

CAN YOU BE YOURSELF AT WORK?

Imagine it is a Sunday evening. Are you genuinely excited it's Monday tomorrow because over the weekend you have had an idea that you want to test and put into practice? Or do you have a ritual that you go through to get your 'work armour' ready for Monday morning?

It might be at this point you realise that your clothes are in the washing machine, wet and floppy and in no condition to serve as armour of any kind. Imagine now that you didn't have to go through that ritual. Imagine you didn't have to spend extra time preparing for what you should do and say at work, and instead, could just be yourself.

I guarantee the world would be all round a better place. In such a world, ideas would flow freely and be built on, instead of being judged. We would leave the office or the conference with a spring in our step, excited to go home and share with our friends and family how our ideas and contributions were taken seriously.

Now remember a time when you were 'on fire,' doing your best at something – bottle this feeling and try to summarise in one word or symbol. Write it down.

Can you be yourself at work? Imagine if you participated in meetings, from the 'heart' without translating your ideas into corporate language or having to solicit support for it ahead of time. If you could just say what you were thinking and work with a group of people who wanted to make it happen. How good would that be? What if instead of asking how the sales forecasts were going, your manager asked, 'How are you really?' or 'What support or help do you need from me to be your 'true on-fire self' at work?' Would you respond positively?

Being our human selves is much easier than being something we aren't. Why do companies force us down the route of being our 'work-self' when we could save that energy for our work and be our best self?

Work is a competitive place which automatically means we feel we need to be on guard and not share our fears or concerns but instead use up energy by being someone else. None of us are perfect, but we can all agree that we're all human. So let's be human.

Let's treat our colleagues with respect. Let's encourage dialogue that will open us up to other perspectives, and let's trust ourselves and others to do the right thing. Companies that create environments that allow their employees to be human will win in the future, no matter how big or small they are, because their employees will have more energy and goodwill to do their jobs, energy that won't be wasted on maintaining a false work identity.

Employers should build environments where people can be human. Remember the symbol or word you wrote down that encapsulates how you felt when you were last on fire? The next time you're facing a challenging situation at work, remember it to re-invigorate you. (I think of feeling focused, and ready to

take on the world with my feet firmly planted on the ground.) I learned this exercise when I was working toward my coaching accreditation – it works! When I haven't revisited this exercise for a while, because I get caught up in the mountain of stuff to do, I realise that just turning up to work without my usual energy, is not just me letting myself down, but also, and more importantly, the people I work with.

So, how can we bring this energy with us into the workplace more easily? The answer is that we all need to learn to leave our 'work armour' at home and be more human at work, and employers should work with their employees to foster this type of environment.

Lead by human example. To begin, set an example. Once you've identified the word or symbol that represents your true self, write it in your work notebook. Refer to it every morning. If you are responsible for managing or developing others, ask your team to do this and begin your week by revisiting it. Then, make a commitment to stop using company speak and referring to PowerPoint when you're sharing ideas. Ask people to explain their idea and invite others to spark from it, either to build on the idea or take it in another direction. Recognise individual ideas, and check in with how the idea is developing so it doesn't get lost.

If you are a leader or a manager you can create how you work with your team and encourage open and respectful sharing through your team meetings. Be human yourself by letting your team know when you think you have messed up – and celebrate when you've got it right – to show your own human side. No one can do everything on their own, so ask for support from your peers or your own manager. Direct their energy to where it will help most e.g. commending you on unique ideas. Likewise, let members of your team know that you are there to help them.

HR professionals can lead the cultural change at companies by thinking less about process and making their communication less complicated. The next time you need to communicate a process or an idea to a colleague, use the 'mum' test. Would she understand the language you're using? Could you stand up in a tube carriage and explain what you need to in between stops? If not, then it's probably too complicated. Take a human approach to speaking to colleagues and invite them for a coffee – you will find out more about them and they will see you as a person, rather than just a member of the HR team. New employees can make a difference too. If you have just joined a company, be curious. Ask 'why?' questions. Understand what has gone on before you by humanising it.

Being human = best work

With new technological advances every day, demanding consumers wanting more for less, resulting in new business models and ways of working, (and a host of considerations like flexible working, managing change, resilience, and leading through times of uncertainty for employers to consider,) the world of work is changing. Workplaces are often focused on a top down approach, following corporate rules and governance, and in some places management by fear rather than encouragement. In today's fast-paced and sometimes unpredictable world, it's good to remember that at the simplest level, employers should want people to do their best work. Since being human is here forever, the goal of companies and employers should be to create an environment where their employees can be their true selves to do this.