

HOW TO TALK ABOUT SHAME IN THE WORKPLACE

- A WORKSHEET AND ACTIVITY GUIDE

Braveologist 

The 'Why' of this Guide

The purpose of this guide is to assist internal coaches, facilitators and HR/Learning and Development professionals who are familiar with the work of Dr Brené Brown, to introduce and hold conversations about shame in the workplace, alongside your own reading and research. Shame is a universally human experience related to our perceptions of how others see us and judgements of not being good enough.

In the workplace, this can show up as low confidence, relationship conflict, a fear-based culture that stifles creativity and innovation, with the workforce unable or unwilling to have the sometimes-difficult discussions that are necessary for change and adapting to the needs of the team or the business.

Understanding how shame affects performance and how to develop resilience is important for the workforce, because feeling 'not good enough' will impact loyalty, job satisfaction and commitment. It's important for leaders (with and without titles) because without knowing how you 'do' vulnerability (and therefore cope with risk and uncertainty), it'll be unlikely you can develop the resilience and capacity for difficult and uncomfortable conversation that is often vital in moving the team or organisation forward.

It includes some key definitions and activity ideas you may find helpful to kick-start your ideas and planning as you develop your own change-interventions, in-house. I hope it helps – I created it in response to several requests for help after fellow change-makers attended The Daring Way™ training and wanted to introduce some ideas into their organisation. You are welcome to use it and copy it freely - please credit the source.

I would love to know how you get on – you can contact me through www.braveologist.co.uk. Please note this worksheet does not equip you to call yourself a Certified Daring Way™ Facilitator – you can find out more about this and the Daring Way work at www.thedaringway.com.

Disclaimer

Talking about emotions, especially shame, can be challenging. These principles may help as a guide - they are based on my 20 years of experience as a facilitator, and 18 months of facilitating conversations about shame. You'll want to adapt these based on your own experience of your workplace and use your judgement about what will serve people best and what you can hold space for. Here's what I do:

How to prepare yourself to have conversations about shame

I set clear intentions for the group based on what I wish for them and what I want the session to have in it. Mine are deep, because the whole Daring Way experience is a deep-dive into some of the shadowy stuff - usually including feeling free, powerful and supported for the people, and having laughter and fun alongside the challenging conversations. I start doing this as soon as I know I'm facilitating a group - I start 'connecting in' right back at preparation stage so there's a momentum of 'intentioned support' ready for the people by the time we get to the actual start of the workshop or session. Momentum counts!

People have a strong, visceral reaction to shame, and the word 'shame'. You might call it something else if you think this could be true for your people. I've used 'not feeling good enough' 'never feeling ready', 'thinking that something is Wrong With You, all the time across many situations', 'that thing that happens when you beat yourself up in your head and make it mean you've failed'. As long as you are clear about the definition for yourself, you don't necessarily need to use the 'S' word if you think it's too much for your group.

Key Concepts (based on but not limited to the work of Brené Brown)

Shame

The intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is defined as “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. Maybe the core of all emotions because without vulnerability, we are likely to be unwilling to feel, love, and fully utilise our creativity.



'Imperfections are not inadequacies; they are reminders that we're all in this together.'

Brene Brown

Empathy

Empathy and shame are on opposite ends of a continuum. Empathy is defined here using Teresa Wiseman's four attributes of empathy. Sometimes we don't make an attempt at empathising with someone else's experience because we don't know what to say. Here are some words: *"That sounds really hard, I'm so glad you told me."*

- To be able to see the world as others see it
- To be non-judgmental
- To understand another person's feelings.
- To communicate your understanding of that person's feelings

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is extending compassion to one's self in instances of perceived inadequacy, failure, or general suffering. Kristin Neff has defined self-compassion as being composed of three main components – self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.



Boundaries

Personal boundaries are guidelines, rules or limits that a person creates to identify reasonable, safe and permissible ways for other people to behave towards them and how they will respond when someone passes those limits. Brené's definition is "what's ok and what's not ok".

Trust

Is developed incrementally and over time, when we can rely on someone to do what they said they would do. Brené breaks trust down into component parts, demonstrated in her acronym 'BRAVING':

B – Boundaries. You respect my boundaries + when you are not clear about what's OK and what's not OK, you ask. You are willing to say no.

R – Reliability. You do what you say you'll do. At work this means staying aware of your competencies and limitations so that you don't over-promise and are able to deliver on commitments and balance competing priorities.

A – Accountability. You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.

V – Vault. You don't share information or experiences that are not yours to share. I need to know that my confidences are kept and that you are not sharing with me information about other people that should be confidential.

I – Integrity. You choose courage over comfort. You choose what is right over what is fun, fast, or easy.

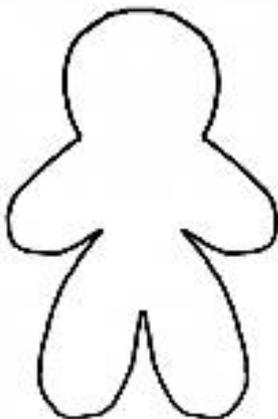
N – Non-judgment. I can ask for what I need, and you can ask for what you need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment.

G – Generosity. You extend the most generous interpretation possible to the intentions, words and actions of others.

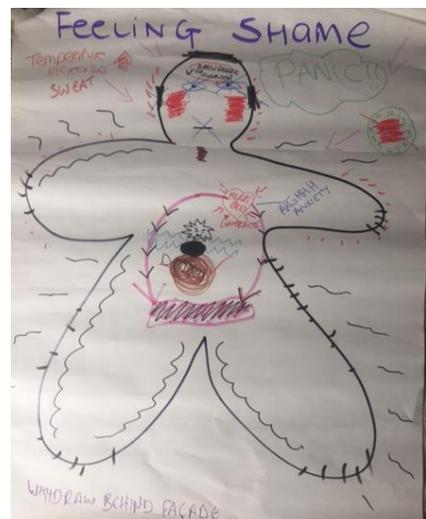
Activities for the team:

Talk about what shame is (see the resources links and do your own research first) and then:

- ✓ Have people practice empathy by talking about something important to them (related to your context or topic) and have them practice empathy with each other, circling back and trying again. This will help people get more comfortable with 'empathic failure' and be willing to try again which will help to build trust over time.
- ✓ Help people develop their self-compassion - plenty of exercises and ideas at Kristen Neff's site*. Developing skills in self-compassion and trust create oxytocin in the body, a buffer against the cortisol produced in the stress response*
- ✓ Trust is developed incrementally and over time. Use the marble jar story* to demonstrate that idea and have the people explore what represents marbles in your workplace and what represents marbles not going into the jar (remembering birthdays? Doing what you said you would do? Communicating what's going on?)
- ✓ Help people understand how they feel when they don't feel good enough (have them draw what happens in their body on a flipchart or on paper – use the shape on the left:



It'll end up looking something like this →



Activities for the team (continued)

- ✔ Explore where people 'go' when they get triggered in relationships – do they 'move away' (withdrawal), 'move against' (aggression) or 'move towards' (compliance) - you could draw a different shield for each strategy and have people stand on them or sit on chairs representing them - helps people recognise how they currently disconnect when things get tough. These three styles link with stress-responses: flight, fight or freeze.

- ✔ Teach people boundaries - at its most basic level this is about what's ok and what's not ok. You could have them create a physical boundary by drawing a circle around themselves, or drawing it in the air and imagining it a bright colour, or working in pairs to discover what would be ok and what would not be ok, around a given situation in the workplace.

- ✔ Teach people to b.r.e.a.t.h.e slowly, deeply, and into the stomach, holding the breath in between counts, and expelling all the air slowly. This activates the body's relaxation response.



**'Organisations rise (or fall) to
the level of consciousness of
their leaders'**

Frederic Laloux

Resources

- ✓ Brené Brown's websites: brenebrown.com, thedaringway.com, courageworks.com
- ✓ Kristen Neff's site exploring self-compassion - www.self-compassion.org
- ✓ Empathy vs Sympathy (Brené Brown) – 2.53 video [Empathy video](#)
- ✓ Strategies for disconnection and relations theory resource links for further reading: [book](#), [paper](#)
- ✓ The anatomy of trust 24 min video – the marble jar story is within the first five minutes - [The Anatomy of Trust video](#)
- ✓ Evidence for oxytocin buffering stress-related cortisol release – see [here](#) for journal resources to start you off!
- ✓ 'Empathy pioneer' Karla McLaren's website and work on emotions: <http://karlamclaren.com/>.



Bio

I'm Jacqui Sjenitzer (you pronounce it 'shane-itzer'). I have a Masters degree in Psychology and I am a certified coach with the ICF (International Coach Federation) and a Certified Daring Way™ Facilitator. Also, recovering perfectionist 😊.

I'm a coach, psychologist, facilitator and trainer, and the main purpose of my work is to create spaces for courageous conversations that transform the way things are, for individuals, for teams in organisations, for coaches. For the better.

I work with people 1:1 and through workshops and consultancy to help them develop their happiness and courage. Find me at www.braveologist.co.uk.

