

We Need To Start Talking About Failure At Work (And Stop Crying In The Bathrooms)

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We live in the age of the overshare. It's now become as [popular to post about our struggles](#) as it is our Valencia-filtered Good Times. Scrolling through Instagram, trigger warnings abound. My friends and followers are [talking about depression](#), periods, terminal illness, break-ups, [menopause](#), eating disorders, miscarriages. It makes for eclectic consumption: Latte art! Aleppo! The bridesmaids! Bipolar! Cocktails! Cancer! But something I don't see very often is anyone posting [with candour about their careers](#).

A few years ago, [I had a high-profile job](#) as the deputy editor of a women's magazine. I was made acting editor-in-chief when my boss resigned – meaning I was in charge until a new leader was appointed. I applied, as did a number of other people, and felt that as I was doing a decent job of holding the fort, I might be in with a shot of getting what would have been my dream role. Throughout the process, I was honest with people internally and externally about [the fact that I was applying](#). I told them when my big presentation was, asked for advice, and shared thoughts on what my vision for the magazine would have been – which was all seen as quite unusual.

But why? I felt that my colleagues were justifiably interested [in who their next boss](#) was going to be. And while I couldn't provide much insight into the decision-making taking place

behind closed doors on the executive floor, I could at least offer the reassurance of being open about my own experience.

At the same time, I've always felt passionately that as the author of my own narrative I have the right to choose when, how, and to whom I tell my story. Other people might choose not to tell their stories in the same way, preferring privacy, and that's fine. I respect that. And I do appreciate that maybe in this case, other people applying for the job might well have felt there wasn't space for them to be as honest as me, even if they'd wanted to, [because it could have created a perceived rivalry](#) that wouldn't have been helpful to anyone. If I wasn't already doing the job while applying for the job, I wouldn't have been so open about it for this reason. Being honest about your feelings should never be at the expense of others'. However, my concern is that we continue to perpetuate the idea that in the world of work, honesty and [openness is equated with unprofessionalism](#). This is ultimately limiting for everyone.

When I didn't get the job, I took some time to process my feelings: disappointment, sadness, frustration, anxiety about what would happen now. And then, because I knew that a lot of people in my industry followed me, I posted about it on Instagram. I would rather they heard it directly from me than on the industry grapevine. Again, I told the truth: I'd wanted the job, I'd worked hard for it, I was disappointed, but I'd move on. It didn't feel like a big deal, but yes, part of me was worried that owning up to my professional failure in this way could make people think less of me. But it seemed to have the opposite effect. My phone started pinging with DMs from people telling me how 'brave' I was, and how refreshing it was to see [someone publicly admit to wanting a job they didn't get](#).

Part of this is that, for all our openness about many aspects of our lives, acknowledging an unfulfilled desire of any kind is still associated with so much shame. Things are improving – it's becoming more and more common [for women to openly admit to wanting a baby](#), or wanting a partner, for example – but in regard to our professional lives, honesty remains taboo.

Yet speaking out about such things can lessen the insidious effects of shame – something that festers and multiplies in the dark. It strikes me as sad, then, that we are less compelled to share our experiences [of wanting and not getting something in our professional lives](#), be it a pay rise, a promotion or a new job. We spend the majority of our waking hours at work and yet we are expected to keep our emotions and desires contained, neatly packaged up, only to be opened at weekends or after 6pm. If we removed the emotional labour of having to constantly moderate ourselves in this way, we might find we had [more energy to devote to our actual work](#).

Where is this reticence coming from? The reality is, the arena of work continues to be ruled by men. All of our ideas about professionalism [come heavy with the weight of patriarchy](#), of being women in a man's world and battling to achieve within it. But now is the time to start gently challenging all the small moments of emotional suppression that we encounter in this space.

Of course, it's often the perhaps-justified fear of losing our job that stops us from talking honestly with our colleagues or leaders. And it's this same fear that produces a shiftiness around exploring our next career move or acknowledging that we are considering our options. We have to pretend we're dedicated for life to the job we are in currently. Sometimes it can feel like we're all playing the same imaginary game at

work. So, we fake doctor's appointments to go to job interviews, sheepishly scurrying into the [office at 11am in our smartest outfit](#). Colleagues might raise eyebrows – or trade secretive WhatsApps – but it feels inconceivable that anyone would actually say, 'Yes, I've just been out interviewing for a different job, I'll let you know when I hear anything.' Imagine!

But what would happen if we did – if all of us, from management to junior staff, were more open about the realities of our working lives? What would happen if we told our colleagues [that we'd been looked over for a promotion](#), or that we'd felt attacked in a meeting or were really nervous about a presentation? What if we sent an all-company email saying we had been made redundant rather than were 'moving on to pastures new'? It would be disruptive, for sure, but would it, in the long run, mean we were happier and more able to be our authentic selves at work? I believe so.

[There is a soft power in being honest](#), yet always measured and thoughtful, in the way we present ourselves and communicate with co-workers. I believe that as long as we keep meeting room doors shut, blinds pulled, have whispered conversations in corridors, cry in toilet cubicles and send secret Slack messages moaning about management, we remain limited by an alpha-male idea of how we must be at work. Frankly, it's as redundant as the fax machine. Let's ditch it.