

# AM I LIMITING MY OWN REALITY?

**The formative years. From birth to 12 years old; where you gain a sense of self, independence and understanding of who you are and where your talents lie. They are some of our most important years because, while from this point on you continue to learn and develop, it is by this age that your values are set based on your experiences of the world, parenting style, schooling and interaction with others. Once values are set it becomes very difficult to adapt or fundamentally alter what you stand for.**

**And so a balancing act begins – the fight to stay true to your sense of self, countered with the demands and influence of external pressures which challenge your belief system. Some people invest a considerable amount of time, effort and resource into staying true to who they are, remaining absolutely clear on how they will sustainably live their lives.**

**Though for many, this battle continues on throughout their careers until one day a small chip in the armour appears. Losing out on a promotion, relationship breakdown, long-term illness or redundancy perhaps. And at that point one of two things occurs. The individual wobbles, reflects, though continues on until that crack gets bigger and bigger. Or, and as was the case for one public sector director, you realise things need to change.**

**“I had recently applied for a more senior role and not got it. It wasn't so much the not getting the role which was the issue. Of course it hurt not getting it, but it hurt more because it was at that point I realised too much of my identity was tied up with the expectations of others and the organisation's expectations, rather than being an authentic sense of myself.”**



## THE MID-LIFE CRISIS?

This feeling of loss is not uncommon. Some define it as an awakening, others a mid-life crisis. Though the same symptoms apply; a lack of being true to who you are creates an unsustainable way of living and working. As the cracks appear this manifests in many ways including stress, anger, fear, illness, and in the worst case, complete burnout.

And so I embarked on a new path, and new work within myself.  
I'm absolutely sure now that I'm not willing to give up on my sense of self again."

But why does it occur? In our experience, people who find themselves at this 'crisis' point are there as a result of two reasons. First, the organisation they are working for has a very strong belief system and clear expectations in terms of logic and rightness. There is a consciousness which demands a way of being, for example, good looks like this; the behaviours we admire are these; and no that's not the way to do things here. Over time, individuals who are not aligned to this way of thinking, begin to absorb a set of alternative ways which then conflict against their own values.

Second, after the formative years, very few people have the motivation to inquire into who they truly are, how they understand their self and how that translates through their daily lives.

"If you combine the presence of expectations and cultural norms with the fact that very few people reflect on where they've come from and where they are now; then it's easy to understand how people end up doing things and behaving in ways which are not necessarily aligned to who they really are."

At this point we have a choice. Continue as we are and try to lead small change from the periphery as a challenger; choose to be a different person in that organisation, or find an alternative organisation which is more aligned with your way of thinking.

I deliberately sought support from someone outside of my sector in order to re-establish a more authentic sense of self."

"I realised I couldn't go on like this, and didn't want to. I needed fundamental change."



## BROADENING YOUR REALITY

In this situation, the style of coaching required is very different. Rather than focus on performance, measures and the transactional elements of a role; to achieve a deep understanding and re-connection with your sense of self, the coaching must focus on the whole person – holding up a mirror and help you to question ‘what if?’

“I knew I wanted someone who wouldn’t approach this from a classic business coaching perspective and so I did some research and slowly became aware of the Gestalt approach which Khurshed [Dehnugara, Partner at Relume] has been trained in. I liked this approach because it paid attention to the whole person.

We initially agreed to eight coaching sessions over one year, including participation in the five-day residential Challenger Week. After this we agreed to three more, spread over 12 months.”

Initially the priority must be clarity around what the individual wants to achieve; outlining a number of shifts that would, combined, create the transformation desired. In our example, this was a shift from feeling that the individual had lost a sense of independence within the organisation for whom they were working, to a point where they were operating authentically from a more sustainable sense of self; while still being aligned professionally within the business.

“It was hard work. I needed to do some fundamental reflection and contemplation. And when you have someone play back to you what you’re saying, helping you see what possibilities lie beyond your understanding of the world and then help you push that thinking, it’s a really quite challenging place to be.”

“I wanted help with re-establishing the psychological contract between myself and my work. I needed to reset that relationship in a way which felt more sustainable for me.”



“Khurshed wasn’t particularly bothered about the context – it was just another organisation. He was more willing to go with me where I wanted to go in terms of my own sense of self. My biggest challenge was sustaining myself when leading change. Not simply representing a corporate position, but trying to be the change. That took a lot out of me. I knew that if I wanted to continue to do this, and at bigger scale, I needed a better way to of ‘being’ in these situations.

“Over the first few sessions, but in particular the Challenger Week, I began to get more of a sense of not just a sympathetic understanding of what I had been going through, but a way of being different.

“I wouldn’t call it a solution, but rather a different way of being which could sustain me better in that world. At that moment it began to make sense to me – integrating my sense of self and my work. It felt like putting on a comfortable piece of clothing. That I was in the right place and being introduced to ways of thinking and understanding and being aligned with what I knew I wanted.

The conversation was fundamentally about to what extent am I limiting or choosing to construct my reality.”

## A PROFOUND TRANSFORMATION

The shift from one reality into another can be an incredibly profound experience. People who have been through this process often find themselves questioning their purpose – why they are here. Not as a mother, father, partner, sibling, friend, but what their fundamental reason for living is. What will they leave to this world? As a result of this deep contemplation, attitudes towards work and where energies should be spent are often changed.

“For me two things came out which were particularly significant. First was the introduction of regular contemplative practice, which I’ve sustained since. I knew I needed to improve my capability to access to my own emotions, in order to increase my awareness of other’s emotions.

“Second, I decided to put that more authentic version of me more fully in service of my work. I did some different things, some of which felt risky when compared to our usual ways of working, but which at the same time I knew were better approaches and which used a wider range of ‘me’. Ironically, those more novel approaches got great feedback – what had really stopped me doing this before? Probably just my relationship with myself.”

Those who are successful in adapting attitude and thinking often conduct themselves in a new sustainable way; achieving purpose in a more authentic manner. For some this means moving into a new career, business or role. Others, like our example, widen their remit to shift their efforts into areas which offer greater fulfilment and make better use of their energies.

I won’t go back to the state I was in before the shift.”

“How I work now is fundamentally different because of a journey that began with Relume and has been supported throughout by them. I can achieve my purpose in a way which is more authentic to me.”