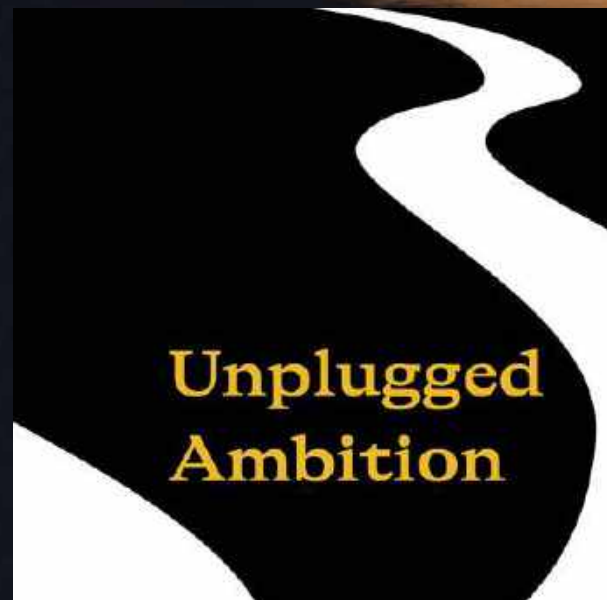


# How Much of This is Me?

Understanding our role in suffering in 'toxic' workplaces



## **Welcome to “How Much of This is Me?”**

**Working in a toxic environment can feel like walking through a cyclone.**

When every day disorients and uproots, it's natural to ask, “Is this all my fault?” or “Could I be handling things better?” This workbook was created to help you explore what's truly in your control and what isn't, to empower you with clarity rather than guilt.

We often hear, “Focus on what you can control,” and that's exactly what this workbook aims to help with. When we focus on our responses, behaviors and boundaries we regain our personal agency. We're no longer a passive victim but a force of nature in our own right.

This doesn't mean taking the blame for everything; toxic workplaces often encourage self-blame as a way to deflect from their own dysfunctions. Instead, this process is about ending the paralysis and cycling that results from being uncertain: how much of the problem is me.

If we can break through our patterns and create space for ourselves, as well as allowing space for others, then we can make things more tolerable. But as we find ourselves being a better version of ourselves, so we become more aware that certain things simply aren't our responsibility, no matter how much pressure you feel to fix them.

As you move through these exercises, give yourself space for honest reflection. This is your time to understand yourself and your environment more deeply so that you can make choices that align with your well-being.


You'll work through ten questions, with examples of others (from Marcus Aurelius to Maya Angelou) who have battled exactly the same existential questions that you are facing now.

1. **Am I in the wilderness of my own thoughts?**
2. **Who am I? Who am I pretending to be?**
3. **Am I too calm?**
4. **Is this fair?**
5. **Can planning a hijack prevent a hijack?**
6. **Am I really all alone out here?**
7. **Is happiness possible here?**
8. **How can I energise myself?**
9. **Am I making problems here?**
10. **How do I connect professionally when I'm losing faith in my profession?**

Worked through and given time, our guide should ease the worst feelings of anxiety, cognitive dissonance and guilt. This may also be your first concrete step to thinking optimically and with more precision about your life beyond your toxic role.

This is a beginner's guide to some of the ideas of emancipatory and alterative entrepreneurialism, produced for those still in the corporate world and feeling overwhelm. It is for the lost and stuck.



A person wearing a brown jacket and light-colored pants stands in a dark, grassy field at night. They are holding a flashlight that illuminates the ground in front of them. The background shows a dark sky with some clouds and distant lights on the horizon.

**Am I in the  
wilderness of  
my own  
thoughts?**

**"You have power over your mind; not outside events. Realise this, and you will find strength."**

### **Marcus Aurelius**

Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher, struggled constantly with the demands and chaos of leadership. Despite the weight of his responsibilities, he disciplined himself to write daily reflections, which later became known as Meditations. By putting his thoughts on paper, he could organize and distill his anxieties and insights, gaining clarity on his actions and grounding his emotions. Through this practice, Marcus Aurelius learned that by sorting through his thoughts, he could find calm and direction in an often turbulent world, focusing on what was within his control rather than being overwhelmed by external pressures.



**When things feel too much it is difficult to keep hold of the fact that “everything” is not the problem. A remarkably small number of tasks, peoples, situations are.**

**We stay in jobs that make us unhappy because, at some level, we know this: we know there are colleagues and parts of the job that we love, that give us joy and meaning.**

**Yet something is not right.**

**Overworked, we fail to isolate and pinpoint ‘the problem’.**

**This makes it difficult to ask for help, to make change ourselves, or to communicate our boundaries clearly.**

**Too busy in the day, and too relieved and exhausted when we finish work, we go into endurance mode and stop asking: what exactly is causing me unhappiness here?**

**Take it a day at a time with this exercise. Then take a week’s perspective on common themes.**

**It’s a clarity giver.**



## Exercise 1

**Goal:** Recognise the thought patterns you are stuck in.

**Exercise:** For a week, throughout the day, write down any thoughts you have about your job or work situation.

We aren't trying to capture your thoughts about doing the job, such as "I must file that report", or "that invoice needs checking," but your thoughts that are narratives on your experience, such as "this is so boring" or "oh there he goes again, contradicting himself".

Next to each thought, note the specific situation that triggered it and any related emotions.

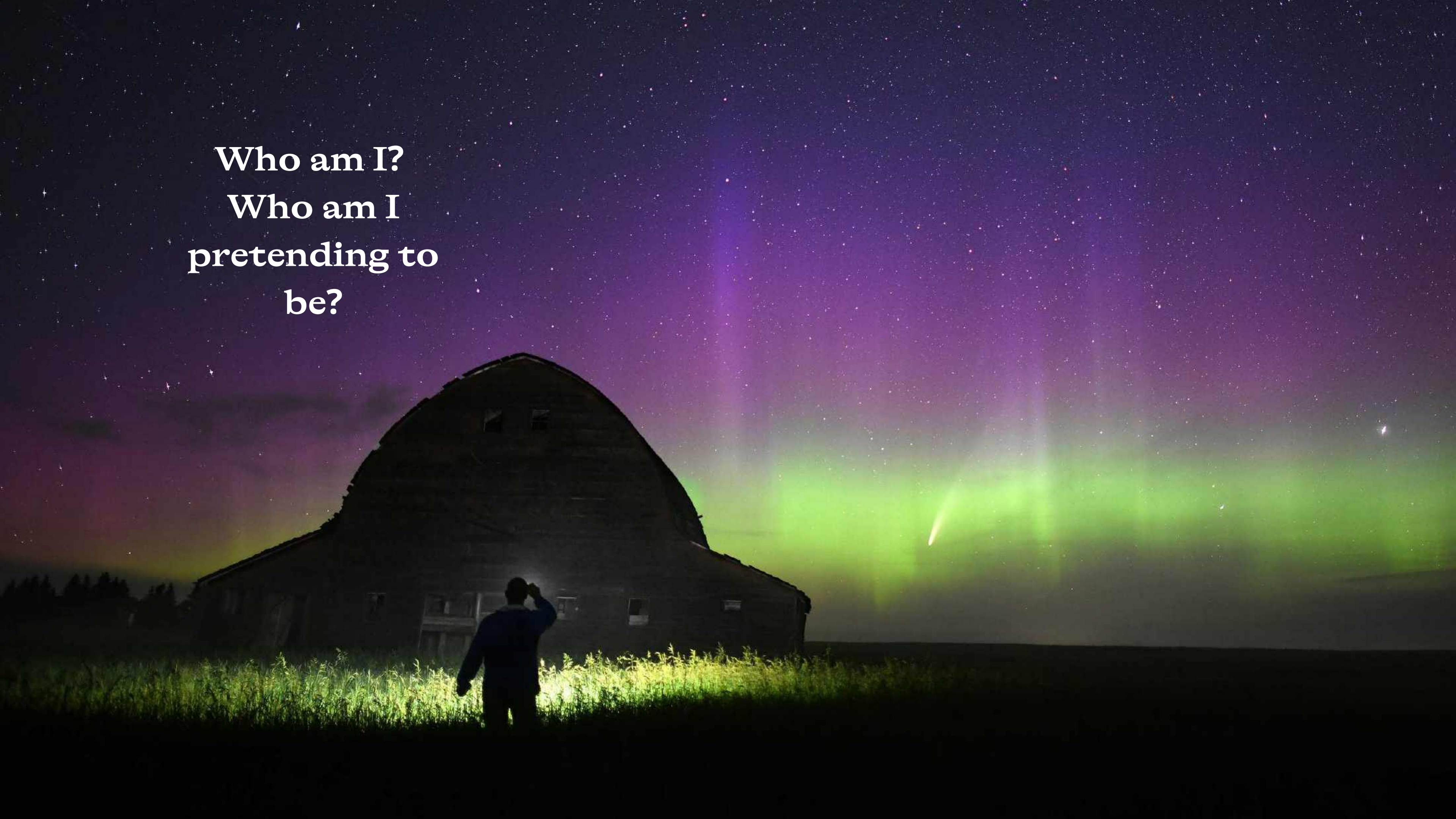
**To think about:** At the end of the week, see what patterns you can see repeating. These might be about individuals, situations, the time of day, or certain phrases or mantras you repeat to yourself.

As you go through the next week, greet your patterns like old friends: ah, there you are again.

Recognising our patterns and accepting them is the first step to more self-awareness. Also, by being better able to anticipate and work through our discomfort, we improve our ability to cope.



Who am I?  
Who am I  
pretending to  
be?





**"You have to decide who you are and force the world to deal with you, not with its idea of you."**

**James Baldwin**

Novelist, playwright and campaigner James Baldwin faced racial discrimination but refused to let others define him.

He encouraged people to create their own identity rather than letting societal expectations dictate who they should be.

**A lot of our issues with others would improve if we could only know and communicate: who am I really, what do I want, what am I good at, what am I not good at, what do I need from you?**

**Instead, we put on masks. We pretend from our first engagement with a company to be something we are not. We hide our flaws and inexperience, we pretend to not share the usual human weaknesses of insecurity, doubt of confusion. In doing so we set ourselves up for failure.**

**If you are struggling at work, could it be because those around you do not know who you are, and what you find difficult? And could that be because you do not let them see the real you?**

**We think that the answer to pressure is to mask more. It's not. Bringing more of our authentic selves to work (and losing the shame about what our current authentic self is) lets others get a handle on us: let's them help, and lowers expectations.**

**Pretending to be a unicorn is exhausting. Plus everyone actually sees that you're not a unicorn, you're just a IT professional prancing around with a toilet role tube on your head.**

**We cannot blame others for not seeing us, when we don't let them.**



## Exercise 2

**Goal:** Consider the impact that your work persona has on what others expect and demand from you

**Exercise:** Write a list of adjectives describing how you see yourself. Next write a list that describes the persona you portray at work. Then, list how you think colleagues might describe you. Compare the three lists and look for discrepancies.

**To Think About:** Do I feel I'm misunderstood? How can I bring more of my authentic self to the situation? Am I wearing a mask or adopting a persona? How would things change if I was more open about my needs? Ultimately: is my real self unhappy because I'm using an adopted persona to communicate with others at work?



**Am I too calm, though?**



**Quote: "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind."**

## **Mahatma Gandhi**

Mahatma Gandhi famously believed in non-violent resistance, yet he was deeply committed to confronting injustice head-on. Rather than avoiding conflict, Gandhi chose to manage it through what he called Satyagraha, or "truth force." When leading the Salt March in 1930, Gandhi didn't back down from direct opposition with British authorities; instead, he faced it calmly, creating space for dialogue and resistance without aggression. By engaging directly but peacefully with his opponents, he demonstrated that conflict doesn't have to be destructive—it can be an opportunity for deeper understanding, unity, and transformative change.

**Many who suffer in the workplace try to avoid conflict. Conflict increases their stress, and is perceived as high-risk: better to stay quiet, get along and not raise objections.**

**The problem with this is that it merely delays necessary conflict, and raises the stakes. It's the classic 'bottling up' of thoughts and feelings which can then erupt in outbursts or over-reaction.**

**Others under stress may default to a 'computer says no' stance: blocking, criticising or otherwise refusing to engage in work which they do not see value in or cannot add to their workload. They may be able to avoid conflict because of their seniority (no one dares argue back) or specialism, but they build relationships where colleagues try to work around them, or resent them...and become increasingly isolated and insecure.**

**We tend either to view conflict as threatening to our survival, or essential to it.**

**What we need to do is increase our range of behavioural options in conflict situations.**

**This begins with recognising conflict exists.**



## Exercise 3

**Goal:** Consider alternative actions in response to conflict.

**Exercise:** Recall a recent conflict at work. Write down what happened, how you responded and how others reacted. Then brainstorm two alternative ways you could have responded. Be careful to consider 'suppressed' or internalised conflicts, where you may not have disagreed publicly but felt internal resistance.

**To Think About:** Reflect on how different responses to conflict, specifically articulating objections and doubts, might have led to a different outcome. In attempting to avoid conflict in the moment, am I merely sowing the seeds for ongoing conflict? I refusing to engage am I causing additional problems? Can I redefine conflict as non-threatening?



Is This Fair?





**"You cannot own people. You cannot lock them in cages. What they need is a place where they can live as people should."**

**Eik Skaloe**

Eik Skaløe, a Danish folk musician and poet, saw injustice in the lack of freedom and opportunities for Denmark's marginalized communities. In the 1970s, as Denmark grew more urbanized and rules around property tightened, Skaløe and other like-minded individuals recognized the city's abandoned military barracks as an opportunity to build something different: a self-governing commune, free from the bureaucratic constraints of the mainstream society around them. This experiment eventually became known as Freetown Christiania, a neighborhood in Copenhagen that still exists today as a hub of creativity, shared resources, and community-led governance.



**Only people exist.**

**There are no systems, cultures, norms or rules without people. Everything we think of as culture or society or work is just...people interacting, people trying to get their own needs met.**

**And a lot of people in power, run things not for the benefit of the business or even their own economic gain, but because they are acting out childhood traumas that they have never healed.**

**Once I understood this, work became a different experience for me.**

**Compassionate responses reduce our anger, frustration and sense of personal wounding: can you see in the injustices in your workplace the pained and imperfect attempts of other humans to get their unfulfilled needs met?**

**Can you even within overarching conditions of injustice, create clusters of support. Can you create alternatives?**



## Exercise 4

**Goal:** Evaluate whether workplace norms and policies are inherently fair.

**Exercise:** Identify three workplace policies or “unspoken rules” that often frustrate you. Write down why they feel unfair, and consider whether they’re fairly applied across the board or if there are signs of favoritism or inconsistency.

**To Think About:** Are these rules in place for productivity, control or due to mismanagement? Who benefits or suffers from these policies? Whose psychological or other needs are being favoured by these rules?

Injustice is not your fault. Acceptance of injustice is not a merit. How can you resist and model alternatives?



A low-angle photograph of a street lamp at night. The lamp is illuminated, casting a warm glow. The background is a dark blue night sky with falling snowflakes. In the foreground, there are branches of a tree heavily laden with snow, partially obscuring the lamp. The overall scene is serene and wintry.

Can planning a hijack prevent a hijack?



**"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response."**

**-Viktor Frankl**

Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, endured unimaginable hardships in concentration camps. He discovered that by understanding his own emotional triggers - moments of despair or resentment - he could prepare himself mentally and emotionally to face them. This awareness allowed him to maintain his sense of purpose, helping others survive by teaching them to recognize their own responses to hardship.

**Some of you reading will be highly reactive...you might be a highly sensitive person, be an emotionally abundant person, or for other reasons naturally respond in extravagant ways to stressors (crying, shouting, snapping). Often guilt and shame follow these outbursts because whilst our external reaction was authentic, it damaged relationships.**

**Others will do the opposite...you will react smilingly and graciously at work ..then you go home and cogitate, stress and play out scenarios. You mask your true feelings, meaning those who work with you will not understand your internal response to their behaviour or see any motivation to change.**

**Most stress triggers are recurring. This might be frustrating, but it means we can predict them. And if we can predict them, then we can plan our responses in advance.**

**This exercise is about identifying and predicting triggers, so you can feel more confident in the moment expressing, rather than suppressing, your emotional reaction, but in proportional ways.**

## Exercise 5

**Goal:** Track and evaluate immediate reactions to daily stress triggers.

**Exercise:** Draw a chart with three columns: “Trigger,” “Reaction” and “Alternative Reaction.” For each stressor you encounter, note how you reacted (this might be an external or internal reaction) and then consider other responses.

**To Think About:** How often are my reactions intense or impulsive? Could I benefit from pausing before reacting? Am I suppressing my reactions in the workplace but struggling with unresolved emotions after work? How can predicting trigger occurrence help me react authentically but in a proportional way?



Am I really all alone out here?



**"I decided I'd try to hold out my hand even if it would be slapped back."**

**Daryl Davis**

Daryl Davis, a Black American musician, chose to pursue an unthinkable mission: to understand and build relationships with members of the Ku Klux Klan. His journey began with a question that haunted him: "How can you hate me when you don't even know me?" Despite the danger, Davis resolved to sit down with Klan members one-on-one, genuinely listening to them and engaging in dialogue. He approached these conversations not with anger or resentment, but with a determination to see each person as an individual beyond the stereotypes and ingrained prejudice.

Over time, Davis developed friendships with several Klan members, many of whom began questioning their beliefs. He never asked them to leave the Klan, but through their discussions over 200 individuals ultimately abandoned the organization, even giving Davis their robes as symbols of leaving hatred behind.



**Feeling pulled in too many directions, office politics, competing priorities, lack of clarity as to our role purpose or workload...all of these are major stressors.**

**It can lead us to create internal maps of enemies, saboteurs and heroes, in which colleagues are assigned a set role, and you interpret their behaviour according to a fixed idea of their motivations and 'role' in your narrative, rather than responding to the facts. Opportunities for alliance are missed. Trust is misplaced.**

**We start adopting maladaptive behaviours: manipulation, fawning, favouritism, undermining, circumventing as we become, in our anxiety, more and more focused on the characters in our work story and less and less able to reside in the realm of reality.**

**Counterintuitively, this can leave you isolated.**

**This exercise is about regaining a sense of agency over dynamics, examining broader dynamics in your workplace, and visually mapping out where you sit and where you would like to sit.**

**Simply, it offers a challenge and alternative to your current (perhaps subconscious) map of workplace relationships.**

## Exercise 6

**Goal:** Visualize interpersonal dynamics and understand how power and influence are distributed.

**Exercise:** Draw a diagram of your workplace, marking people you interact with regularly. Use arrows to show who frequently exerts influence on whom and who creates tension. This will help you see patterns of influence, allies and potential stress sources.

**To Think About:** Am I caught between influential groups? Where can I seek support or balance to improve my experience? Can I 'move' myself within this dynamic map to strengthen my sense of belonging, reduce isolation and minimise conflicting demands or norms?





Is happiness possible here?



**"Striving for peace and working toward the welfare of mankind brings more enduring satisfaction than anything else."**

### **Bertha von Sutter**

Bertha von Suttner was a countess with everything a woman of her time might have desired: wealth, social standing, beauty and wit. But despite her place in society, von Suttner was increasingly troubled by the injustices and inequalities she saw, especially the devastation of war.

Driven by a sense that her true purpose lay beyond the comfort of her social position, she decided to give it all up. She became one of Europe's most influential peace activists. Her tireless advocacy for peace helped inspire Alfred Nobel to create the Nobel Peace Prize, which she later won.. Her decision to forsake wealth and a life of privilege in favor of activism changed the course of her life and the lives of others.



**A sense of futility sets in when we realise that no matter how hard we try, we will never achieve anything important to us personally. This might be because our organisation exists for an ultimate purpose which we do not relate to (typically, making money for investors), or because our job role does not allow us to use our skills fully, or for other reasons.**

**In such contexts, our goal becomes only the temporary abeyance of fear, stress and failure. All is stick. There is no carrot.**

**This is the reason for Unplugged Ambition. Our community was formed because too many people are wasting their talents and energies in pursuit of goals which have no meaning to them, unable to use their passions and skills to their full effect.**

**But within our community, there is a continuum. And many are still gaining skills in the workplace (enabling them in the future to successfully build their own initiatives) or have other benefits such as training whereby continuing in the corporate world has long-term purpose.**

**This exercise can help you stop the should-I-stay-or-should-I-go conversation, which is so draining.**

## Exercise 6

**These themes are much more fully explored in the Skills and Passion Audit Handbook, available to all members.**

**Goal:** Clarify your personal and professional goals and assess how they align with your current role

**Exercise:** List your short- and long-term goals. Then, assess whether your current role offers a path toward these goals.

**For you to think about:** Are my personal goals made more or less achievable if I continue within this role, this organisation, this profession, this industry?

What self-talk am I using to justify my decision to stay?

What am I sacrificing for what gain?





How can I energise  
myself?



**"You can't use up creativity. The more you use,  
the more you have."**

**Maya Angelou**

Maya Angelou turned to writing and performing during periods of self-doubt and exhaustion. Her creative practices weren't merely expressions of resilience; they were acts of renewal that restored her energy, allowing her to continue her advocacy and literary contributions with strength.



**They pay you for a reason. The reason is: nobody would do it for free. That's right: work sucks.**

**But once we're comfortable in a job, we can start resenting certain tasks or people.**

**What energizes and what drains us is sometimes related to natural preferences and the ease with which we can complete tasks, but often it is also linked to the stories we tell ourselves.**

**What drains us isn't the task, but the emotional burden of our reaction to the task.**

**It's only reasonable that some even many parts of your job will be things you would not do willingly. Managing your inner narrative here, becomes important as we focus on what drives us.**

**Creative practice beyond work significantly increases our resilience to draining and repetitive tasks in work.**

## Exercise 8

- **Goal:** Counter draining people and tasks with energising practices
- **Exercise:** At the end of each day, note tasks or interactions that were energizing or draining. After a week, look for patterns: what drains you?
- **To Think About:** Are there adjustments I can make in my day? How can I build in energizing tasks or interactions to my day? How can I schedule my day to meet my energetic needs, and not merely the task needs? How can I manage my own energy levels better? What can I give myself? For one week start a creative practice; observe how your energy at work is impacted.



A man with short brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a white short-sleeved button-down shirt, is looking directly at the camera. He is holding a flashlight in his right hand, which is turned on, casting a bright white light. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man's face and the shirt. The text "Am I Causing Problems Here?" is overlaid on the right side of the image in a white, serif font.

**Am I Causing Problems Here?**

**“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”**

**Leo Tolstoy**

Leo Tolstoy, came to a point in his life where he questioned the meaning of his existence and his role in society. This led him to a period of deep self-examination, in which he realised that genuine social change could only begin with personal transformation. His journey of inner change influenced not only his writing but also his commitment to nonviolence and service to others.



**You're not perfect. Forgive yourself for that.**

**Still it's likely that people around you see how you author your own misery through your communication style, task management or in other ways.**

**You could be happier. You choose not to be. Perhaps you're waiting for the world to change. You might have to wait a while.**

**As we get older, we'll endure more and more discomfort rather than change. The brain's plasticity reduces from our late 20s and we have 'social proof' in our job title or seniority that 'we know what we're doing'. We overestimate the impact that reading a self-help book has had on how we interact with those around us. Other people are the problem, we tell ourselves. We almost believe it.**

**Relationships are systems: change your behaviour, and those around you will change too.**

**You can change an experience from bad to good by focusing on what you can control: your words and actions and your interactions with others.**

## Exercise 9

**Goal:** Take responsibility for unhelpful behaviors.

**Exercise:** Ask as many people at work as possible (20 is a good number): what's one thing you'd advise me to do less of? Why? Look at common themes. Consider how people might be suggesting you cause problems for yourself, unwittingly. Resist the temptation to resist!

**Prompt Questions:** Try an experiment and take one or two pieces of feedback into the next week. Are you able to identify any concrete examples of where a change in your behaviour has led to a change in the behaviour of others?



How do I connect professionally when I am losing faith in my profession?



**“Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.”**

### **Fred Rogers**

Fred Rogers built his career on creating a compassionate network of friends, colleagues, and mentors who shared his vision for educating children with kindness. By intentionally connecting with others who believed in empathy and sincerity, he cultivated a strong support system that helped him bring thoughtful programming to life and navigate the competitive media landscape with integrity.



**People pleasing and isolation go hand in hand. It's a sad irony that the more we try and perform, the lonelier we feel.**

**As disillusionment grows with your role, colleagues, company and perhaps the entire corporate world and its values, so connecting authentically becomes more problematic. You're aware that you're starting to look negative, combative, withdrawn or just plain 'weird'.**

**Isolation not only increases our suffering but makes it harder to get the job done. It's a vicious cycle.**

**If we are truly contemplating change, and dedicating our energies and talents towards meaningful goals, then it is unlikely we will meet our kindred spirits, fellow travellers or allies in the workplace.**

**Looking for support in the wrong places is a brilliant way to stay lost and stuck.**

**Time to find your tribe.**



## Exercise 10

- **Goal:** Remodel your circle of influence
- **Exercise:** Write down three colleagues who make you feel supported and three who typically contribute to your stress. For each person, identify *why* they have that effect on you. Consider ways to strengthen supportive relationships and set boundaries with those who cause stress.
- **To Think About:** Outside of work, how can I build connections with people who see the world the way I do?



A stage scene with a large, bright blue spotlight shining from the top right corner. Several smaller spotlights in various colors (blue, green, purple) are scattered across the stage, creating a dramatic atmosphere. The background is dark, and the overall lighting is a mix of cool tones.

**Where do I go from here?**



It's up to you





**Unplugged Ambition is a community dedicated to supporting business professionals looking to use their passion, energies and talents to build more meaningful lives and careers.**

**Please join us: we're an inspiring bunch**

**If not, but you've found value in this guide, please consider donating to support our work using this link:**

**<https://unpluggedambition.ghost.io/#/portal/support>**

**All funds raised go into the promotion of our work and resources so as many as possible can benefit.**

**Thank you.**