



'I don't know what I'm doing': How to have that conversation at work

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Friday 29 October 2021

Workshops and coaching sessions tell us that people sometimes have the feeling that they don't know what they are doing at work. The webinar looked at four scenarios where a person might have that feeling and gave suggestions for actions. The scenarios are:

1. When you make a change – a new role
2. When things change around you – a new system or way of working is introduced
3. When you don't know what you are doing – and this leads to mistakes
4. When you're having a career crisis – I don't what I'm doing in this role at this organisation

1. When you make a change – a new role

Applying for and getting a new role should be cause for celebration. You saw an opportunity, you went for it, other people recognised what you have to offer, and you got the job.

But once the endorphin rush of success subsides, imposter syndrome kicks in. This syndrome has been well-documented, including by Harold Hillman in *The Imposter Syndrome: Becoming an Authentic Leader*. He states it is 'partial to people who impose pressure on themselves to be perfect, thereby limiting themselves by their unwillingness to learn and by missing opportunities to be genuine and authentic people.'

Those in the grip of imposter syndrome are not only burdened by the fear that they don't know what they are doing, they are doubly burdened by the fear that other people will find out.

Hillman offers ten strategies for beating imposter syndrome. Here are three that are useful to remember when you think you don't know what you are doing at work.

- Imperfection is the norm – truly, nobody is perfect
- Grey is larger than black and white – you will always be dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty
- Most problems are managed rather than solved – accept that issues will ebb and flow, and few can be neatly wrapped up.



Judy Robertson writes about imposter syndrome in academia. Her advice includes an excellent warning on what to avoid: responding to imposter syndrome by working harder and longer. Instead, remind yourself of the facts, talk to yourself kindly, and find social support. Robertson also has advice for managers: make sure your team know you value their work.

Actions you can take

- Start with a reality check. How long have you been in the role? Training Industry Quarterly suggests full productivity in a role may take up to 24 months. How far into the role are you? Think back to when you started your previous role: How long was it before you felt competent? What are your patterns of behaviour in new situations?
 - ◊ Read your application letter and CV – what growth opportunities were you looking for in the role? What did you bring to the role?
 - ◊ Read your position description – where are your strengths in the role? Where do you have least experience?
- Own your successes. What have you contributed? What positive feedback have you had? Where are you comfortable?
- Now, narrow the focus to identify the times when you felt you didn't know what you were doing. Your goal is to be specific about when it happens and what impact it has on you.
 - ◊ Reflect on the past week of work: When do you feel lost? How confident are you with systems and processes? What induction have you had in this role? What relationships have you been able to establish?
- Decide who you need to talk to – it could be an induction buddy, a colleague, or your manager. Is this about getting more training, sharing experience, or seeking reassurance? Start with your positives, and you may find the reassurance comes without you needing to ask for it.

2. When things change around you – a new system or way of working is introduced

You used to feel competent and confident, and then there was a system or process change. One week you feel you know what you are doing, and the next you don't. You could take a linear or a conceptual approach to addressing this.

A linear approach

Sometimes a system change feels like a barrier to being able to do the things you used to take for granted. You are still expected to achieve the same outcomes, but your ability to deliver is hampered by change. One common example is the way you create, store and retrieve documents. At The Training Practice, the pandemic meant an overnight pivot from live facilitation to doing everything online. And it was hard.

We often use the ADKAR model of change from Prosci. It suggests people follow the line from awareness, to desire, to knowledge, to ability, and getting reinforcement for change.

Have you engaged with the change roll-out? Did you ask questions about the reason for the change? Have you taken advantage of opportunities to learn the new system or process? Have you been to the workshop, got the desktop guides? Have you asked someone to be your buddy?



Actions you can take

- Focus on what you want to achieve, not how you are going to achieve it.
- Find out what meetings, trainings, or seminars could help you learn. Be present and ask questions.
- Talk to your manager – find out where they want you to focus your energy.

A conceptual approach

This conceptual response comes from April Rinne's *Flux: 8 Superpowers for Thriving in Constant Change*.



Rinne is a futurist. Her book is a self-help guide for mindset shifts for times of change and uncertainty. She uses the word 'flux' to capture the essence of such times. She's identified eight superpowers for flux, two seem particularly relevant here: Get lost & let go of the future.

Get lost When change happens at work, Rinne suggests getting lost as the best strategy to help you find your way. Embrace the unfamiliarity. You're still expected to achieve the same impact, but the landscape has changed. What is possible now that wasn't possible before?

Rinne suggests noticing your emotional response to change: do you see a crisis or an opportunity? What is your default response, and what would happen if you responded differently? What grounds you – who or what can you call on to help you find your way?

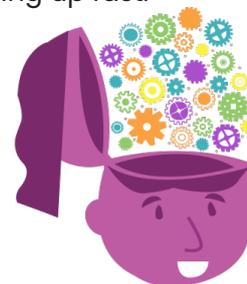
Let go of the future Before the change at work, you know what you were doing and what came next. Your familiarity with systems and processes meant you could anticipate what happened next and your future seemed secure. Rinne makes the point that talk of letting go is always about letting go of the past – we don't have a guide to letting go of the future. But the future is filling up fast.

April Rinne offers three shifts to help let go of the future.

A mindset shift: from predict to prepare. Move away from working to what 'will' happen, instead be prepared for what could happen.

An expectations shift: from "things will go to plan" to "plans will change". The value of this shift has become apparent in the pandemic response.

A shift in focus: from known to unknown. Yes, history is a great teacher. But the rate of change is means it can't necessarily provide guidance to the latest human experience.



The conceptual approach has great potential for growth and innovation – and for seeming rather perplexing to people who think you could just do the training and learn the process. And you could do both. You might talk to a manager or a mentor about getting lost and letting go of the future. You'll have to make that call.



3: When you don't know what you are doing – and this leads to mistakes

Sometimes the phrase “I don't know what I'm doing ” is grounded in fact. You end up doing something that has an unexpected or unwelcome outcome because you really didn't know what you were doing.

And you may not immediately recognise the consequence of your actions. Which hinders your ability to talk about it in a useful way.

The advice from software engineers and senior executive coaches is the same here: own up right away and be able to describe what you did. Putting the emphasis on what you did frees colleagues who may need to intervene to respond to the situation.

Be clear about the boundary of your understanding – you don't have to wait to understand every consequence of a mistake. As much as possible, focus on the observable evidence.

The Forbes Coaches Council recognises the anxiety that comes with owning a mistake at work. Ten expert coaches each offer a nugget of advice, all of which require talking to your leader. Here are two of them:

- Admit the mistake and identify solutions. Move from what could happen as a consequence of the mistake to what is now possible in the current circumstances.
- Focus on the opportunity to improve. Talk to your boss about what happened, the how and why, and what you'll do differently next time.

Actions you can take

- Reflect on when and how you ask for and offer support – in this role or others.
- Consider if there have been times when you were trained or supported in this role. Where did it come from? Why did it stop?
- Review times when have made mistakes. Be specific about when it has happened. What gaps show up in support or training? Is it the lack of resource or that you haven't sought support?
- Understanding the systemic failure that contributed to your mistake. This is a really useful conversation to have, as long as it is centred on the work. It will be less useful if it comes across as a way of shifting blame.
- Review the big picture and the system settings that were in place when the mistake happened.



4: When you are in the wrong role or the wrong organisation

This is more of a cry from the heart – I don't know what I am doing here – in this role, for this organisation. Any or all of the preceding scenarios could lead to this feeling. Unchecked imposter syndrome, change that leaves you feeling you have nothing to offer, mistakes that undermine your confidence. All three are event specific, whereas this feeling could come on without a specific trigger.

A global pandemic is rich ground for reflecting on what you are doing with your life and why. Your perception of the value of your role and your organisation might have changed. This is a good time to reflect on your personal and organisational values. How strong is the alignment and what inspiration can you draw from the idea that you do live and work your values?

Pandora Sykes collections of essays, *How do we know we're doing it right?* identifies the insidious ways in which we are encouraged to think we can't possibly know what we are doing, let alone be doing it right. She also writes of FOMOG – not just Fear of Missing Out – Fear of Missing Out on Goals. We're expected to be constantly aspiring to the next goal and that means any achievements are swept away by the need to move on.

Back to April Rinne and another of her eight superpowers. The one that is useful here is 'Know your 'enough', know what is enough for you. Rinne refers to the yogic principle of brahmacharya or non-excess for this superpower.

"When you strip away everything that is not authentically you, and everything that keeps you from experiencing the truth of who you are, you are able to bring more of your true self to life. By subtracting what you are not, you becomes all that you are."



Actions you can take

- Appraise your values and how they align to work.
- Identify what gives you a sense of fulfilment at work.
- Take inspiration from April Rinne's list of subtractions. You might find taking things away will help you do better with what is left. Here are a few to get you started.
 - ◊ Unsubscribe from one newsletter.
 - ◊ Remove an app from your phone.
 - ◊ Let go of feeling guilty for an obligation.
 - ◊ Retire one hobby, club, or group that's no longer inspiring you.
 - ◊ Empty your cup instead of filling it.
 - ◊ Shed a mindset that is holding you back.
 - ◊ When you are tired, rest.

Herminia Ibarra's article *How to stay stuck in the wrong career* addresses the idea of career change head on. Like Rinne, she dismisses a predictable linear approach. Instead, think of such a change as reshaping your workplace identity – which is shaped by what you do, who you work with, and the stories you tell yourself. And the best way to do this is to test and learn.

- Craft experiments: try new things, such as activities and professional roles on a small scale.
- Shift connections: develop new contacts, find new role models and reference groups.
- Make sense: find triggers for change and change the stories that you tell yourself.

A final note: Don't expect to know what you are doing all the time.



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