

MONICA *Stake*

# STORIES *&* COMPASSION

Looking at the workplace through different eyes



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When I read articles, LinkedIn posts or the news, focus is on what leadership needs to do more of for their employees. From topics covering how leaders should give feedback, how their behaviours or lack of behaviours are the cause of team issues, how a toxic culture is the responsibility of the leader and so on. I believe that we put a lot of ownership and responsibilities on leaders and sometimes forget that they are human and have their own life story going on.

In my view, workplace issues stem from the lack of awareness amongst leaders and employees. When we remain within our own paradigms and refuse to shift our behaviours and ways of thinking, we face challenges which can adversely affect ourselves and those around us.

These short stories are insights into the types of things which happen at work and how when leaders and managers can impact themselves and those around them. Some of the scenarios look at the negative effects of leadership behaviours whilst others give a more positive insight. At the end of each short story, we reflect on the scenario, share tips, notice what worked well so that we can all learn when ever in something similar.

These are general circumstances and not a reflection of real events. You may see some similarities to situations in your workplace or even notice behaviours which you are portraying. With a sense of awareness, there are ways to react to situations in ways which are more informed and consciousness even when things are going wrong.

In the words of George Bernard Shaw:

*“Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”*

# PROLOGUE

# STORY 1

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HOW AN ANGRY  
MARY DROVE  
HER STAFF TO DESPAIR



Sometimes we carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. We feel we are meant to be this way, the past experiences of failures, missed opportunities, lost loves to distant relationships.

Mary dreamed of being the best she could be in her field. As an aspiring student, she thrived in academia, had a great circle of friends and felt a sense of purpose.

Life shows us what we value most when we don't have those things anymore, when she listens to the song "Only know you've been high when you're feeling low, Only hate the road when you're missing home" it brings her to tears and feelings of melancholy envelope her mind and body.

You see, as life progressed, Mary experienced disappointments, let-downs, feelings of low self-worth and started to carry inner resentment, which she simply couldn't shift. She has sleepless nights, wakes up tired and goes to work each day having these feelings and thoughts of anger and frustration walking alongside her.

Mary has a great job, on the surface, she is successful, makes lots of money and manages a large global team. Within her lies those deep-seated feelings which impacts how she operates at work.

At work, her team respect her immensely as she is an expert in her field and is clear on what she requires from them. On the other hand, when she walks into the office, she creates a sense of fear amongst her staff, they are never sure what kind of mood she will be in. There have been many occasions when people are afraid to approach her and explain a work issue or even to ask for time off.

On one occasion, Mary asked her main team leaders to meet with her and she used this time to berate them for the things they were failing at, how productivity was not there, and that people were not coming to work early enough. Everyone remained silent and simply accepted the words been thrown at them. Why? They were afraid!

The team on the other hand felt they were doing it all they could, they were delivering results and felt too much was being demanded from them. Some has small families and felt that they could not come into work any earlier than they already were. They were afraid to speak up in the meetings and what they really wanted to say was:

*"I am burnt-out"*

*"My family life is being impacted by the amount of extra time I work"*

*"I have continuously met the demands on me and still have not been recognised through more money or promotions"*

*"I want to feel safe at work and I am not"*

*"We want to feel part of a team which is well-lead"*

All these phrases remained as thoughts, and no one said a word. In time, people found better opportunities and left. They felt safer resigning and moving onto new pastures than share their needs and feelings. The workplace did not promote a safe environment to share and express.

### **LET'S REFLECT**

*In this story, several themes emerge from lack of self-care by Mary, the failure to be a leader and the employer failing to act.*

*Mary the leader - based on what we have seen, she is stressed, suffers insomnia and has some emotional feelings which she cannot escape from.*

*This is where self-care is critical for individuals. She may have tried these things or felt that she had a handle on them.*

*Why was her work so important to her? She felt this is something she can control but when staff left, her control was lost as they found a way out.*

### **LET'S REFLECT ON WHAT MARY CAN DO FOR HERSELF:**

*1. Seek professional support for her insomnia - help from others*

*2. Have any difficult conversations which are not letting her move forward, if she cannot say them, write them down so that they can leave the mind and be put to paper - express feelings and journaling*

*3. Do things she enjoys - find joy in life*

*4. Spend time with people who nourish her - sense of belonging*

*5. Practice self-love through self-acceptance and compassion - being more self-aware*

### **LET'S REFLECT ON WHAT MARY CAN DO FOR HER EMPLOYEES:**

- 1. Learn the art of observation to understand others through their non-verbal cues - become an active listener and observer*
- 2. Become emotionally intelligent to temper the impact of her personal story onto others - build EI*
- 3. Share a little bit about herself - create a connection with employees*
- 4. Ask staff how they are through group and 1:1 meetings - build empathy*
- 5. Notice changes in staff behaviours - build empathy*

### **LET'S REFLECT ON WHAT EMPLOYERS CAN DO**

- 1. HR initiatives to check-in on staff - gather feedback, anonymous boxes, surveys, skip level meetings*
- 2. Support leaders through coaching, learning and awareness programs - Leadership initiatives*
- 3. Act upon feedback from exit interviews*
- 4. Run company-wide programs, townhalls, communications on employee wellbeing and self-care*

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# STORY 2

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HOW RUNNING LATE  
MADE RANI FORGET  
HER CORE VALUES  
AND BEHAVIOURS



When we are under stress and pressure, we all react in different ways. Some of us may be able to regulate ourselves whilst others simply feel overwhelmed and share their frustrations in not-so-positive ways.

Rani runs her own business and over the years has found herself chasing time. On paper, she knows that she needs to act to better manage herself, her work, and her life. In practice, it is a very different story.

Rani does everything in her company, she runs the day-to-day business, speaks to clients, delivers services, posts on social media whenever she can and at the same time generates sales.

Only last week, Rani found herself in a situation where she just couldn't handle so many spinning plates.

It was Wednesday morning, her normal routine is to spend time with her kids during breakfast before she sets off to drop them to school. On a regular day, this is a smooth process, lots of fun and good bonding time.

On this day, she woke up rushed (due to a late night), has a presentation to deliver in the late morning and was not fully aware of what is going on around her.

Rani's patience was wearing thin, so when the kids began to ask for things and scrapping between them, she felt herself slowly getting angry to the point where she raised her voice and shouted at them. She couldn't help it and shouted a lot louder than she thought his words would come out.

What happened next was something she never expected. Her son hugged her and said "it's ok mummy. When you feel angry, next time, say "I am feeling angry about what you are doing", it will help. This is what we learn during circle time at school so we can share our feelings".

In that moment, Rani realised that it had all gotten too much and it was time to make some changes. She never wanted to be in a situation where she shouts at her children again.



## **LET'S REFLECT ON WHAT RANI CAN DO FOR HERSELF:**

- 1. Take steps to manage time in terms of urgency and importance - learn tools and techniques*
- 2. Talk to someone who understands the life of an entrepreneur with whom he can express feelings, share ideas and have a sounding board - hire a coach*
- 3. Learn how to share and express feelings and emotions in healthy ways - self-expression*
- 4. Learn to understand his triggers and reactions - practice a form of mindfulness*
- 5. Take out me-time through hobbies and interests which resonate with him - create personal space and time*
- 6. Realise that he cannot do it all and seek help and support from others - delegation*
- 7. Prepare activities in advance, for example don't work until late if there is an early meeting - practice prioritisation*
- 8. Learn to better control the workload and pressures upon him - practice saying no*

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# STORY 3

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TONY FEELS STRESSED  
AND ANXIOUS WHEN  
DELIVERING DIFFICULT  
MESSAGES



Tony has worked for many companies, he is an expert engineer and specialises in renewable energy. Due to his expertise and experience, his employer has promoted him and now he is managing a large-scale team.

In the past, he has managed a handful of people but now, this is something very new and alien for him.

Tony prefers to get on with the job and be part of a team of experts. This new role requires him to become a leader, and this is something he has little experience in.

As part of this new role, his employer has sought an executive coach to work with him and invested in some leadership programs to help navigate these new responsibilities.

Tony has noticed that there are several employees who are lacking skills and experience to do their role. They slack off a lot and their productivity is low. Over the last few weeks, he has started to become irritated by the behaviours of two individuals. They are not prepared when coming to meetings and are oblivious to the impact they are having.

On some days, Tony leaves work feeling frustrated and resentful of these team members. In his head, he wishes he can express how he feels and even fire them, but he is not comfortable to share such messages with others. Giving negative feedback or having difficult conversations worry Tony as he feels he will fluster and will not be able to be as direct as he wishes to be.

During his next coaching session, Tony discusses the situation which is concerning him and admits that he finds difficult conversations extremely worrying and does not know where to start. During the session, the coach and coachee discuss the situation and Tony uses this time to get clarity on what he can do next and what it is about this scenario which is bothering him so much.

## LET'S REFLECT ON WHAT TONY CAN DO FOR HIMSELF:

- 1. Structure his thoughts, feelings and facts to make this professional - be fact-based rather than subjective*
- 2. Create a plan of action - have a strategy*
- 3. Practice the scenario - do role-play with a coach to deal with various reactions and scenarios which may emerge*
- 4. Mentally prepare for the conversation - Visualise the conversation*
- 5. Learn to be assertive - use strong language, body language and techniques which makes him feel strong and grounded*

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# STORY 4

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DAVID IS GETTING  
BURNT-OUT BY  
CHASING THE NEXT  
PROMOTION

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*“Here we go again. Another project away from home and intensive working hours. But but I know this project will get me the promotion and more money, I am sure of it. I have been told that if I do well with this client, then I can see my career escalate. Hold on...how many times have I heard this before?”*

David works for a prestigious organisation. He has been here since he graduated and the promise of getting to the highest ranks keeps him motivated to work hard and sacrifice his time, health, emotions and more.

David has seen his colleague get promoted over the last few years, so in his mind, it is just a matter of time. At this last year-end review, he was told that he needed to deliver more and bring in more business; this made him feel low and resentful.

Over the years, David has experienced so many personal life situations which have brought him down. His girlfriend left him because she wanted more of his time and commitment. His family continuously tell him to slow-down, his friends try to tell him to enjoy evening outs rather than rushing home to work.

One Friday evening, David managed to get home by 6pm, something he hadn't experienced in many years. He felt a sense of anxiety and fear overcome his mind and his body. He felt afraid and alone. This was his moment of epiphany, he realised that he was no longer in control of his life. He had allowed external factors dictate his path and he realised his current destination simply didn't make him happy.

### **LET'S REFLECT ON WHAT DAVID CAN DO FOR HIMSELF:**

- 1.Process the emotions and accept where he is right now - give himself the space to let things out*
- 2.Seek support to express, share and process his emotions - professional support from an expert*
- 3.Decide what he wants from his life at a professional and personal level - design his life by listing his dreams, desires and possibilities*
- 4.Discuss with his management or a trustworthy person at work - raise an awareness on how the work culture is impacting him*

*5. Do things which give him joy & pleasure - step away from everyday life to enjoy the moments*

*6. Review sources of stress and anxiety - look at what can and cannot be controlled and then make an action plan*

*7. Move towards self-care and reflection time rather than rush into new things and experiences - create space for himself*

### **LET'S REFLECT ON WHAT THE CAN EMPLOYER DO:**

This is not an uncommon situation, especially in specific professions. To avoid employees going through such experiences, employers can take a proactive approach to create psychological safety at work.

*1. Implement programs which focus on employee experiences and care - Employee Assistance programs (EAP), time-out sessions, open forums for staff to share experiences*

*2. Lead with compassion - senior leaders set the tone by operating in new ways, where they are open, compassionate, empathetic, and concerned*

*3. HR run initiatives to train people managers to recognise signs of burn-out, stress, overwhelm and general well-being - bring in experts to provide tools, methods and insights*

*4. Prioritise the wellbeing of your staff - learn to say no to client demands and give realistic timelines and manage expectations*

*5. Educate clients that your staff's wellbeing is key*

*6. Listen to what staff need and want - run focus groups, community events, support programs to learn more and connect with staff*

*7. Act - taking in information from staff is not enough, put things into place is key*



# STORY 5

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BOREDOM AT WORK  
LEADS TO APATHY –  
HOW A WHOLE TEAM  
RESIGNED IN THE  
SAME WEEK

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A bored employee will lose morale, lack a sense of purpose and become generally less productive.

When I am bored, I find myself becoming agitated and frustrated and do not enjoy *“working”*.

This can happen at times when there is little work to do or if the job is monotonous and lacks a challenge.

We are all different and work for different reasons. At the end of the day, we are trying to make a living and put food on the table.

We spend most of our lives at work, so if workplace experiences prevent a person leading a life which doesn't give purpose, this can lead to a wave of different emotions.

In our next short story, a team of highly skilled and experienced call centre handlers have been working in the job for on average 3 years. Over the last 12-months, they have felt restricted in their career growth. Each wants to do something different in their organisation.

They have many ideas on how they can improve the organisation, the call centre experiences and how they interact with clients. To date, any ideas have been set aside as management believe that growing the business is more important than improving how things are.

During weekly team meetings, if anyone shares an idea, it is heard, but nothing happens. Over the last few months, the team meetings lack positive communication, and the morale is low. The body language is closed and the energy in the meetings is non-existent.

One of the team members was approached by an ex-colleague to join a new organisation which was open to change and has a culture of collegiality. The opportunity requires multiple people to join. It did not take the team long to decide to sign new contracts and prepare to leave this company.

To quote Richard Branson, *"Clients do not come first. Employees come first. If you take care of your employees, they will take care of the clients."*

When this team was not put first, they took action to find something else, something new with the opportunity for something better.

Following their resignations, the management tried to persuade them to stay and made promises but by then it was too late. Their failure to pay attention, listen and act has cost them a core team who was contributing to the success of the company.

### **LET'S REFLECT ON WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE DIFFERENTLY:**

*1. Pay attention to the people who are closest to the customers, they know more about what is happening on the ground - listen to feedback, recommendations and ideas from employees*

*2. Be open to change and growth by listening to your people - be proactive in gathering insights and then take action to implement change*

*3. Review the organisation's culture and make decisions which may be difficult - change staff who are stifling and creating a toxic culture*

*4. Get clear on the culture you want to have in your company. Notice signs of a toxic culture and assess what's important to your vision and mission - review company's values vs. what is happening in real-life*

*5. Be prepared for attrition and staff turn-over - establish a clear succession plan as this not only prepares for the future, it means you are thinking about growing and developing your people*

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# STORY 6

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EMPATHY IN ACTION



In 2019, Jane made a decision with her husband to start a family. They explored various options and decided to undergo fertility treatment.

In her company, Jane is a well-liked and proactive employee. She is usually bubbly, organises events and brings a sense of joy to the workplace.

During Covid, Jane was the one who was keen to spend time with her colleagues online and ensured that activities were in place to keep the team engaged and supported. The team have been back in the office for the last year and back to normal working routines.

Over the last few months, Jane has become quiet, less animated in her mannerisms and behaviours. She is pleasant and kind, but somehow not her usual spritely self.

During a recent one-to-one meeting, her manager started the meeting by simply asking her how she was. He didn't speak about work and focused on giving the chance to share more about herself. He took the courage to say he has noticed that she is quieter than usual and that if she needs to talk or share, that he was there for her as was the company.

Jane felt a sense of emotions overcome her and saw this as an opportunity to express and share with her manager. She explained what she was going through, she explained the ups and downs of the emotional roller-coaster of the fertility world.

Her manager responded in a caring and compassionate way. He explained that he also had gone through something similar and understood her feelings. He asked how he can help and support her.

Jane was taken aback by him sharing his experiences and felt he understood her and her journey. She explained that she wanted to change her working hours and work from home more often as it would give her more time to relax before going to the clinics for various injections and blood tests. The manager was supportive of this and asked her to reach out when she needed any support from him or the company.

## LET'S REFLECT

1. Notice changes and behaviour differences in employees and ask them how they are doing - learn to get better at observation, looking at the verbal and non-verbal cues

2. Put yourself in the shoes of others to understand where they are coming from - learn to have empathy and show it through your words and actions

3. Offer support where possible, work with HR as and when needed - some companies provide leave and even funding for fertility treatment

4. Look at implementing organisation-wide programs focusing on various situations and scenarios from infertility, menopause, bereavement to diversity & inclusion - these can be driven by HR or outsourced to third party companies

5. Embed a culture where it is ok to share - this is an organisation-wide change where changes can be driven organically by training and developing managers to become better listeners, observers and attentive

6. Trust is what enables a person to feel safe to share, this comes from having psychological safety at work which needs to be driven by everyone in the company

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# STORY 7

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ONE YEAR'S WORTH  
OF WORK DELIVERED  
IN TWO MONTHS



When organisations go through huge change and transformation, this is a time of stress, turbulence, oblivious and flexibility. The amount of pressure on those implementing the change is huge and requires individuals to tap deep into themselves to ride out this time.

Eustress is a form of stress which drives us to achieve, to hit goals and targets and succeed. One characteristics of Eustress is that there is a beginning and end, in other words, the work will end and so will the stress. We thrive in such environment, we get a buzz on seeing things through and even enjoy the pressure because we know that when it is done, it is done.

In our next scenario a team of core leaders have been given a brief to set the strategy in place for an organisation within a very short space of time. They are a relatively new team and whilst trying to meet the needs of the company owners, they are getting to know each other too. This is a stressful situation at times and the opportunity build team dynamics and bonding is not available.

With the goal in mind, they work together on a continuous basis, from face-to-face meetings during the day to early morning and late-night calls, they create deliverables and each week prepare to deliver these to the board members.

At times there are differences of opinions and lack of clarity and direction, this creates stress and tension, yet, they persevere.

### **THERE ARE A NUMBER OF THINGS WHICH HAPPEN:**

-The day-to-day team who are working on the ground are kept in the dark and are left to fend for themselves

-This group becomes less patient with their teams and make requests which are unclear and incomplete, yet they expect the work to be delivered. This causes stress among the employees as they are unsure on what is expected of them

-They are surviving on very little sleep which makes them irritable and impatient

-On the days when they meet the business owners, they are given more work to do and turnaround within 12-24 hours, they feel like they are on a hamster wheel of never-ending pressure

-They consume delivery meals and find themselves unable to feel calm and settled

By the end of the two-months, the work has been approved and the implementation activities commence. The leaders are operating on negative energy and craving for a break. It is the first weekend in nearly a year that they have not needed to work.

They feel satisfied with what they have achieved and are reflective on the toll this time has taken.

### **LET'S REFLECT:**

*1. When employees are kept in the dark, trust is lost, and staff feel undervalued. In this case, even though such pieces of work are confidential, certain things can be delegated to the wider team - this helps grow people and also provides insight into the workload*

*2. Share updates with the wider team so they are aware and appreciate that is going on behind the scenes - set-out a communication plan and implement it, even simple email updates carry weight*

*3. Celebrate wins, whether it is a meeting that went well or an approval which was provided - enjoy the moment of the hard work you have put in*

*4. Recognise that staff have been waiting at the side-lines for you to be their manager - set time with them to explain what was happening and thank them for their patience and support*

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# STORY 8

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EMPATHY IN ACTION



I remember the feeling when our family dog passed away. The pain was and still is excruciating, this was made worse by Covid as we couldn't all say our goodbyes to him. I remember the video call in the last moments of his life, so many tears and piercing pains in the heart.

For anyone who is a pet lover will know the pain of saying goodbye. I remember calling my manager and explaining to her that a family member has passed away and that I couldn't come to the office.

In our next story, we go to Max who is a partner within a well-established professional services firm. Since Covid, he has shifted most of his time to working from home and has enjoyed this newfound work-life balance. His days start at the usual time but is saving a minimum of 2 hours each day in travel time. He has reconnected with his kids and takes his dogs on daily walks in chilled manner since he knows he doesn't need to rush for a train.

Max is fully present in all meetings and continues to lead his staff and manages his clients. He has recognised the pressure and stress that Covid has placed on those around him, he ensures that he is available to staff and has spearheaded meetings and communication events with staff to demonstrate support.

One morning, he noticed that one of his dogs Milo was not his usual self, he appeared tired and refused to eat his breakfast. When the kids tried to play with him, he didn't engage.

Max decided to book an appointment with the vet on an emergency basis. The vet explained that Milo who had been with them for over 12 years since he was a puppy was very unwell and didn't have long to live. This was heart wrenching for Max and he knew he had to share the news with his family.

Max sat in the car with Milo, they spoke, Max remembered the special moments Milo has played in their lives. He cried, held Milo close and prepared to drive back home.

After breaking the news to his family, they decided to spend the next few weeks together with Milo and make these the best times possible.

That week, Max was attending a meeting with his team members, he spent time to ask everyone how they were doing, some people explained that they were overworked, others talked about balancing home-schooling with working and one colleague spoke about a close family member losing their life due to Covid-complexities. Max listened with attention and care, he then did something he doesn't usually do, he shared what was happening in his life and how sad he was about Milo. Max explained that he will be working but on certain days, he would need to take Milo to the vet and spend time with his family.

When the time came, Max and his family spent a few days away from work and focused on themselves.

### **LET'S REFLECT ON THIS SCENARIO:**

*1. Max has demonstrated compassionate leadership towards his people as illustrated by regularly speaking to them during the pandemic. When he offered support and explained that he is available, he is showing that he cares, and he understands*

*2. By spending more time at home, Max has reconnected with his family and created a new sense of balance between his home and work-life. If we were to read between the lines, this is something he has not have the privilege of doing for quite a while. This means that when Milo was not well, he was able to be there in person to show support and go through the process together*

*3. Max has maintained on-going communication and relationships with his clients by ensuring his is staying close to them and communicating*

*4. Max showed vulnerability to his people, he was able to explain what happened to Milo and share a bit about his life outside of work. This created a bond between him and his team which creates trust and connection*

*5. By taking time out to focus on his family and Milo, Max was conscious in prioritizing during this difficult time. This demonstrates self-care and an awareness of needing to support his family.*

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# STORY 9

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MY STORY



All the stories above reflect a bit on my experiences in my own life either with me being directly impacted by them, witnessing such scenarios or wishing a scenario went the way it did in the story. By nature, I am a bit of an activist, so when I see things which seem unfair or unnecessary, I usually reflect on them to assess what can be done differently. I have worked for large banks, consulting firms, energy companies all the way through to IT functions in various companies – all have left a mark on me.

I have always been a hugely positive and optimistic person, so when the obstacles and challenges occur, my first reaction is to look for the best from it, to learn, grow and evolve. I take the lessons I've learnt through life as the strength to handle things, whether it is a missed flight, a difficult colleague to a moving to a land new where I had to start from scratch.

Early on in our careers, the confidence and ability to speak out may not be there, for me, I internally processed things as learning experiences. Where I valued a great manager, I liked the idea of taking their best traits and implement them. When I worked in a toxic environment, I learnt what was and was not good for me.

Just like the stories above show us, we are not just workers, parents, friends, siblings or any other roles we may have – we are holistic beings who are impacted by all that goes on around us. If we are not aware or tuned into the things around us, we may become overwhelmed, frustrated, resentful or simply out of balance.

My own journey to today comes from a place where I felt that I needed put others before myself, this could range from letting others pick the restaurant, not saying no, not speaking up in meetings, failing to talk about the things I wanted, all the way through to letting external factors lead the flow of my life. These may sound like simple things, but studies show that when we keep side-lining our own dreams and desires for others, we end up becoming out of balance and our views of the world get impacted.

Many people I speak to tell me about personal transformation journeys which they have been on and how they moved from a place of fear to a place of freedom. I too have been on a journey, and it was through personal development, becoming a coach, training to become a meditation teacher and working with clients to create big transformations that I understood the impact we can all make.

My experiences have given me a sense of belonging, personal understanding and the desire to introduce ways to support the corporate world – leaders and employees. I believe that when we are more aware and mindful in life, we can give the best of ourselves to us and others.

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The aim of these stories is not to paint a bleak impression of the world we live in. They have been created to show what can happen when we fail to pay attention and act.

There are so many themes which I wanted to share from diversity and inclusion, cultural awareness, the way we speak to others to how our biases impact our behaviours. I will keep these themes until next time.

I use my own methodology - EMPATHIC-R to work-through these themes and share tools and techniques on how to become more aware to understand ourselves and others - after all, if we care about ourselves, it will trickle into everything we do.

I hope that I have given you food for thought and I would love to hear more from you on your views and experiences.

I would like to thank you for downloading these stories of compassion and taking time to read them.

In the words of Rumi,

*"Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."*

*Thank you*