

Emotions and Professionalism:

A different take on the workplace?



Mental Health Awareness (MHA) week has been and gone. I was planning on writing something that would hopefully be of use to others, and to continue challenging the stigma that still exists around mental health, and especially Bipolar disorder. Originally, I didn't get around to writing the piece because every hour of every working day at the moment is taken up with coaching 32 incredibly talented student officers across the UK, and supporting students' union CEO's where I can with their response to the Covid-19 pandemic, even if sometimes that is just to lend an ear.

I love every minute of my work right now; I am enjoying it immensely. I feel this enjoyment brings out the best in me and provides me with a genuine sense of purpose. The truth is, I have reached a point where I can now genuinely tap into my disorder in a productive, positive and constructive way, by using the 'high' energy levels that are fuelled by kind feedback from my clients, the fulfilment of watching people grow and develop their thinking, and above all the sense that 'me being me' is having a positive impact and effect on people. For the vast majority of us, we know what makes us tick and what doesn't, and for me it has been through exploring these two things in such depth that I now feel more able to make *conscious* choices about where to invest my energy and time. I don't always make the right choice, far from it in fact, but I do try to take confidence from what I can only describe as a new found level of acceptance when it comes to who I am, how I am wired (not literally, although some may beg to differ!), and the values, intentions and reasons behind why I make the choices that I do. This has been central to my learning when it comes to taking responsibility for the impact of my actions and behaviours, having bipolar does not give me an 'excuse' for my actions, as all actions, regardless of how they come about, have the potential to make a small, and sometimes huge impact on other people in a positive, negative, and sometimes indifferent way. Bipolar just means that I perhaps need to work harder than others when it comes to trying to maintain and manage things such as my self-awareness, my confidence, and my anxieties.

So, as I missed MHA week what made me decide to write and release this blog? There are four reasons:

- It doesn't have to be MHA week to talk about mental health. Those who know me will also know I am generally open to talking about the subject and my own lived experience on any given day if I think sharing could be of benefit to somebody else.
- Bipolar Disorder is still such a taboo subject for many, like it was for me until I received my diagnosis a couple of years ago. Therefore, my reflections may help to further break down some of the stigma, myths, and misunderstandings.
- A stressful situation arose recently in my family life that dug up a lot of emotion and memories of experiences from a time when I was at my worst, a time when I was struggling to understand myself, and didn't have (for me personally) the benefit that my eventual diagnosis brought in terms of enabling me to manage myself, and my condition in a much healthier way.
- A conversation with a student officer the morning after this stressful situation arose...

That morning I got out of bed to the usual sound of my alarm. I went through the usual routine ahead of my first coaching session at 9am, but the difference to any other morning was how my body ached from a poor night's sleep, and how my eyes were puffed up as a result of the tears I had shed the night before. It was around 8.45am and I made a point of looking in the mirror and saying aloud to myself "Right, game face on, you choose how today goes and leave your baggage outside of the room (or the Google Hangout session in this instance)".

The officer's I am currently coaching may have heard me talk about situations where phrases like 'put your game face on' can in fact lead somebody into 'being' or 'doing' something that doesn't come naturally to them, in turn making them come across as 'false', 'awkward' or perhaps 'insincere', for example. So, I am now highly aware that I have probably just exposed myself as a massive hypocrite! I must check with the officer I am referring to in relation to this 9am session whether I managed to pull it off in a consistent way, and in line with their previous experiences of working with me!

And so, I start to come to the point of this blog, and why I wrote it. I have built a relationship with all 32 officers that I am working with, and feedback would suggest that these relationships have been built quickly, are strong, and have been built on trust. However, as a human being there will naturally be some officers, some topics, and some conversations that I can empathise with more than others, simply because we have perhaps shared or lived through similar (not the same) experiences.

On this particular morning, this particular officer was describing some of their challenges, how they approach these challenges and their motivations for taking the steps that they do, as they were talking there was an unbelievable amount of self-reflection going on. I was deep in listening mode, and to say I could relate to everything they were saying around self-doubt, their approach, confidence, vulnerabilities, and so many other things that they were grappling with would be a huge understatement. I was quietly taken aback because it felt like somebody else was explaining my behaviours to me, as opposed to talking through their own! It was quite surreal as I have never heard anybody talk to my past mental health experiences in such a detailed, authentic and understanding way, and this was made all the more bizarre by the fact they were expressing themselves, and not talking directly to me about my experience!

I began to feel sad as I continued to listen, as I could feel their frustration, I could feel their anxiety, and I could feel how their circumstances were creating conflicting challenges for them. My frustration stemmed from remembering when I was in that space, a time when I mainly had questions about myself as opposed to knowing who I was, and the things that I had to do and experience to reach the point I described at the beginning of this blog. I wanted to wave a magic wand and reassure them that in time, with further experiences in the bag, that the self-awareness, reflection and development of their approach will begin to accelerate, as they develop new levels of *consciousness* about their actions, behaviours, and the impact of those two things on others, whilst retaining and not compromising their authenticity, values and beliefs.

Unfortunately, I sold out of magic wands at Coole Insight just as the pandemic hit, awful timing I know! However, I do still have my toolbox of techniques, interventions and activities that enable me to help myself whenever circumstances trigger a spike, up or down, in relation to **my** bipolar. I would be happy to share some of these things, as I have done in previous articles if people would like to know more. I also use this toolbox to inform, support and empathise when people open up to me about their mental health, but more importantly, as a coach, it is about trying to enable them to have the space to explore what works for them, why they feel a certain way about things and how they might approach similar situations or scenarios in the future.

At this point, I can hear readers who have made it this far saying '*Steve, you have talked a lot about emotions, but what has professionalism and the workplace got to do with any of this?*'. My answer to that is everything.

What made me sad when listening to the officer share their experience was the idea that others could be doing so much more to support them. If anything, the apparent need or belief of others that we have to 'conform' with a culture and the way we do things in society (things that did not exist until we made them up) could, or was directly having a negative impact on their mental health. It is this conformity and its negative impact that inspired me to write and share this article, and prompted me to pose the following questions around what some people may consider as 'being professional':

- Does the way you dress make you smarter than someone else?
- Does where you are from dictate your academic and/or vocational abilities, skills, and potential?
- Does the way you talk make you more, or less clever?
- How does the way you 'practice' professionalism impact on others?
- Is your professional practice authentic and true to you, or do you conform, and practise learned behaviours from others? Perhaps a mix of both?

Our choices are our own, and this is not me preaching about a right or wrong way about how we all approach the **concept** of 'professionalism' **and its construct**. This is me trying to use another angle around how our behaviours, choices and actions impact on others, and considering the multitude of ways that these things can 'land' with different people. Professionalism is naturally associated with the workplace and is one aspect of our considerations when we think about our approach to work and our 'style'. As we experience more and more roles and scenarios, arguably this 'style' that we develop has the potential to become an unconscious norm for us, as the routine of our approach sets in over time. This brings me back to the word consideration, and ultimately to my final points:

- Consider the different ways your style and approach could be interpreted or perceived by others
- Consider the extent to which your approach is authentic to you, and how much you try to conform with our engineered, often majoritarian expectations of one another
- Consider the overall outcome and impact you are trying to achieve, and how you can effectively balance 'playing the games' (that are again engineered in the workplace) to 'get stuff done', with your unique experience, skills and strengths

The choices we make will set the tone, and heightening our consciousness around impact will, perhaps, lead to better choices around what we say, how we say it, and what we decide to do.