



NIKKI J. OWEN
TRANSFORMING LIVES

Trauma: The Biggest Block to Leadership Success

By Nikki J. Owen

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Living with trauma can be a debilitating experience, leading to feelings of fear, anxiety, and helplessness. It is important to recognise the unique challenges posed by traumatic experiences to find ways to heal and move forward effectively. This report explores how resolving the biggest block to leadership success can help you reclaim your power and confidence.

Trauma is caused when the individual experiences distress without resolution and it's more common than leaders realise. It leaves a lasting impact - an emotional wound that can harm a person's sense of safety, sense of self, and ability to regulate emotions and navigate relationships.

Emotional wounding is the internalising of painful experiences that can negatively impact an individual's leadership potential. Many things, including physical or emotional abuse, trauma, neglect, or bullying, can cause emotional wounds. These experiences can lead to feelings of shame, fear, vulnerability and even a lack of trust in others, which hampers leadership ability.

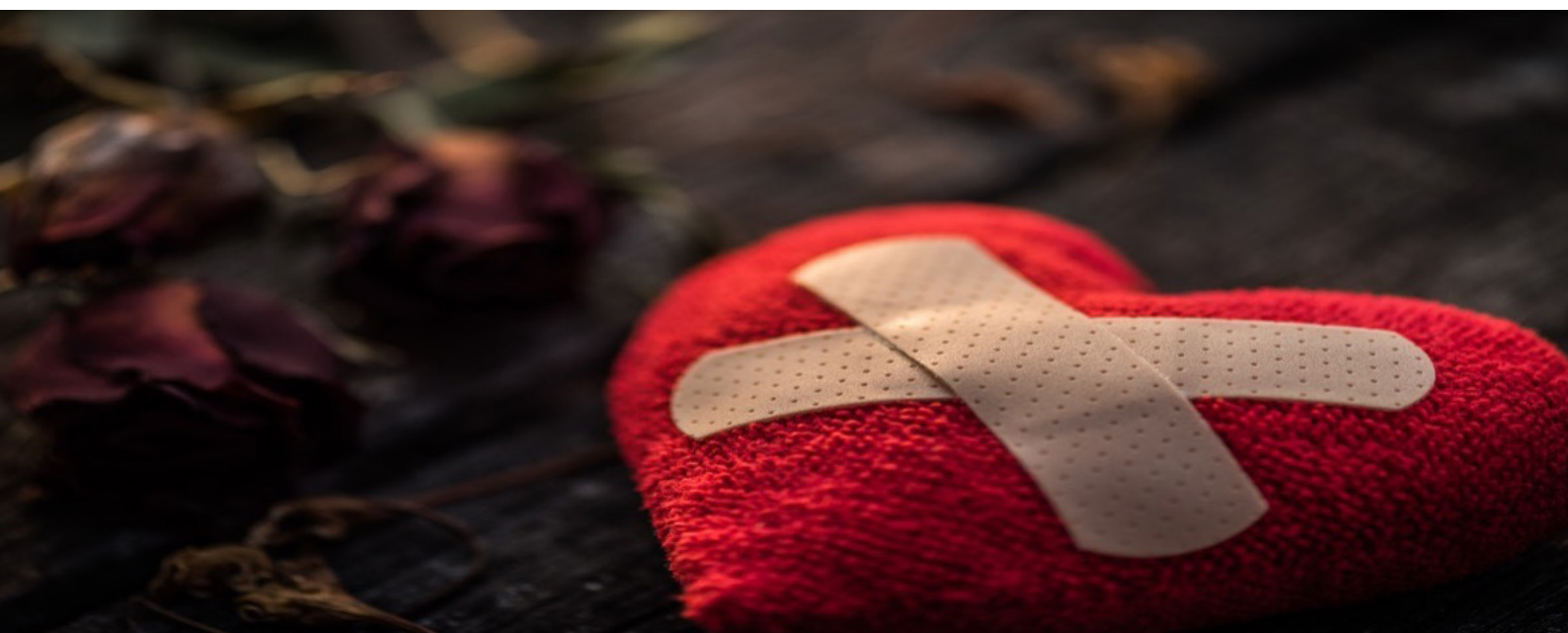
Emotional wounds can also lead to negative psychological and physical problems, such as depression, anxiety, and difficulty regulating emotions, interfering with an individual's ability to think clearly and make sound decisions, which are important traits for successful leaders.

Additionally, past emotional experiences can lead to a person feeling unworthy or undeserving of success, further impacting their ability to realise their leadership potential.

According to research published by Mental Health Foundation, around 1 in 3 adults in England report having experienced at least one identifiable traumatic event. But everyone lives with some trauma without knowing. It's not uncommon for leaders to state that they don't have any trauma because they don't recognise something as trauma. The longer the trauma is circumvented, the worse the symptoms worsen, and this weakens leadership capability.

The cycle of maladaptive behaviours due to past emotional wounding tends to create inflexible and myopic leaders. They are less agile as they struggle to adapt to rapid change and show a tendency towards defensive behaviour that feeds into a culture of fear and distrust. Leaders tend to make impulsive decisions based on their values instead of taking a more balanced approach to benefit the team.

When such leaders are unaware of their maladaptive patterns, it can lead to a breakdown in communication, morale, and productivity. To break this cycle, leaders need to be able to reflect on their behaviour and understand how it is impacting the team. This is difficult with unresolved emotional wounds because they are often unconscious.



Leadership adaptability in a high-pressure environment

The world has changed dramatically in the past twenty-five years. Mobile phones and 24/7 access to online mode make it harder to switch off and take a proper break. New forms of technology consistently emerge to help us to complete tasks more quickly and optimise our time management. Many people experience that the pace of life is getting faster. This acceleration of life adds more pressure, stress, and tension. It's a very different experience driving at 50 miles per hour on the inside lane compared to 70 miles per hour in the outside lane. The faster you live, the more stress and tension you attract.

Many leaders are juggling the challenges of rising inflation, the cost-of-living crisis, supply chain instability, talent shortage, cyber-crime, remote and hybrid working and changes in consumer behaviour. They are witnessing a shocking rise in people's mental health issues, with 76% of employees reporting moderate to high-stress levels. (Stress Statistics UK, 2023 Data – Champion Health)

When a leader experiences a life-changing situation, particularly if it is unexpected, managing their life often evolves into feeling out of control and overwhelmed.

These life-changing situations come in many forms, from changing jobs, divorce, having children, financial worries, and even planning a wedding.

Why can some leaders integrate these things into their daily routines while others become overloaded and overburdened?

In 1964 Dabrowski published a Theory of Positive Disintegration, a mental health theory that suggests that people must experience some level of psychological distress before reaching their full potential. It argues that only by being exposed to uncomfortable or distressful experiences and emotions can people mature, learn from their mistakes, and develop new perspectives about themselves and the world around them. The theory suggests that this process of positive disintegration is necessary to break through psychological barriers and reach new heights of self-awareness and understanding. Every individual has unique potential; however, unless they are willing to go through appropriate levels of distress and struggle, it may never be achieved.

This process is demonstrated by the way to build muscular strength. When athletes work out, they create tiny injuries to muscle fibres called micro tears. Once these occur, the body sends blood to the area to heal. This, in turn, is how you grow musculature.

Over time, if done correctly, the micro tears sustained from exercise eventually form muscle mass. Breaking down the muscle to build it back up makes it stronger. In the same way, leaders that strive to become the best version of themselves are more likely to reintegrate challenging experiences and events. Everyone has experienced emotional wounding, yet when a leader appreciates that every trauma and difficulty has presented them with an opportunity to grow, learn and become emotionally resilient.

The vital component to leadership resilience

Imagine an empty glass. If you leave that glass under a running tap, it starts to overflow. Leaders' emotions are continually flowing into their system. Emotional dysregulation is a common challenge for leaders, and resilience helps to bring balance in these situations.

When the glass is full and overflowing, it's easy to become overwhelmed or sink into negative emotions. It can become difficult to make decisions in a balanced way and consider all available information. In a permanent state of fight or flight, leaders may be unable to think clearly, leading to rash decisions without considering potential consequences.

In fight or flight, the amygdala, responsible for emotional regulation, quickly signals a threat, and there is a reduction in certain neurotransmitters' ability to function as emotional brakes.

The prefrontal cortex, which helps the amygdala see stressful events with more context, is turned off. A leader's emotional reaction to normal day-to-day pressures is intensified and may inadvertently trigger a deeply buried emotional wound.

This harms performance.

Trauma – today’s leadership blind spot

Many leaders are unaware they’ve had a traumatic experience because they believe ‘trauma’ is dramatic and life-changing. Big traumas are apparent and easily identifiable because they leave the individual feeling helpless, powerless and without control. Yet trauma and emotional wounding happen to everyone.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

EMOTIONAL

Anxiety
Frustration/anger
Depression
Stressed
Isolated
Self-beration
Shame
Overwhelmed
Life feels ‘hard’

PHYSICAL/BEHAVIOUR

Insomnia/nightmares
Exhaustion/fatigue
Edginess and agitation
Aches and pains
Unhealthy addictions
Racing heartbeat
Unexplained ache /pains
Digestive problems
Sweating

LEADERSHIP IMPACT

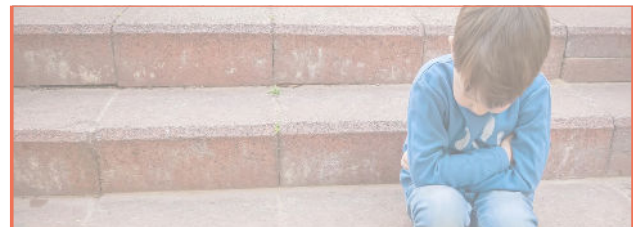
Difficulty focusing
Unable to make logical decisions
Lacking confidence
Critical/judgemental/controlling
Emotional instability
Micromanagement style
Risk adverse or reckless
Disconnected/lack empathy
Impulsive reactions

When a leader’s younger self has unmet needs

Typically, an adult has experienced events in childhood that they have not fully processed or integrated into their adult self. They may not appear as a big deal to the adult reflecting on their life, but the event was difficult, painful, and hard to understand for the younger self.

A young child may be eager to share their ‘9 out of 10’ spelling test. If their supportive mother responds with: “That’s wonderful, which one did you get wrong?” the child may believe that they need to be perfect to win more approval from their mother. This may create a belief about not being good enough.

This seemingly innocuous moment doesn’t appear important to most leaders, yet it can tarnish their sense of self-worth and diminish their confidence as an adult. This may translate in a leadership context to imposter syndrome because the leader has an unhealthy obsession and a need for perfection and their imperfections mean, they are not competent for that role. The leader focuses on what’s wrong instead of what’s right about people and situations and worries about making mistakes. This struggle with feeling good enough often creates imposter syndrome.



A little boy of four may stumble and fall. When he starts to cry, his dad might say, “Come on son, pull yourself together, big boys, don’t cry.” The little boy learns to push down his emotions for his father’s approval. In that moment of his father’s reaction, the little boy’s distress has not been resolved and the child learns that it’s not ok to be that part of himself that feels distressed. He has been scolded for expressing how he authentically feels. To maintain his relationship with his father, he rejects that part of himself that feels upset, believing that this emotion is unacceptable and buries it in his subconscious. The little boy has learned to suppress emotion to maintain a connection with others and, in doing so, is rejecting part of himself. As an adult in a leadership role, this may cause a lack of emotional intelligence and a sense of discomfort when faced with emotional reactions from others.

TYPICAL EXPERIENCES THAT MAY CAUSE TRAUMA

CHILDHOOD/TEENAGE

Starting nursery/school
Being left out by other children
Parental divorce/separation
Exam pressure
Need to belong
Pressure to do well
Hormonal/puberty
Emotions not validated
Death of a pet
Wearing glasses

PERSONAL

Divorce
Conflict at home or work
Infidelity
Relocating
Starting a new job/leaving current job
Having or adopting a child
Financial or legal troubles
Being rejected
Another person's reaction to you
Wedding planning

LEADERSHIP

Rising inflation
Cost-of-living
Cyber-crime
Supply chain instability
Talent shortage
Employee stress levels
Remote/hybrid working
Technology
Green transition
Customer expectations

The root of leadership behaviour

Research in psychology and cognitive psychology shows that situations in childhood where unmet needs are not resolved can create trauma and becomes part of who they are as adults. (Danieli, 1998; Kidron, 2004; Philippe et al, 2011; Ogle et al, 2013). Childhood experiences are key ingredients in the development of leaders because they are the root of leadership behaviour and competence.

During the initial seven years of a child's life, the infant functions in a hypnogogic, highly suggestible state when observing, recording, and downloading information about their environment. This conditions their attitude, beliefs, mindset, and behaviour. Their caregivers have also been programmed by their caregivers, so an inherited cycle of inner conflict is passed on through the generations.

Emotional wounding

Many of a leader's deepest emotional wounds are carried by the child within. These wounds are like weeds growing where they are not wanted, competing with what is wanted. This creates tension, blocks, or contractions within a leader's heart, mind, and body. The leader develops an identity, an ego, based on who they think they are constructed from their personal story. In the same way that a garden covered in weeds, chokes the growth of the flowers and plants, past conditioning limits the ability to realise true potential.

The child learns coping mechanisms to deal with emotional wounds and often remains unconscious in the adult. A need to be the best and win at any cost may have been the way that a child gained more parental approval. An adult's need to comfort eat under stressful conditions may have been conditioned by how a parent soothed them as a child when upset. Even with awareness regarding one's self-sabotaging behaviours, they become incredibly difficult and time-consuming to change consciously or with willpower. This is because the emotional wound has been experienced and felt by the younger self that has become separate from the adult.

Peak performance

Emotional deregulation caused by childhood trauma or the inability to process and express emotions regularly will constrain peak performance. According to the definition of peak performance by the American Psychological Association: "Peak performance is when an individual performs at optimal levels physically, mentally or both." A critical component of high performance is determined by the leader's metaphorical 'glass of water'. If it is full, the leader's response to current challenges is intensified. Leaders whose glasses are full to the brim notice that their ability to think clearly and perform well is obscured.

Emotional contagion

Emotions arise in the brain from the dynamic of several structures that collectively make up the limbic system. Neuroscientists regard the limbic system as an open loop, which means it responds to stimuli outside the body and tunes itself accordingly.

As Daniel Goleman, author of the bestseller, Emotional Intelligence identified: emotions can be contagious. Unlike cognitive behaviour, emotions struggle to be left at the office door. Because employees are very aware of their leaders' emotions, leaders can strongly impact an employee's mood and, consequently, the organisation's culture.

A leader who has resolved their emotional wounds and 'emptied their glass of water' contributes to a collaborative culture because employees feel safe and secure to express themselves. In a toxic culture of fear, leaders inadvertently condition their teams to suppress authentic emotions. This perpetuates the cycle of conflict and silo thinking.

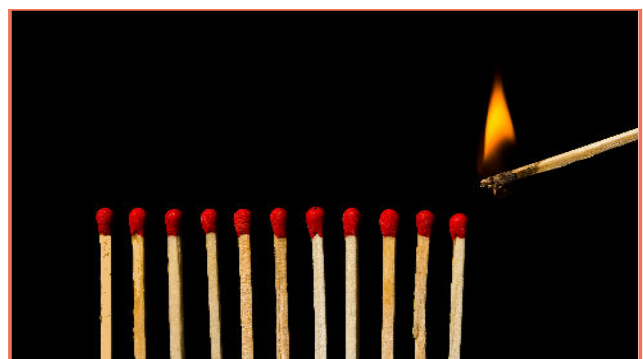
Improving the culture of an organisation requires changes to deeply rooted behaviours. It requires a shift in mindset that propels people from operating from a survival attitude to a growth attitude. The leader's ability to behave as an integrated individual rather than an individual carrying separate wounded parts is emotionally balanced. The leader embodies the change they want to see in others and the organisation.

How to heal emotional wounding

The quickest way to process and release past trauma and resolve emotional wounds requires an awareness of the younger part of a leader that is 'stuck' in an old memory. The younger part feels and experiences situations differently because their need at that time was unmet and prevented resolution. Re-visiting a childhood memory as an adult changes the memory because it brings to life the experience of emotional maturity. This knowledge can be used to empower the younger part so they can process and learn from their experience. All events are categorised in a person's subconscious using linked emotions. If the first event of a group of events that share the same emotion is discovered and resolved, all subsequent events sharing the same negative emotions are neutralised. This type of deep self-development has a life-changing and transformational impact on a leader's mindset, behaviour, and performance.

To work more deeply requires a blended approach of coaching and therapy. The primary function of coaching is to create a context in which life and performance development may take place. The primary role of therapy is to create a context in which healing may take place. The younger part of a leader who holds the emotional wound requires a therapeutic intervention while simultaneously coaching the leader to process and integrate changes occurring with their younger self.

The opportunity to transform a leader's mindset, attitude, behaviour, and performance happens more easily when they are willing to explore the root cause of the challenges and blocks they are experiencing in their daily work. Rather than push down painful memories, a leader must feel ready to re-visit them. Rapid and impactful transformation is actualised for leaders with a high level of willingness to embrace a self-awareness journey.



How to assess readiness

Every leader is unique and different. The ability to assess their willingness to navigate those difficult inner states successfully can only be considered by the leader themselves.

The following questions provide a framework that helps a leader make an informed decision about their readiness to embark upon this type of leadership development.

“Until you make the unconscious, conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”

Carl Jung

1. What issues are you experiencing that you'd rather not have?
2. Which of these is causing you the biggest problem?
3. Why is this issue a problem?
4. What is likely to happen in the next year if you don't address this issue?
5. Who else is your issue affecting?
6. When you think about this issue, how does it make you feel?
7. What have you done previously to resolve this?
8. How does this issue protect you?
9. What other areas of your life are you experiencing the same issue?
10. What recurring patterns are linked to this?
11. What's this issue an example of?
12. How often do you listen to and trust your intuition?
13. How much do other people affect your energy?
14. How have you dealt with intense emotions in the past?
15. What's your biggest fear in relation to dealing with this issue?
16. What would you lose if you didn't have this issue?
17. How does this issue serve you?
18. What is it about this issue that you have never told anyone?
19. What's the best outcome, the benefit you'd gain from resolving this issue?
20. On a scale of 1 – 10 how committed do you feel about resolving this?

It's natural to fear the unknown and this fear if left untamed, creates a resistance to change. A leader ready to accept that their natural resistance caused by this fear is worth facing will find the courage to do whatever it takes to grow and develop in times of turbulence. With leadership comes great responsibility. A leader continually impacts and shapes the culture of their organisation. A leader embodying the change they want to see in others ignites others to dream, learn, and become more.

Working with Nikki J. Owen

The Leadership Breakthrough Programme is a quick and powerful way to release unprocessed trauma and heal emotional wounds that block leadership performance.

Nikki's core area of expertise is supporting leaders in resolving childhood trauma, which has been successfully applied over 3 decades with 1000's of business leaders.

As a result of completing The Leadership Breakthrough Programme, leaders state:

- Heavy workloads are easier to navigate
- More authentic communication
- Improved self-confidence and personal presence
- Increased creativity with problem-solving
- Greater self-awareness and confidence
- Improved relationships and collaboration
- Improved agility when managing unexpected change
- Increased clarity and cognitive function
- Sense of purpose and meaning
- Lighter and more expanded perceptions
- Easier to generate desired results
- Improved work-life balance

“Nikki has something very special to bring to a leadership audience and I would highly recommend her to any organisation with a forward-thinking leadership agenda.”

*Jenifer Richmond,
Group HR Director,
National Express*

FREE Virtual Discovery Session

Leaders who are ready to learn more about The Leadership Breakthrough Programme must trust who they will be working with. A Discovery Session provides an opportunity to learn more about the process and assess how comfortable they feel about working with Nikki J. Owen. This is an opportunity to ask questions and share current challenges. It also gives Nikki an understanding of a leader's suitability, alignment, and readiness for this type of programme.

What's involved?

There are six breakthrough sessions of 75 minutes scheduled over three months. Each session blends various tools and techniques that work at the speed and depth appropriate for each leader. The sessions get progressively deeper.

Individuals have several layers built up over time and mask their authentic selves. Much like an onion, the layers are gently peeled away to allow the hidden, younger parts to emerge. This creates the conditions for addressing the inner child's unmet needs by reparenting themselves as adults.

Interim Session Support

To build high levels of safety and reassurance during the programme, formal and informal support is provided to ensure that the leader successfully integrates the changes into their everyday life and enjoys the resulting benefits.

Leaders receive access to several tools and techniques that optimise the impact of the breakthrough sessions and gently transition the leader from supported sessions to self-supported techniques based on their individual needs. This equips leaders with practical ways to manage their ongoing healing and development journey.

Pricing for The Leadership Breakthrough Programme - £6500 plus VAT

About Nikki J. Owen

With over three decades delivering thousands of leadership breakthrough sessions for different organisations, Nikki's cutting-edge techniques are blended from neuroscience, quantum mechanics, cellular biology, and quantum healing systems.

Qualifications

Teacher of Neuro-Linguistic Programme certified by American Board of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (ABNLP) in 2000. Trainer of Hypnosis certified by American Board of Hypnotherapy in 2000. Trainer of Timeline Therapy certified by Advanced Neuro Dynamics in 2000. Reiki Master trained in Usui Shiki Ryoho in 2009. Executive Faculty Henley Business School – Advanced Management Programme in 2011. Advanced Practitioner Emotional Freedom Techniques & Matrix Reimprinting certified by AAMET in 2014. Fellow of the Professional Speaking Association in 2015.



Clients over 30 years

Academy for Chief Executives	Jumeriah	Royal Dalton
Accor Hotels	Kantar Media	Sainsbury's
Barclays	McCurrach Mercedes-	Shell Europe
Baringa	Benz National Express	Shell Global
Canon UK	Neopost/Quadiant	Skanska
Capita	NFU Mutual	Southern Water
Churchill	Octopus Energy	Texaco
Deloitte	Orange UK	The Open University
Esso	Oxford University Press	Total Energies
Goodwood	Post Office	Trident Housing Association
Grand Metropolitan	PageGroup	Virgin Holidays
Gulf Oil	River Island	Vistage UK & US
Heineken UK	Roche Diabetes	Yell

“ Working with Nikki was transformational and helped improve resilience, create clarity, and provide tools to develop myself further. Nikki works at a deeper and more intuitive level than most coaches and consultants. Immensely valuable. ”

Paul Simpson, OBE Chief Executive Officer at CDP

Case Studies

Fear of presenting to instant gravitas

A senior software engineer working for a major financial institution was trying to improve his confidence during presentations. His voice would become very quiet, and he struggled to project confidence and credibility. His company had funded many courses for him that were helpful to a point, but none of them helped to address his quiet voice tone and lack of confidence. His breakthrough moment came when he identified a previously suppressed memory from when he was seven when his mother told him off. Whenever he was 'put on the spot' at work, he unwittingly responded as the humiliated seven-year-old. By working with his unconscious mind, this previously suppressed memory was uncovered, and when he processed the old fear, his breathing deepened, and his voice tone and pitch changed completely. He now finds it easy to speak out at meetings and express his point of view succinctly and passionately.

Silo mentality to collaborative

The financial director of a housing association appeared resistant and distant from his team. His toxic attitude was negatively impacting other senior leadership team members, who found him to be unapproachable and intimidating. His 'wall' had been created at 17 when he had been badly beaten up in a completely unprovoked attack. His self-confidence had been literally 'knocked out' of him. He still held the belief he formed at 17 – you can't trust anyone – so he appeared distant and wary. He visualised meeting his younger self. When he felt safe to explore what was behind his behaviour, he was able to acknowledge the impact of this event and understand that this belief was no longer relevant or appropriate to his life now. Recognising that the fear he felt was old fear enabled him to feel safe, and his protective wall disappeared. The entire leadership team noticed an immediate change in his attitude towards them.

Distant to approachable

Maureen, an HR director, had a reputation for being ruthless, intolerant, and tough. She had a clipped voice tone that caused her to appear cold and insensitive. Her working environment was male-orientated and full of people who exhibited strong driver-style behaviours. This caused her to close emotionally to protect herself. Maureen had experienced several dysfunctional relationships – a couple of ex-husbands and a former live-in boyfriend. Her new relationship had been brilliant initially, yet it was starting to feel toxic and destructive. Maureen saw that how she dealt with people at work, particularly men, was like how she dealt with her personal relationships. Because she had been repeatedly emotionally hurt, she put up her guard whenever she felt challenged or criticised. Her behaviour was tracked back to her first boyfriend, who suffered from manic depression and would frequently fly into an unprovoked rage. This cemented a belief that it wasn't safe to trust men. This realisation resulted in her becoming warmer and more approachable at work. She stopped avoiding difficult conversations.

“ More than ever, we've needed to find creative and different ways to be able to manage stress, anxiety, and the challenges we've had to live through. Nikki's work has developed in the most wonderfully, enlightening way throughout the years. It's an absolute joy to partner with Nikki, her approach is transformational, inspirational, ground-breaking!!! ”

Nebel Crowhurst, People & Culture Director, Roche

Procrastination to progression

William was a sales director for a global office supplies company who tended to procrastinate over decisions. In a fast-paced and challenging work environment, the slightest bit of extra pressure was causing emotional paralysis within. His self-esteem was continually being battered by his harsh critical self-talk that sounded like his late father who served in the police force. From an early age, he believed 'I'm not good enough' and rejected his true authentic self. His procrastination was caused by a part of him wanting to act and a part that held him back with self-doubt. He worked for a CEO with a low tolerance for mistakes and was quick to slash budgets at the expense of culture and engagement. William felt permanently afraid because he was continually triggered by his leader's similarity to his father. Rather than responding as a capable adult, the fearful little boy could not challenge or express his perspective. The key to William's transformation occurred when he saw that his father's behaviour was driven by fear.

Overwhelm to clarity and decisiveness!

An international pharmaceutical company had recently acquired a smaller competitor and was making several staff redundancies. The Operations Director felt extremely concerned about the livelihoods of the staff he was making redundant and was struggling with handling this aspect of his job role. He wasn't sleeping and was in a permanent state of anxiety. He was unable to think clearly and was overwhelmed by his job. His unconscious mind took him back to his first job, aged 16, working in a fireworks factory. He was involved in a massive explosion that broke his leg and killed his best friend. He had never processed this trauma that had been tormenting him for years. Immediately he began sleeping soundly, and his wife and daughter could not believe the change in him. At work, he showed compassion with how he handled the scheduled redundancy programme, and his anxieties about the process were appropriate for what he was doing. His ability to work under pressure improved; he reported having more clarity and certainty around decision-making.

Self-sabotage to self-confidence

Julie was seeking board-level progression work with a FTSE 100 company in the manufacturing sector. Despite being identified as having high potential, her career had stagnated, and her progression stalled at final interview stage. Concerns were raised about her enthusiasm and passion for the new role identified, and peers who were initially perceived as less able were being promoted before her. Once Julie felt safe enough to talk about her confusing emotional reaction, she identified feeling vulnerable when giving presentations. She 'saw' every future progression as having to deliver more presentations – even when this wasn't the case. When Julie understood what was blocking her, she enrolled on a presentation skills course and secured a promotion within five months.

Anxiety to peak performance

A Group IT director, John, had suffered a heart attack at the age of 44. He had been given the all-clear by his heart surgeon and was back at work. He felt permanently anxious that his heart might suddenly stop and kept nervously covering his heart with his hand. Both his parents had died young from heart failure, and he initially thought this was the root of his fear. Surprisingly, his fear stemmed back to an incident when he was a boy that was the cause of his fear. He recalled sitting in the front garden at six with his friends. They were chatting about death, how they would all die, and at what age. His friend decided that their house number would be the age of their death. John lived at house number 44 and had his heart attack at age 44. As a little boy, this conversation had completely traumatised him. His fear completely disappeared, and he is now on top of his physical and mental game.

“ Nikki’s approach is different to anything I’ve experienced before and the impact she has helped me to achieve and unlock is profound. The benefits I am experiencing personally and professionally are huge. I now see a lot of things differently and feel so energised by understanding myself better. ”

Ian Teagle, Director, PageGroup

Next steps

If you want to discuss more about the Leadership Breakthrough Programme, either for yourself or for specific leaders within your organisation, **book a FREE Discovery call**

If you want to receive four self-help suggestions to gently heal your emotional wounds **visit the Nikki J. Owen blog**



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