an adversity as an opportunity to show virtue. Remember, no one else's business deserves to be the (green) kryptonite to your Superman.

Set boundaries.

It is imperative that you prescribe boundaries to add value to your already priceless being. Boundaries need not necessarily resemble the Berlin Wall, but it could look something like getting people to respect your time, space and privacy.

Normalise detachment.

Recognise that staying detached is a high-value response and is a part of our emotional repertoire, and not a defence mechanism for the most part.



On a final note, allow me to drop a truth bomb here. Your energy is gold. Own it! Be in complete alignment with the theory of unbothered-ness. If you haven't done so, set some firm boundaries. Let me reinstate that this is something that everyone should do to affirm their worth. The power of stoicism can only be defined when one experiences it with the core of their being.



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