

How to handle yourself, raise your game and perform at your best

This free guide is designed to give you a condensed set of personal support tools, processes and pointers that you can use and benefit from in the time leading up to that all important presentation or meeting, where you want to deliver your messages clearly and effectively, but are typically not feeling as confident as you'd like to.

How to use this guide

In the form of a personal story and some challenging questions, I invite you to read this to the end and to place yourself and your challenges centre stage. While my story and my challenges may differ from yours, at its core we all contend with things which we are unclear how to improve. That lack of clarity breeds uncertainty, and we can lose sight of where to look to find the appropriate steps forward, trying anything to escape the fog and get back on the path to our destination. I am reminded of Lewis Carroll's thoughts in Alice in Wonderland when Alice asks the Cheshire Cat where to go from here. Paraphrasing this, "if you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there, but is it where you want to go?"

Towards the end, I've outlined the typical mindset challenges and the kinds of **mindset tools and processes** you can use to bring yourself back on track in those situations where you feel most challenged.

Typical performance scenario: performance anxiety

No doubt you've done lots of preparation on your presentation and know what you plan to say, but when the moment comes and you are sitting in the meeting or standing on stage to present, it is as if the room and audience are swimming before your eyes. Maybe you feel overcome with body tension, shortness of breath, a flurry of distracting thoughts, with the overall sensation of walking through treacle. And why wouldn't you feel like that? It's not every day that you're standing in front of an audience with them all looking expectantly at you.

While those sensations are all very normal, what is far less normal, in my experience, is for people to have a system, tools or processes that they can use to manage their sense of overwhelm in these situations and be able to get themselves back on track. Tempting though it is to read your notes or slides one more time, make more notes, think about what points to emphasise, etc, that is not going to save you from those feelings of anxiety, stress, fear and worry. If anything, doing that will just magnify those unpleasant emotions. Why is this? Because the discomfort you are experiencing is **not** because your cognitive rational brain is sending you a signal that you need to prepare more. If it were that straightforward, then I would definitely say go over your notes once again.

The answer lies somewhere else

No, the reason this approach doesn't work is because the stress signals **are coming from a different place entirely**: it is your emotional brain signalling those bodily sensations and emotions in anticipation of your coming performance moment. Yet, while it is helpful to know this and to realise that more last minute reading of your notes is not the answer, if you are unaware how to manage those emotions, you are likely to do whatever you can to avoid feeling them, because they feel unpleasant and you fear they that if you let those emotions in, they will overwhelm you more. If you already feel overwhelmed, you won't want to risk even more of the same! Unfortunately, by responding in that way, **your avoidance has exactly the opposite effect to the one you desire – the unpleasant feelings increase and don't go away.**

Carl Jung, the renowned Swiss psychiatrist identified this phenomenon a long time ago, examining what happens when we seek to escape from feeling something by avoiding it or pushing it away. Jung's conclusion was that "what you resist, persists", meaning that the more you resist anything in life, the more you bring it to you. So, if we accept that "what you resist persists", what then could be an alternative response? And how can we be confident of learning to respond differently when we've had so many experiences of feeling nervous in these situations, that we think this is just how we are and that anything else appears impossible?

How to change direction: acceptance

I come across this sense of resignation regularly when I work with people. When they've got it into their heads that they are a certain way, they have plenty of evidence and are keen to prove themselves right. And I completely get it – this is how it has been for you so far. That is what you can see. The question is, does it have to remain so in the future? To consider that question effectively requires us to look at our mindset. Are we open to discovery and curious to find out if we can somehow learn to handle our nerves, or are we straight back inside that past story recalling all the times we didn't succeed and convinced we have no chance? Fundamentally, that is the choice before us with any challenge in life. The bad news is that there is no right answer "out there" – the only person who can make that choice is you. What will you decide about yourself? Will you disempower yourself and choose your tried and trusted response, or will you step into the unfamiliar and consider there may be more you can learn? One thing I will suggest to you at this point before you decide is this: consider that unfulfilled possibility is still possibility. In other words, something you have not yet managed to fulfil, can still be fulfilled. And that can be exciting to reflect on, provided that you are willing to take a stand for your personal growth and development.

I am sharing my personal story as I really and deeply believe that anyone – if they are courageous enough to take themselves on – can improve their relationship to nerves and performance anxiety in performing situations. You don't need to be a musician to appreciate the underlying principles here, as these are common to all areas of performance challenge in whatever discipline.

My performance anxiety story

Those kinds of resigned thoughts, like “how can it be different in future when it’s always been this way?”, are exactly what I used to experience as a performing musician when I studied music at university many years ago. Despite getting a positive reception from the audience after my performances on piano, all I could see was how unpleasant the whole experience was. I would get through the programme in a way that appeared confident to others, whereas to me it was an ordeal, and the sinking feeling of nerves beforehand and, to some extent, during the playing, feeling almost sick before going on stage, left me thinking it was an experience I did not want to repeat. At the age of 20 I gave a recital for my university degree, which, despite it getting a very good mark, was so daunting and overwhelming that I decided I did not want to do this anymore. It was not worth all the agony!

Fast forward some 10 years and I was taking a personal development programme. In one of the sessions, the trainer asked us all to recall an area in our lives where we had given up on something. Instantly what came to mind for me was my performing on piano and giving recitals. And immediately with that memory came feelings of great sadness and regret, loss of something which, deep down, was really important to me, but which I had allowed myself to withdraw from because of a fear of nerves.

It was a real turning point for me to get the insight that **deep down, I loved to play and perform**. This re-ignited my determination to have another go at performing. I suddenly saw everything differently: whatever happened in the past was now in the past. It didn’t have to be that way in the future. I had the insight that I could approach the challenge of performing in a new way: **rather than trying to suppress or avoid the nerves, fight against them or resist, how would it be if I accepted them as a natural part of the process?** As I thought about this, I instantly recalled how my teachers and other professional musicians had always told me that feeling nervous in performing situations is normal, but I had never allowed this idea of normality to sink in. I hadn’t been able to imagine or accept this. Now, I had an opportunity – fueled by sheer excitement and curiosity – to try something new and different.

It is OK not to know HOW to achieve your goal: HAVING a goal is what matters

I did not yet know HOW I would do this, but I knew WHAT I would now do. I would schedule and organise a recital in 6 weeks’ time, enough to prepare a 40-minute programme, and I would see it as an opportunity to reprogramme my approach to performance. I would take on the advice I had received in the past from professional musicians, consider that nerves are a natural part of performing, see what shows up if I do that. I would make sure I prepared the pieces as thoroughly as possible, so I would have the notes learned thoroughly and my interpretation clear enough in my mind not to have to think about them. Memorisation – I could even try that if I really wanted a big stretch goal! The possibilities seemed endless, but importantly they also seemed real, as if I could actually accomplish what I was setting out to – **to LIVE my performance instead of trying to SURVIVE it!** In other words, to enjoy the experience of those few minutes on stage in front of an audience, rather than wishing it would all be over asap.

Preparation and visualisation

Over the next 6 weeks, I noticed immediate differences as I prepared for the coming recital, held at Chartered Accountants Hall for colleagues at the Institute of Chartered Accountants, with donations in aid of Shelter. The immediate difference was that I was focused and looking forward to the event, seeing clearly what I needed to do to prepare and not worrying about what could go wrong. And I was imagining the hall set for the concert, the audience, the platform, the sense of occasion. It became ever more satisfying to take the time and go deeply into preparing the pieces I had chosen, including works by Faure, Brahms, Beethoven, Debussy and Mendelssohn. It all felt so worthwhile, and it gave me confidence to practise this way, as I discovered new aspects to the pieces and could focus on raising my game to play them as well as possible.

Familiar situation: new mental map to navigate it

When the day of the concert came, a lunchtime concert, I was there in plenty of time and could feel the build up of adrenalin and the sense of my breathing changing, tingling and butterflies in the stomach. The difference was that I could really embrace this as all being part of the package, rather than something to fight. I was able to keep an open mind and **reframe the recital as something generous where I could contribute and share my love of music**. That idea of being of service to others, appreciating that they were giving their lunchtime to come and support me and listen, was a vision that inspired me.

When I was welcomed on stage I was excited and I walked tall onto the platform. Why not? I could now see it as my moment to communicate with an audience, a privilege and opportunity that doesn't come every day. No-one else was going to play. So, I went on with conviction and passionately attempted to do my honest best.

I smiled and bowed and sat down to play. I gathered myself, noticing the flurry of thoughts and feelings, taking time for a few slow breaths before beginning in my own time. Once I played the first notes of the Brahms, it was as if everything shifted and fell into place. I wasn't having to think hard about reproducing the music I had rehearsed. Instead it was a unique performance, informed by my practice, but not limited by it, so I was free to go with the flow in the moment and **perform rather than just play**. What that means is – paint the picture and communicate the key messages of the music, rather than just deliver the notes. It is so freeing - in the moment - to be able to sense that focus and feel free to perform. And it was something completely new which was unlike anything I could recall before when playing on stage.

The rest from there on was a bit of a blur really. Each piece seemed to go fine, the programme flowed and the time passed happily. Most of all, I was so grateful and able to enjoy my time in the spotlight. **I had achieved my dream of actually being able to LIVE rather than SURVIVE my performance.**

What did I do after that and what did the experience teach me?

The significance of the recital experience and what it did to free me and give me a completely different experience of performing did many things for me. Initially, it fueled my desire to repeat the experience and to perform more recitals. I started to play, beginning with that same programme, every 2-3 months wherever there was an opportunity – music clubs, local events, fundraising for one of my local churches. Each time, it was the same experience of lightness and freedom, built upon the thorough preparation that preceded each concert.

More broadly though, **it completely transformed my interest in presenting. I could step up at work and happily take the microphone and speak to groups of people, in ways I could never have imagined.**

Many years passed, during which presenting and taking a leadership role in discussions became the norm for me in my career in international membership organisations, ensuring that everyone participated and seeking feedback from conference audiences as a key part of gaining buy-in for new strategic ideas.

Then, in 2020, after spending 21 years as a senior regional leader in a respected global accountancy network, I could see new horizons and a new vision for what I wanted to do, drawing on my professional experience of running global membership organisations and, particularly, empowering and supporting their executive staff and teams to perform at their best, working with me as a coach and mentor, drawing upon my my musical performance and performance anxiety experience.

I took a training to become an executive coach and I had invested in developing my mediation skills through mediation-focused leadership training over the past 8 years, both trainings being so practical and useful in helping me improve my effectiveness as a coach and mentor. As with musical performance and the importance of contributing and communicating to an audience, I could focus on the person sitting opposite me and on supporting their needs, rather than worrying about myself and mine.

Live Your Performance Consulting Services

I established my consulting business, incorporating coaching and mentoring services, under the name **Live Your Performance Consulting**. It was a no-brainer – I wanted to support and enable others to get the same experience I had benefited from **in LIVING rather than SURVIVING their performance, be it as a conference presenter, a team leader, a committee chairman.**

While much of the work I do is for international membership organisations, like global accounting networks, I tailor my coaching to support anyone in whatever sector they work in, to help them get a new perspective beyond their blind spots and current performance challenges if that is something holding them back. There are many common areas of challenge that people bring up in our work together, no matter what professional background they come from. Among these challenges are:

- Limiting beliefs
- Blind spots
- Fear of failure
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of clarity
- Reluctance to set limits and say no
- Pleasing others to avoid conflict

As we look into these challenges together, new ways forward start to emerge for people when they reflect on:

- Awareness of their emotions
- Seeing their needs and those of others
- Noticing where they've given up on something important to them
- What's at stake that makes this challenge worth the work?
- What's the benefit to them in not dealing with something they say is important?
- Going beyond the comfort zone of having to seek others' approval, while discovering and respecting others' needs
- Going for it – taking a big step and committing to action when they don't have all the answers
- Self-management
- Addressing and resolving conflicts peacefully
- Realising their vision

My [Live Your Performance Coaching Programme](#) for executives is designed to take people on an empowering journey from self-suppression to self-expression; in other words, to give them confidence to step out and be themselves and draw on their natural strengths as leaders. To realise that to be your authentic self is the best place you can operate from, especially if you are as bad an actor as I am! I see so much pressure people put themselves under, to live up to some image they cling to as the “right way” or the “only way” to lead or present. It's a huge burden, and it's a pretence trying to be someone or something other than yourself. One important caveat on being yourself: during our work together we look carefully together at who you consider yourself to be, so that while your past informs who you are in the present, it does not limit who you can be now and for the future. I call this reinventing your worldview and how you see yourself. This Programme comes with solid processes and tools and is designed for anyone who is courageous and serious about going beyond where they are now and producing new results in how they lead and live their lives.

What would it mean for you if you could:

Stay focused on your strengths?

Be proud of your achievements each day, rather than focusing on the one thing that didn't go so well?

Reproduce your successes because you know what the source is? That way, you have something powerful to draw on when things aren't going so easily, as well as when they are

Reassess the risks in taking actions that, currently, you're not taking, but want to take?

Notice what it's costing you in lost time, energy and morale by standing still. Free yourself from worry about rocking the boat and step out!

What area do you want to develop, but struggle to see how to?

Your area of challenge may not be to do with performing on stage or presenting to an audience. In case you're thinking "well, my issue is different", consider this. Underneath every challenge is the common obstacle of mindset whether we are aware of it or not. In the same way we only become aware of the air we breathe when it smells especially pure or, on the other hand, polluted, we similarly are rather blind to our mindset when left to ourselves. We need to remember to focus on it consciously. By working with your coach, you will be alerted to notice your mindset regularly, so that, by yourself, you become curious and want to tap into the tools and processes that help you shift your mindset. This is a big part of what we work on together. Because as you start to direct yourself towards your mindset challenges, you can make a difference and shift into a new mindset with all the choices and new perspectives that shift brings. That is what I mean by putting your hands back on the steering wheel of your life, rather than the sense of being driven by someone or something else.

If anything here calls to you and you sense you want to grow and not hold back, reach out for a free discovery call.