



**UNLOCKING
YOUR SHINE AT
THE WORKPLACE**

FINDING YOUR SAPPHIRE: AN INTRODUCTION



Being a coach for over a decade gave me an insight into the unique challenges that women face in their daily lives, both personal and professional.

After spending the first phase of my career as an IT professional, thriving in the corporate world, I took a step back to step into my role as the nurturer of my family more fully. I did this with the confident knowledge and belief that, at some point, I could pick up where I left off. This sabbatical, however, challenged my initial beliefs in a multitude of ways. Not only did I find myself transforming mentally and emotionally and unlocking new, wondrous nuances within myself, but I also found myself having newer ambitions, and wanting to be a different kind of professional. With opposing wants and needs, a sea of inner changes to navigate, and non-stop demands from my environment both personally and professionally, my life was thrown into flux.

Finally, the decision came to me: I needed to dedicate myself to turning my passions into my profession. And so the journey to becoming a life coach began. Through this process of finding my path, I learned that true change can only happen within and not through circumstance. With that realization comes acknowledgement and acceptance, as well as the capacity to navigate our emotions, respond to circumstances, and perhaps come out shining in the glow of our self-worth.

During this time, I also came across the significance of the "sapphire," a striking gem that shines with a brilliant blue hue but is actually much more than just that. The Blue Sapphire stands for wisdom, mental strength, emotional well-being, and financial abundance. It was through this that the idea of *Sapphire* took birth. It was born from personal experience and deepened through conversations.

Sapphire is a one-of-a-kind women's community focused on empathic and meaningful engagement, bringing out all that is best in women in every aspect of their lives. I wanted the community to address the body, the mind, and the spirit to help women break out of their boundaries and imagine a brighter future on the horizon, crafted and created by themselves. The intent is to bring together women across age groups, cultures, and geographical boundaries to bring about a collective transformation in the way they perceive professional life and ultimately, themselves.

This ebook is an extension of the Sapphire community and is an amalgamation of various issues that I feel women face on a regular basis, their unique challenges, and an exploration of how women can take on these challenges and be successful. It is my endeavour to help women across the globe in their journey towards achieving their full potential in whatever they choose to do.

The aim of this book and the challenges discussed here is to create awareness and make women think about how they apply to their lives and what they can do to change them. Life may have dealt you a raw deal, and you may have a plethora of unanswered questions, but if you decisively take the reins of your own life, reflect, and grow your self-confidence, you will discover an unexplored part of yourself that will usher in a whole new era of joy, peace, and prosperity.

Ready to make the choice today? Read on!

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Chapter 1

**CHARTING A PATH: FROM PASSION TO
PROFESSION**



Over the years, I have crossed paths with numerous women who have been courageous enough to change tracks in life and pursue their hearts' desires, carving a successful career trajectory from their transformation. In these stories, I encountered tales of many women who either never worked at all or took prolonged sabbaticals because of marriage, childcare, or other family-driven circumstances. After dedicating time to the hearth and home, they took stock and reassessed their aspirations, ultimately deciding to pursue their passions and turn them into their profession.

In their stories, I found a deep resonance with my own. My professional life started off as a young software programmer in the late 80s, when computers were slowly making their mark on the Indian horizon. And here I was, a young woman in her 20s, training men about my father's age in the basics of computers and programming. It was, needless to say, quite exciting, and more so because I was living the dream in the Silicon Valley of India—Bangalore.

However, over time, dreams change shape. I had my first baby, and life in the professional fast lane stopped looking like such an appealing option. Those were the days when there weren't very many creches or any other childcare facility for working women in India, and working from home was completely unheard of. In the absence of infrastructural support, there was also a lack of family support. There was no one to help me at home as neither side of the family was there in Bangalore; everyone was far away in north India. My husband, though very supportive of my career, could not extend himself due to the high pressure that came with his own corporate career. With these looming challenges and the needs of my firstborn, I bid farewell to my career as an IT professional.

But this wasn't the end of the road for me. I wasn't going to be neatly stacked into the label of "former professional, full-time mother"; I was going to add many more nuances within my personal and professional selves, and the best part is, I didn't even know it then.

In my early 30s, having realized that I wasn't going to go back to being an IT professional, and with my home life looking more settled, my interest turned entrepreneurial. I started looking for something else to occupy my days. Early on, I believed that I could perhaps turn my love for designing into a profession. I did research and found out that there was a demand for one-of-a-kind, hand-painted organza lampshades and table runners, as well as for authentic Lucknowi garments, which were a rarity in the bustling metropolitan areas that I always inhabited. So, I turned my love for designing and art skills into a successful business of both those things, giving me a lot of happiness and, most importantly, financial independence. My life felt like my own again, instead of something that needed to be put on hold. I had my family and my career, but more importantly, by anchoring myself to my passion, I was experiencing more fulfillment in my career than ever before.

Naturally, I didn't want to stop there. I wanted to delve deeper into the inner recesses of my heart to find what else drives me.

What was also happening during this time were the connections I was making with people, each deeper and more meaningful than what I had been used to. Friends and family would call and talk about their lives, their wins, and their losses, mostly using me as a sounding board. Somewhere along the way, I realized that I loved being that sounding board and that perhaps it was time to shift gears and make this into a new profession, where I could reach more people and help them understand themselves and their journeys, just like I had had the opportunity to do. It dawned on me that this may be the closest I've gotten to my true self in years. Lo and behold, the idea of life coaching took root. I again researched, explored

options, and single-mindedly devoted my time to developing this as a career path. I went through all the requisite training and accreditations, and the rest is history. After two pivots and achieving the career of my dreams, I can attest to one truth without a shadow of a doubt: your passion will guide you to greatness.

A decade later, I can proudly say that I am now not just a coach for women but also a mentor to other aspiring coaches, and not to sound immodest, I am rather successful at what I do.

I encourage people to look deep into themselves and explore their own passions. Passion cannot be a passing fancy or the latest trend. Your passion is something you unfailingly love to do and are actually good at. Here's how you mentally prepare to find your own:

1. The first step is to explore and identify the one thing that you really love doing. Finding your passion requires self-awareness. What is it that makes you want to wake up in the morning? What is it that you think about every second without feeling fatigue? What is it that energizes you even as it challenges you? That is your passion. It is way beyond mere love, and one must be self-aware to distinguish between the two.
2. The next thing is to be practical and understand whether the world really needs the product of your passion. Passion can only be successfully churned into a profession when it becomes a fool-proof product that finds a market and an audience that believes in it. When I started my interior accessories business, I did a lot of research to figure out whether a market existed for my products and whether it would sustain itself in the long term. I started working only when I understood that there really were buyers for my products.
3. The third step, and probably the most practical, is to find out what you could be paid for your product or service. If the cost is greater than the return, obviously it's not going to be a good business idea and should be left alone.

Basically, what you love doing and what you're good at is your passion; once you've found that, you must couple it with your vision and mission, and then decide to make it a profession. It may take a while to find, and it's a journey to take within the self, but it's all worth it to find your purpose. Until you reach this point, do not fret. You aren't falling behind. You aren't directionless. Stay on the path.

Finding your passion requires a lot of self-reflection and self-awareness. The awareness to know and accept that to truly turn it into a profession, you might need to upskill, do a few courses, or even get certified in line with your passion. Don't hesitate to do what needs to be done in order for your passion to become your mission and, eventually, your vocation.

For me personally, once my passion, mission, vocation, and profession all worked out and came together, I had found my Ikigai. Ikigai is a Japanese term and, in simple words, means "your reason for being, your happiness." Isn't the pursuit of joy a significant goal for all human beings? Life is no fairytale; therefore, this entire process also isn't going to happen overnight with the flick of a wand. Things will take time to get aligned. But as long as you can create a flow for yourself, you will be able to reach the goal post.

The first thing is knowing what to do, then knowing how to do it, along with an awareness of how well you can do it, whether you can really take it forward and sustain it, and then knowing where to go from there. One has to navigate through these waters and all the while be aware enough to realize that there might even be practical changes, lots of challenges along the way, and the significant skills that you will need to learn to face these challenges.

Be sure to rid yourself of doubt and distractions. On the path to a better life centered on your true purpose, you are your best and only advocate, teacher, cheerleader, and student. It's a lot of work, a process that gets repeated almost daily, and you need to be able to accept that.

As scary as it may be, you can always ask for help every step of the way. To build your self-awareness and be able to reflect, you might even need a sounding board and perhaps even some gentle guiding and handholding. And, therefore, you can turn and ask for impartial help—that of a coach. A professional coach can guide you through the ups and downs of your path and help you achieve the success that you set out to achieve.

Whatever you do, and however you choose to do it, Choose today. Your future self will thank you!

Chapter 2

FIGHTING THE NOISE: UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS



Picture these scenarios:

Scenario 1: A young woman professional on an upward trajectory in her chosen profession gets married and eventually has a child. After the 6-month maternity break, she chooses to return to work. As much as her heartstrings are pulled when she leaves her little baby at home, she isn't keen on giving up on her career, which she has worked so hard for.

But this young lady is now the subject of constant scrutiny and judgement over her choice to resume work rather than stay back home to tend to her little baby. Society questions her on how she could be so selfish as to leave a small baby behind and go back to work; what kind of woman is she to leave a baby in the care of a nanny or even grandparents—they are too old for this? And besides, the child is hers, and therefore her responsibility, not someone else's.

Scenario 2: Another professional woman, also with a strong and upwardly mobile career, chooses to quit her job to stay at home and take care of her child for at least the foreseeable future. She wants to concentrate on raising her child without any work distractions.

Yet even she is the subject of societal scrutiny and judgement: *"How could she so easily give up on a brilliant career? She is wasting all her training and talent on raising a baby. She could hire a nanny to take care of the baby's daily physical needs and lean on family for more emotional and mental support."*

Scenario 3: A young mother on a prolonged sabbatical from her corporate job after the birth of her baby decides to work freelance, giving her the option of working at her own pace and on projects that she really gets excited about.

Most around her do not give her work the due respect because, for them, WFH or freelancing is just a hobby, a way to pass time rather than a proper profession. Most people in our society only recognize a 9-to-5 kind of job as a professional job.

In all three scenarios, women are being judged for their choices; sometimes it even seems like a Catch-22 kind of situation: you lose if you do; you lose if you don't!

The question is always about the woman's worth. At the end of the day, it is these perceptions that undermine a woman's self-confidence and make her question her self-worth. The ones who can successfully navigate the sea of perceptions are the ones who are able to hold on to their confidence and are secure in their knowledge of their self-worth.

Personally, I visualize a space where women are empowered to make their choices in the existing sociological or professional environment in a way that creates an all-new environment where there is never a choice between nourishing their families and advancing their careers as well, if that's what they wish to do. I wish to see a world in which women are free to make empowered decisions for themselves and their families. This cannot be achieved in isolation, and it is not about putting down men in any way. Respect and trust for an individual that is not based on any conditioned belief system are prerequisites for a pleasant home and a goal-oriented workplace free of unnecessary acrimony. Gender bias in some areas is about perception and needs to be dealt with with a fair amount of wisdom and assertiveness, not aggression.

The empowered choices that are made will set the stage and nurture an environment of synergy and satisfaction. More women leaders in the workplace will help address emerging issues and ensure, to a great extent, that the needs and concerns of women are voiced and

seen as a priority. This vision that so many women share can take shape only if each one of us makes the effort to break free from our own limiting beliefs, develop a vision, and display a will to lead! Eleanor Roosevelt said, "*No one can make you feel inferior without your permission.*"

To manifest this vision, we need to live it every moment. So, dream big, be creative, and ignore the norms. You are the writer of your own destiny.

Chapter 3

**KNOW THYSELF: UNLEARNING
COMPETITION**



I was recently chatting with a friend when the conversation veered towards a question on why women are constantly in competition with other women. Now this is an interesting question because, for me, even men compete with each other, whether in school or at work. But the pointed reference to just the female competition made me think about it, and I realized that it was to a large extent true. Girls are conditioned from a young age in their homes to be better than the other girls, whether in school or within the family. Then they grow up, but the competitiveness with other women doesn't fade away; rather, it becomes more pronounced, both on the domestic front and at the workplace.

In a related article in the Harvard Business Review, the concept of internalized sexism came up, and it is certainly something we should all ponder over. The conditioning of females from an early stage of their lives is to be competitive with other females to prove that they are better than others. They internalize the patriarchal messages that they are not as strong, competent, and capable as men—also known as *internalized sexism*. Women therefore unconsciously absorb such beliefs, underestimate themselves, and also underestimate other women around them, judging them just to prove that they are better than the rest.

I won't go into an analysis to prove that women aren't really the 'weaker' sex, nor will I discuss the competence of women; it is a well-established fact that gender doesn't factor into competence at all. What matters is the individual. In that case, the competition between women sounds like something out of the Middle Ages because the smart, intelligent, hard-working woman professional or even a homemaker should ideally know her worth and revel in it. Her only competition should be herself; her only challenge should be to become a better version of herself!

When I look back at my own life, I realize that the word competition was thrown around a lot, even when I was in school and in all subsequent spheres of life. But I never quite understood the meaning of competition. My academic excellence was always driven by my own intrinsic motivation to be the best at whatever I chose to do, not to be better than my classmates but just to be better than before.

Even today, I get nervous before presenting a new product or making a presentation because I worry about meeting my own high standards, but it is definitely not because I'm worried about what others will say. My motivation is to produce the best product as per my capabilities. Therefore, to use a common phrase, I am my own competition. My only focus is on rising to my own high standards and figuring out how to achieve them in whatever I decide to do. I do not respond to external challenges; my challenge is within me.

I am ambitious; I have my own dreams and goals; I keep myself relevant, but there is no competitiveness. It is fantastic to see other people succeed, but that is because I am aware of my own self-worth; I have self-belief; I have confidence in my own skills; and I am always ready to learn new skills because I don't know everything. There is always a chance to learn something new.

This awareness of my own capabilities keeps me calm, is truly fulfilling and satisfying, and most importantly, helps me deliver quality in all I do.

So, what is the point of this competition? The goal is to be the best version of yourself; to deliver the best quality work, the challenge must be internal, because external competition ends up pulling another down to prove one's own worth. Does that make us better people or more competent? No, it doesn't!

The coaching conversation is based on the tenets of awareness, acknowledgement, acceptance, and then the mindset of change. Each one of us should look into our own selves and honestly self-reflect. Acknowledge where you stand in life, what your capabilities are, accept it, and then, to be better and to challenge yourself, one needs to have the mindset to change, but what? It cannot be a sweeping statement about change. Change needs to be specific and small, step by step. And one needs courage and conviction to bring about these changes.

Gone are the days when women had to fight for a place at the table and climb over each other for scraps left behind by a male-dominated world. Today, women craft their own worlds.

Changing society is a very big statement, but any change needs to begin at the very basic level, at the individual level. Try to bring about smaller changes in your own life to make a big impact on the world at large.

Chapter 4

**A PAUSE NOT A BREAK: WOMEN ON
SABBATICAL**



So many of the women I have coached or met have, for some reason or another, taken a sabbatical, me included. But what I've realized, and the data support this, is that nearly 70% of such women never return or struggle to return to the workplace.

So let's first understand the reasons women quit or take sabbaticals.

1. **External factors:** The most common reason is social and familial pressure. In-laws and husbands don't want the women to continue working post-marriage. You are told that child care is the most fulfilling job you'll ever do. The other reason is that you have to take care of someone in the family who has health issues.
2. **Internal:** Some employees take a break because their own health issues don't allow them to keep working.
3. **Upskilling:** A very miniscule percentage of women take a break to further their education or to upskill.

The last two reasons do warrant re-prioritizing in the interim. The external factors can be worked out if only one would pause and reflect upon them.

- **Childcare:** If the issue is sensitive and only you as the mother can deal with it, then again, you don't have an option but to quit work. But if the only reason is maternal guilt—I am unable to give enough quality time to my kids—that is a problem that may have a solution, and a work-life balance can be worked out if only you looked at your options.
- In today's environment, people are more and more supportive and empathic, and they do understand such struggles. Therefore, before calling it quits, talk to your supervisor in the organization and HR. Find out if there are options available, such as flexible hours, WFH, hybrid WFH, etc.
- Be aware of your own reasons, and knowing your self-worth, talk to the organization and try to find a balance between your child and your work.
- In the event that flexi-hours, etc., are not an option in your particular role, then explore other roles within the organization that might have less demanding hours, part-time options, or even project-based work.
- Of all the women who've taken a break, a large percent return within 6 months because they've redesigned their lives and handled the situation in a way that coming back is easy.

There are a few things women overlook when they take such a break, and this is a mistake, in my opinion.

- Women must be aware that this decision will have a fallout on other things, with financial status being the most significant. A loss of income usually affects a family tremendously.
- Loss of self-esteem, growth of frustration, losing track of everything one has achieved, and the sense of self-worth take a beating, which in turn affects social interactions.

Now, if you've already taken a break or chosen part-time, flexible hours, or project-based options, how do you stay in the flow or pave the way for an eventual return to full-time work? **Here are some things that you must do:**

- If you are still working (part-time, flexi-hours, etc.), then it is vital that you stay in **constant touch** with your immediate supervisor in the organization and your team members so that you are updated on everything that's happening in the organization. Even if you've taken a sabbatical, you must make it a point to keep in touch with your previous colleagues, HR, supervisor, etc. and keep abreast of all new updates, new product launches, any new systems, etc. This also becomes important with the idea that most women who return to the workforce return to their previous organizations; it makes it easier and faster to acclimate if you already have all the important information in your hand.
- If you're working part time, etc., even then, do not skip important meetings; **don't undermine yourself** just because you've downshifted gears and gone easy on the work front. Always remember you're still valued and important, which is why your organization gave you the opportunity to work flexible hours.
- **Commit to deadlines**, and in case you can't meet them, be honest to yourself and to your supervisor, and inform your team of the delay. If you honestly share that the deadline will not be met due to whatever reasons, most people will understand. So, ask for support, but please honor your commitments. It maintains the trust your organization has shown in you.
- The most important thing is not to stop **taking care of yourself**. Most women who take a break from their careers lose their sense of self-worth and ignore themselves. Take my advice: do not stop your self-care routine—reading books, meditating, exercising—everything you were doing for yourself before you took that break.
- If you're still part of the workforce but working from home, then carve out a **dedicated time for work and** balance it so well that it maximizes your time and efforts. Your productivity shouldn't be affected because, in that case, your performance scale will drop and the faith that your organization has shown in you will take a hit. So, **be faithful and responsible**.
- Now, if you're on a complete break, then take an actual holiday for the joy of it or take up a new hobby. This is also important to keep your sense of self-worth strong.
- Again, if you're on a complete break, do not stop **networking**. Keep up with friends in other organizations and professions; every contact and conversation helps build your circle of connections in the long run.
- When you're not working, it is time to **upskill**. In today's world, things change quite rapidly, and you need to keep up with these changes to remain relevant.
- **Reading** is another way to help you stay updated on new perspectives; books are also great teachers.
- Take out an hour or so to volunteer or intern at regular intervals. It helps you stay connected and network, and additionally, it helps you acquire a whole new set of skills. For example, your background may be in marketing, but interning at a human resources organization may help you acquire an entirely new skill set, a new career path, and a whole lot of experience as well.
- While you're on your sabbatical, you could even use your time to **plan entrepreneurial ventures**. I did that and started not one but two extremely diverse businesses by following my passions when I decided to re-join the workforce. Use this time to do research, plan out the steps, if needed, upgrade your skill set, and keep networking.
- **Be part of groups**—there are so many progressive groups out there—talk, discuss, discover something new, and use them as yet another networking opportunity. You

will realize that you are not the only one on a break, and the chance to learn from your fellows is truly a viable one.

- The all-important question is: Can this be done alone in a vacuum? Not really. As humans, we need a sounding board—someone who's interested in your life but is not judgmental.

This is a journey that needs a companion, so **ask for help and support**. This is especially true in the case of career professionals who have taken a break after 20–25 years of working because, for them, the first emotion is the loss of something extremely precious. It can be devastating and emotionally taxing, and if left unaddressed, it can lead to a drop in self-confidence and self-worth.

Support can even be in the form of a certified coach, one who is equipped to help you deal with your emotional health first and then guide you to join appropriate groups for networking, freelance work, volunteer work, etc. It is very important for one not to be apologetic about their decision to take a break; they should **own their choice**. Be confident that you took a break for a certain set of valid reasons, and don't justify yourself to anyone.

Stay confident and aware of your self-worth during your time of sabbatical, and once you eventually return to the workplace, you'll see yourself as far more confident with new perspectives, new skills, and a lot of power, and you'll add value to whichever organization you join.

Chapter 5:

**A NEW LENS: VISION FOR WOMEN IN THE
WORKPLACE**



Congratulations! You've taken the bold step of returning to the workplace. You've been the axis of your family's world, nourishing their lives in numerous significant ways, and now you're ready to shift focus back to your own self. After offering up your care, attention, time, love, and skills to fuel the hopes and dreams of your family, you've deemed it the correct time to fuel your own. It's a decision that comes from deep understanding and a truly admirable sense of self. Take a minute to congratulate yourself on your decision. After years of dedicating yourself single-mindedly to the ever-important goal of nurturing others, you are shifting gears, but let's not forget that this is a reality grounded in one salient fact: everything has changed.

There's no denying that your field of work and the professional world itself may have undergone a sea change in the years since you left them behind. In fact, why don't we take that as a guarantee at this moment?

Technological advances have seen more dynamism than ever before, been swifter than ever before, and are more adaptable to human life than ever before. Since technology no longer exists as an entity outside of ourselves, our cultures, behaviors, vocabulary, and indeed, even our emotional DNA, have changed to reflect the impact of technological devices, which seem to become more iterative and advanced with every passing second. And now, with the advent of remote or hybrid workplaces that have blurred the boundaries between work and home, it can be harder to strike a balance or feel like yourself in a world that once felt like your own. Long story short, you aren't exactly walking back into familiar territory, but the reasons aren't just circumstantial.

YOU are now effectively transformed.

Your role as a primary caregiver, your sense of responsibility, and your general perspective of the world have changed to reflect a wiser, more nuanced outlook. The way you approach your area of professional expertise, then, requires a whole new lens.

Let's sharpen our vision for our lives in the workplace with this lens. Here's what you need to know:

Don't lose your nerve.

Rejoining work after a sabbatical can be a frightening and intimidating reality. Self-doubt and imposter syndrome are bound to rear their ugly heads. You will doubt your professional capabilities and even consider quitting, especially early on. But this is a crucial juncture. Let the power of self-belief drive you, and couple that with a system grounded in self-awareness. The best way to overcome the 'lack of confidence' phase is by listing your strengths and weaknesses, reviewing behaviors or actions that reinforce them, and trying to incorporate or identify how they may play out in the new workplace. It will help you regain your lost confidence, and you won't need to feel left out or like you have to model yourself after someone else. The key to confidence is knowing your capabilities and skills and effectively promoting them. Remember, you are the best version of yourself that exists out there. Your uniqueness is an asset to any company out there!

Shake up your wake up

Your routine is about to see a paradigm shift, and this in itself could be disorienting enough to make you reconsider your decision. As human beings, it's in our nature to settle into comfortable patterns. A disruption to what you've come to know best will understandably be difficult. This is why it's important to introduce an anchoring principle to your everyday life. My advice is to make your mornings the heroes. Biologist Christoph Randler discovered that *"people whose performance peaks in the morning are better positioned for career success, because they're more proactive than people who are at their best in the evening."* Get a jumpstart on your day by using your morning for some dedicated "me time". Make your to-do list, exercise, spend some time with your thoughts while leisurely sipping on your tea or coffee, and set a positive intention for the day. If you've started your day with an abundance of time and a sense of calm, you won't spend the rest of the day playing catch up. It's worth a try!

Try monotasking over multitasking.

Even if you pride yourself on your ability to juggle many tasks simultaneously, when you're just getting back into the groove of things, taking it one step at a time might serve you better. Monotasking is about being mindful and not giving into the distractions of technology or indulging in too many tasks. Trying to multi-task may hamper our creative reserves because rapidly switching from one point of focus to another doesn't allow the brain the time to sink into single-pointed focus and find effective solutions. Train yourself to be more attentive. Give yourself to one task by learning about it, understanding its needs, and allocating your resources and time to it. You'll be impressing everyone in the workplace in no time!

Focus on building relationships.

As women, our greatest asset is often the community we build with each other. Our friendships are safe spaces, our lives an automatic channel to build up another—there is a warm and constant sisterhood that underscores our interactions with each other, and frankly: It's wonderful. Building a solid professional support system helps you adapt to the new work environment. Forging a bond with your female co-workers is essential because they can empathize with your decision to take a break. In fact, being open and talking about your journey or being transparent about the gap can be the first step in building your support network inside the organization. This group will help you discuss your personal and professional difficulties and stick with each other through thick and thin.

Remember, returning to the workplace after a break does not make you a lesser professional. You do not need to compete with your former self in order to feel like you belong in a workplace. In fact, congratulate yourself for the lessons you taught yourself during this break. Let them guide you. When you walk back into the workplace, walk in envisioning yourself as having a fresh approach, new skill sets, better productivity, and the drive to accelerate your ambitions while meeting the company's needs.

This is the new lens for a new you.

Chapter 6:

**FIRM & FERVENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF
ASSERTIVENESS**



When it comes to expressing oneself at the workplace, the behavioral pendulum really only seems to swing between “passive” and “aggressive”.

For women professionals, whose actions and reactions are scrutinized with a more critical eye than those of their male colleagues, both these labels can be equally damaging.

At one level, we never want to ruffle any feathers, of course. We want to create enough room for ideas to flow freely in a way that makes everyone feel positive and secure. Taking that to an extreme however, can make room for another uncomfortable reality- feeling like a perpetual pushover, whose desire to avoid conflict far outweighs a sense of personal well being. There’s a fine line between being accommodating, and paving a surefire way to burnout by acting only according to the expected norm, never expressing oneself and letting resentment fester.

On another level, we want to get our way, garnering a place in the sun, making a name for ourselves through our effort and creativity. We want people to know and see what we can do, how much better we can make things when a good idea meets the right execution. Take that to an extreme? You’re in danger of undercutting the work of others, sticking stubbornly to your own truth and becoming fixated on one familiar way of doing things rather than letting the best way emerge.

As you can see, we all begin with the best of intentions. But without a set pattern in place to regulate our behaviors and decisions in various dynamic environments, our intentions can get the better of us. Especially in a space we are trying to re-adjust to after some time away, and a space in which our performance and outward actions are on display.

We need a middle ground, not just of expression- but cognition. And that middle ground is assertiveness.

Assertiveness is not just expressing your opinion clearly and firmly so that people listen to you or do what you want, it is the ability to speak up for ourselves in a way that is honest and respectful.

While this sounds easy enough, it is understandably not such a breeze to achieve. There are so many conscious and unconscious fears that hold us back on a day to day basis. It can be the eagerness to prove ourselves, being afraid of not living up to expectations, or even feeling like others around you may know more than you do. Whatever it may be, while it is valid to feel the way you do, you cannot let it hold you back from who you truly are, and what you need to achieve.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind as you step into your assertiveness at the workplace:

- 1. There’s no right answer, but a million right questions:**

Women often shy away from speaking up in meetings due to not believing that their ideas, opinions, questions or beliefs are valuable. But these limiting beliefs go against the logic of why you were hired in the first place- in order to showcase your capabilities and offer a unique perspective that only you can provide. However, if the

idea of speaking your mind in a public forum causes trepidation to you- never fear. You can ease into it by asking insightful, open-ended questions that allow everyone in the forum to participate and share their view- while also giving you the chance to be seen as the person with the appropriate outlook and mindset to even have sparked such a discussion.

Research by the Harvard Business School revealed that those who ask questions and seek advice are seen as more competent by their peers than those who remain silent. If you fail to ask questions, you lose out on an innovative way to be seen; and more tragically, you can never overcome your initial doubts. This is not only a disservice to your company, but you yourself.

2. “No” is a complete sentence

The foundation of assertiveness lies in drawing healthy boundaries for yourself. Advocating for yourself will not make you seem difficult or unlikeable. In fact, assertive communication is a far cry from aggressive communication, which only tends to the needs of the speaker; as opposed to the former, where both the speaker and listener get to win out.

When it comes to your availability, responsibility or even your transactional relationship with a company, you must learn to say ‘no’ when something doesn't work for you. And when you say no, just remember one thing- you do not need to apologize for it. There’s a difference between apologizing when taking responsibility, and apologizing to accommodate. The latter just isn’t worth it.

Here’s how you you can rewire your workplace vocabulary-

- a) Rather than saying “I’m sorry, that doesn’t work for me”, say “unfortunately, that suggestion doesn’t work for me” and offer what does.
- b) Use “excuse me, could you repeat that?” instead of “I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”
- c) Instead of saying “sorry I’m late” say “thank you for your patience” or “thank you for waiting for me.”

3. Define your worth & value

Often, you may not find supporters for what you believe in. You may find people who choose to stay neutral, or even those who detract from your sense of values, or your point of view. In those moments, you must remember that you must stay committed to what you believe in. That commitment is the definition of your worth, to your own self. Get to know yourself, your strengths, your weaknesses, what you can/cannot stand for- and set goals to speak up in service of those. You are your best representative, and stepping into your power will always be worth it. Seek out resources such as books, podcasts and workshops to develop effective leadership skills (strengthening conflict management, speaking confidently, improving body language, building relationships) and be your best self!

Assertiveness is a positive trait that will help you in both your personal and professional life. Seeking mentorship and coaching for developing your inner assertive woman will go a long way and help you get to where you want to be. So don't wait, don't hesitate- go boldly toward your dreams. You'll always have someone to help you get there!

Chapter 7:

Online & On Point: Emotional Intelligence in the Virtual World



Since the COVID pandemic of 2020, the way we define workplaces has been altered indefinitely. The brick and mortar environment that housed our ideas, thoughts and bonds has given way to a virtual work environment where the lines between your personal and professional self have blurred.

But what worked for you in a conference room of peers, may not translate the same way in a Zoom meeting. Tones, accents, looks- even the most nuanced of expressions may be open for interpretation, and more dangerously- misinterpretation, in a virtual environment.

Joel Schwartzberg, a writer for Harvard Business Review and renowned executive communications professional has compiled some handy tips for how to make an impact through the screen, that endure even in a post-pandemic hybrid work scenario. Here's how to use them:

1. Find your lens:

If you work in a remote, or hybrid work scenario- meetings are few and far between- and can often be the only common forum wherein you can interact with colleagues. That sense of connection, while exciting, can also be distracting, in a multitude of ways. It's important to remember that this meeting is precious time to communicate with clarity, deploy tasks and understand challenges. It's also your chance to establish yourself as an effective communicator. Make sure you look directly into the camera. Presentation coaches will always reinforce the importance of direct eye contact. In a meeting, that's your camera. Practice looking into your camera during video conferences when you speak, even for brief moments.

2. Carry your voice:

For most people, the auditory experience of a virtual call is immensely important, in order to establish the most salient topics of discussion and drive a project. When you speak in a virtual meeting, channel the feeling of a real conference room. Use a louder-than-usual voice because, in addition to being clearly heard, strong voices convey authority, credibility, and confidence. This concept is just as true in virtual conferences as it is in actual ones.

3. Set your frame well:

The focus a well composed picture in a frame receives from onlookers is what you must aim to get from your meeting attendees. The farther away or more obscured you appear, the less engaging you will be. In a video conference, your head and the top of your shoulders should dominate the screen. If your head is cut off at the top or bottom, you're too close. If your entire torso is in view, you're too far away. If only half of your head is in sight, please adjust the camera. Also be mindful of your

background. Cluttered rooms make communicators seem disorganized. Distracting elements will pull attention away from you.

4. Beware the perils of multitasking:

In an environment that is controlled, like a closed conference room- distractions are intentionally removed. This however, is not the case in a virtual meeting; where your attention can easily drift either to pressing matters at home (or just your very cute child/pet) or even to another task at work. It's easy to forget you're still being watched. Even if your camera is off. You may want to check your email or attend to other work, but multitasking can easily catch you off guard, because you might be caught unprepared if asked a sudden question. Even if you don't need to be fully engaged in the meeting, your professional reputation can suffer if it even looks like you're not paying attention. So close those other windows, turn your phone upside down, and remember that you're always "on camera." Because you're less aware of social cues in a virtual meeting, it's also important to be mindful of how long and how often you speak.

5. Befriend chat windows

The written word is powerful, and more importantly- lasting. Since the chat window is the one place you can jot down quick messages and thoughts- you can use it as more than just a discussion platform. When you refer to an article or shared document, link to it in the chat. If you run the meeting, put a link to the agenda in the chat. When others are speaking, respond with support or questions in the chat. The chat window is a unique opportunity in virtual meetings to elevate your presence, add dimensions to your ideas, and demonstrate that you're fully present. You can even summarize the meeting before it elapses, so everyone can hold onto the minutes of the meeting.

Chapter 8:

Looking & Acting the Part: On Executive Presence



It's no secret that women are severely underrepresented in executive leadership positions across sectors. In fact, as per a recent Grant Thornton study- women hold just 31% of senior leadership positions globally. While the reasons for these are many and varied- we do know one thing- this trend is rapidly changing. The entrenched gender bias of our world has been questioned, and its foundation shaken by hundreds of trailblazing activists and thinkers forging a better world for us all, and as we take our place in this world-we must be prepared for it physically, mentally and emotionally.

To do this, we must understand what it means to be a leader, and to embody an executive presence.

In my years of working with women professionals, coaching them through readjusting to the workplace after a sabbatical or just helping them reach higher professional targets- the feedback I have consistently received is that there is a general lack, or rather a nebulous understanding of what "executive presence" really is, and yet- they have often experienced being passed up for promotions, or desired jobs because they didn't truly possess it.

Leaders who succeed in executive leadership have two key qualities:

1. They are highly skilled, and can employ said skills
2. They can communicate and deliver their vision masterfully

Stakeholders perceive them as credible, confident and at ease with themselves—all attributes that constitute executive presence, even when there's no one true definition of the concept. To me, it's always been about cultivating an executive mindset, and blending it with nuances of style and presentability.

Let's map executive presence along 3 traits that can be demonstrated:

1. **Gravitas**: Executives need to be trusted in the most tumultuous times and seen as the leader who will keep driving when things look dire. Executives need to be tenacious in communicating their vision. A leader who displays courage, calm and compassion during times of crisis is an inspiration to all, and creates an environment of trust and growth for those around them, especially those relying on them for direction.
2. **Communications**: The entire gamut of expressions, both verbal and non-verbal that constitute how people perceive you and respond to you in a workplace scenario. That subtle joke delivered at the right time, the way you understand and comfort people, how you can garner the attention and respect of a room full of people from varying backgrounds- is your lasting signature.
3. **Appearance**: The way you stand, your dressing and etiquette- all goes a very long way in creating an impact. But beyond your attire, your energy and enthusiasm- the way you smile at people or understand the right look to offer to someone that needs it.



Here are a few quick tips to tap into your innate executive presence:

1. Never walk into a meeting doubting what you can add to the conversation.
2. Stand up tall and straight. Be calm and purposeful about the way you hold yourself and your gestures. Look others in the eye when you're speaking and be intentional about truly engaging.
3. Never talk just to talk – be deliberate and make sure that each word you speak is advancing your purpose.
4. Don't rush through the important message that you want to deliver. You'll risk losing the power of your words.
5. Ask questions and listen to the answers. Use pauses and lulls in conversation to your advantage- assimilate the information to formulate an effective response.
6. Don't take yourself too seriously- a well timed joke, or a witty line at the end of a particularly intense moment might go a long way in adding to your image as a calm, ultimately approachable person.

Conclusion:

Unlocking the power of YOU: The Most Important Stakeholder



Do you know the one, least talked about skill that every workplace undoubtedly needs?

A strong sense of self worth.

It all begins with you, ladies. Your sense of self, your authenticity, your decision to embrace your worth everyday makes the world better. Why then, would any workplace not want you for their own?

All you really need to do is believe. Easier said than done, I know. But it truly is the best place to start.

The one thing you need to do when you take the decision to return to work, or start an ambitious new professional project- you must ask yourself who you really are. who you want to be, and where you are going- at work and outside of it.

Commitment to Self

The world will try to tell you the virtues of compromise. No matter how many years pass, you'll continue to hear the phrase- "women cannot truly have it all."

You mustn't believe the noise. You are your 'all'. When you look to go back to work, redefine what the term "work life balance" means to you. I would argue that it isn't just limited to the way you align your work vis a vis your personal life. In fact, an equal balance might just be an impossible ideal. "Balance" also means you are a balanced, whole and healthy individual, with balanced, whole and healthy goals.

Loving the Self

As you return to work and navigate newer waters, give yourself a break from self-judgment. Learn to forgive yourself, absorb from your environment, and what it has to offer you.

Self love at work can be defined as a series of making your own choices, prioritizing yourself, standing up for yourself, fulfilling your commitments, making a conscious effort for your growth every single day and never stopping to share your opinion or ideas. Loving yourself is a daily choice, and it is reflected in how you care for yourself and how you hold space for your own thoughts and feelings.

Taking Charge of the Self

The overwhelming demands of the world outside can often make you a spectator to your own lives. By taking charge of your life, you can blossom into your authentic self, set the direction for meaningful goals and gain resilience during setbacks and low points.

Throughout the course of life, you will make a multitude of choices, each of which will be your responsibility. Your choices should be focussed around being able to perform as your best self, while simultaneously offering yourself the kindness you deserve in order to be it. You must be able to define success on your own terms, set a vision board for your long term goals and project those thoughts into the universe, letting it guide your purpose.

You are the most important stakeholder. Your well being, growth and contentment can be the fuel for a number of visionary ideas, changed lives, joyous moments and newly discovered pathways for a life well lived. Continue to nourish yourself, learn from yourself and be your own strongest cheerleader. It is in this practice of self-nurturing, that you will unlock your power.

Meet Sandhya Mathur



Sandhya Mathur, is a PCC accredited executive & mindfulness coach, mentor coach (Symbiosis Coaching USA) and emotional intelligence assessor with over 20 years of rich experience working with clients across the Indian subcontinent, US and Canada. She is the CEO of **Inward Focus**- a Gurgaon based coaching, consulting & training firm, that helps people build self-awareness, self-belief and self-confidence as practicing principles in life. After working as an IT professional in the first innings of her career, and then taking a sabbatical to nurture a family- she understood the intricacies of the decision to work after a gap, and became deeply motivated to help other people- especially women-navigate the tumultuous waters of a career & life change, or even a return to work after a long period away, like herself. She set herself on a path of working towards empowering people to create vision, enhance their lives and fulfill their dreams. She decided then, to turn her passion into a profession and became a life coach, helping executives from different walks of life and levels of seniority; and eventually mentoring aspiring life coaches who wanted to build a career helping others achieve their goals. Using her personally crafted coaching style, she combines Emotional Intelligence and spiritual wisdom with structured coaching techniques to empower professionals, and aspiring coaches to build strong leadership character. She helps clients strengthen their relationships with themselves and others, and have more grounded, fulfilled and highly successful careers and lives- a part of her vision to create ripples of total transformation in their lives, which will carry forward within their own ecosystems. She helps women navigate their way back to the workplace through her specialized community led programme- '**Sapphire**' by **Sandhya Mathur**. She also creates digital communities of people and coaches who interact with one another to share information, resources and knowledge over the coaching profession.

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