

## Transcript - In Conversation with EY's David Brewin - Managing mental health in a high-pressure role

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Host 00:03

Welcome to Future Talent Learnings In Conversation podcast series, where we talk to business leaders and thinkers to uncover their perspectives about the changing world of work. This episode is hosted by Future Talent Learnings, Karam Filfilan.

Karam 00:20

Today, I'm joined by David Brewin, partner at EY. To his colleagues at EY, David has always been the super reliable, personable high achiever. The sort of person you turn to when you need something solved in a hurry.

Karam 00:31

A trait he has demonstrated time and again in his 20 year career with the organisation. However, David's professional successes masks feelings of detachment and depression that he has felt for most of his adult life.

Karam 00:41

And that he has kept hidden from the outside world. But in 2010, things came to a head. A personal relationship David was in ended and he was asked to take on a stressful project at work, the culmination of which left him, in his own words, unable to function.

Karam 00:56

In the midst of a breakdown, David's secretary intervened, calling a cab that took him directly from work to the Priory Clinic, where he ultimately spent a month. In this podcast, David discusses the moment his secretary called in to say he needed help, how he came to terms with the disconnect between his intellectual capacity and his own emotions, and why mental health is ultimately about being honest with ourselves about our own feelings, desires, and needs.

Karam 01:19

Thank you for joining us on this Changeboard podcast. Just to start, I thought it might be worth you kind of telling us in your own words, the situation and background that kind of led you to having your breakdown and what kind of prompted it.

David 01:35

Sure. Well, it's a long story, which after I condensed a little bit, so having been in the profession since 1985, and having been by any kind of empirical standard reasonably successful during that period, I'd had various kind of small episodes of what I see now and understand now as clinical depression.

David 02:03

I didn't have the language to articulate that or understand that. And life was good in that I was being successful, I was married, I had two children, and professional life was successful. And so I kind of really just shrug that off and pushed on.

David 02:22

And then through a change of circumstances, and I'd subsequently got divorced, I was in a relationship. And the combination of that relationship breaking down and being asked to take on a very challenging role in the firm, that role I felt was well within my normal capability.

David 02:44

And I think the firm would agree with that. But I found myself in a position where I just couldn't get started, I would be in a situation where I'd look at the same piece of paper over and over, I knew really how to handle the situation.

David 03:01

It wasn't new, it was bigger and perhaps more complicated, but it was a normal kind of change situation. But I couldn't find myself. And I couldn't find myself really. And looking back on it now, it was a very scary moment, because during my entire academic career, school, university, and then professional career, there was something I always felt I could rely on was my ability to get things done, and think clearly, and come up with a plan of action.

David 03:36

And that was something that I felt was, I could rely on. And during that moment that had evaporated, I couldn't access that.

So that was a very scary moment. So I think it's probably not overstating it to say that during that period, I just lost myself, and I was not effective.

David 03:55

And that was becoming clear to the firm. And then, sort of out of the blue, I received a phone call from my secretary who works in our Leeds office, and at the time I was working here in London, who simply said, I've booked a taxi for you.

David 04:18

The taxi's outside. I've made an appointment for you to see a doctor at the Priory. You need to get in the car, and you need to go, and you need to go now. How she knew, who knows, but I got in the car, and I went, and I ended up staying in the hospital for the best part of a month.

David 04:44

And that was really how I came to be there. Since then, life has progressed positively, but that was the event that precipitated my time in hospital.

Karam 04:59

You talk about that moment of kind of paralysis that day where you kind of sat down and you knew what needed to be done in the task. You'd always been the person, the go-to person that could get things done in the organisation, but you just couldn't do it.

Karam 05:11

There was like a paralysis.

David 05:14

I couldn't, I couldn't seem to get my head to work. It was a strange thing to explain and it's a strange thing to try and remember now in, but it was, you know, as an analogy, it's sort of like paralysis is the right thing.

David 05:28

It's like, you know, it was physical, you can't walk because your legs aren't working. I couldn't get my head to work in the way that it needed to work. And I, you know, I don't know what the medical explanation of that is, but it was certainly, well, if I can't do that, I can't do anything.

David 05:48

That's what it felt like. And that's why it was so scary at the time.

Karam 05:54

And what was the feeling like once the core came through from your secretary, once you knew the car was outside? Was it a feeling of worry? Was it a feeling of relief? How did that transpire for you?

David 06:07

Yes, it was strange in that, you know, looking back on it, I might have thought I'd be saying, you know, you've got to be joking. I don't need to do that. But at the time, it was sort of relief, resigned acceptance.

David 06:23

And I'm very relieved. I'm not sure what might have happened if I call hadn't come through, because I'm not sure I would have had the capability to do that myself almost. So certainly looking back on it, I'm hugely appreciative of it.

David 06:42

And at the time, I can remember feeling relieved and acceptance that I needed to get some help.

Karam 06:50

And you know, I'm interested in that you say that you'd had these kind of episodes of depression. I think, again, an interview talk about feeling more like compression rather than being depressed necessarily.

Karam 07:00

I mean, what kind of stopped you seeking help previously? Or did you not feel like that was something that you needed at that time?

David 07:07

Well, I did I did seek help. So during that period from, I guess, firstly, 99 through to 2010, so 10 or so years, my career was progressing very well. But during that period, I did seek some professional help.

David 07:23

And I would go and see a therapist. And I can remember quite often Carol would ask me, how are you feeling right now? So she would observe some body language, perhaps. So David, tell me how you're feeling.

David 07:35

And my response always was, well, I think this. And she would say, I didn't ask you what you were thinking. I asked you what you were feeling. And at the time, I had no real distinction. I didn't understand the difference, which is quite an extraordinary thing.

David 07:53

But I don't think I really understood it. I might have understood it in a sort of theoretical sense. But I didn't understand it in an emotional sense, the difference between how I felt and what I thought about things.

David 08:07

And certainly, looking back on it now and through the work that I did in hospital, there was certainly a sense that previously, I would live my life, as it were, from the neck upwards, to process everything in my head.

David 08:23

And then, of course, when the event happened and my head didn't work anymore, that was kind of like game over sort of thing. So this disconnect between head and heart, or however you might describe it, was significant.

David 08:37

And looking back on it now, it was the way in which I connected with the world was much more through my head than my heart. And I think what was happening is that I wasn't getting what a fully functioning human being needed, because I wasn't engaging in the world as a complete fully functioning human being.

Karam 09:02

And is that something you'd always felt? Is it something you'd always felt throughout? Because you've been quite clear again that that work didn't cause these issues. This was something that you felt you've kind of been dealing with your entire life before.

Karam 09:13

Was that a feeling that you'd always had before?

David 09:16

I think I'd always felt sort of slightly, you know, disconnected or different or, you know, there are analogies that people have used, you know, seeing the world from behind a plate glass window, not quite fully connecting with other people in the way that other people seem to connect with each other.

David 09:34

So I never really, you know, I can remember that being the case when I was a teenager, but I never really thought that that was that significant other than that's the way I am. And that's the way other people are.

David 09:49

As to whether work caused this event breakdown, cooler what you will know in that, you know, that was a that that was sort of 20 or 30 years coming. And ironically, you know, it might have been better if I'd had that event, you know, at 28 or 32 than than when I did have it.

David 10:11

So it was it's an era like accumulation of just not being fully connected to the world. The those two events happening at the same time, you know, is that anybody's responsibility? No, did work create that?

David 10:28

No, that was simply the time when my way of being in the world just wasn't going to work anymore.

Karam 10:36

Sure, and did you have to learn how to kind of listen to your emotions? You know, you talk about now, or again in the interview you talk about now when you're stressed, you can physically feel it in your chest.

Karam 10:48

Yes. At the time pre the event, was this not something that you could feel or this was not something that you knew was happening to you? Or was it, how did it kind of feel to you?

David 11:00

It didn't ever manifest itself in the same way as it does now it was you know I wasn't open to it, I would just you know push on, ignore it. Not even be sensitised to it. So sort of mind-body problem or you know, I'm much more aware of what my physical body is telling me and I take appropriate action.

David 11:27

I don't, you know, I'm like all of us you know, I'm not remotely an expert at this. So I will have stressful situations and I don't always respond how in hindsight I would like to have done, but certainly vast majority of the time I'm aware, much more aware of what my body is telling me and I check in to that and I listen to it and I act accordingly.

Karam 11:51

And just going back to that, the time that you spent in the priory, I mean, again, you've said to me previously that, you know, some of the people that you saw there were kind of some, it was the sanest place you'd ever been in your life, really, and the experiences and the kind of peer-to-peer sharing you got from other patients there was almost the best thing about it and the most helpful sort of thing.

David 12:12

Yes, it was and I, you know, that's not to be disrespectful to the counsellors and the doctors there, but I think the value, and I'm sure they would, you could ask them, I'm sure they'd probably agree, the value comes from being in an environment where you will be in a group session and you will be listening to somebody and you will sort of see the construct they created there for themselves, you know, a wonderful, caring, supportive mother who has developed this view that she is not any good at anything and as an external observer of that conversation you can see that this is sort of all made up somehow because of the interactions that I'd had with her, that she was none of the things she thought she was.

David 13:01

She's a wonderful person and you go around the room and you pick the nuggets of all of these and then you realise that actually, well, that's just me, you know, I've just created this complete construct which is not real and that's just, the penny drops very profoundly when you can see it in somebody else and then you are, then you turn the mirror on yourself and say, okay, well, you know, yeah, I guess that's me too and that's the moment of change or it was the moment of change for me.

Karam 13:38

In what in what way whether you

David 13:40

You just make up sort of strange narratives born out of something you think is true which isn't true and you know, am I a decent person, yes I am a decent person. Do I care about other people, yes. Am I capable and good at my job, yes I am.

David 13:55

Do I make mistakes, yes, like everybody else. But you get a better balanced view of reality rather than this made up notion of something that actually, you know, wherever it came from is just not real.

Karam 14:10

And does it take, do you have to kind of teach yourself that? Is that something you have to kind of work on day to day to try and change that kind of perspective yourself? Or as you said, is it like the penny drops something changed and that made a profound difference in the way you view it?

David 14:22

Well, I think, yeah, speaking personally, and I think other people might have a different process for this, but they're kind of penny-dropped in a number of those group sessions. And then you work on it, you continue to work on it, you catch yourself,

or I catch myself going into a place of, you know, you catastrophize things, you predict the worst possible outcome on no basis whatsoever, other than that's your process, you know, what could possibly go wrong?

David 14:52

All these five things, well, I better worry about them, then, well, they're not happened yet. And so all that sort of stuff, which is, you know, sort of classic CBT stuff, but you end up listening to your body, you listen to the thoughts that come into your head, and you've got no control over those, and I try to choose not to engage with some of those thoughts.

David 15:20

And if you don't engage with them, they'll just drift from your left ear out of your right ear. If you engage with them too much, they, in my model, they go down into your chest or your heart, and you start getting stressed about them, and these are just thoughts, they're not real, they're just thoughts.

Karam 15:43

And I'm interested also, just to move on slightly, again, when we spoke previously, you talked about kind of the disconnect between how we define ourselves as people. So, you know, we present one kind of side of ourselves, perhaps professionally or to certain people than we do to ourselves, to them than how we feel personally.

Karam 16:03

Why do you think people do this? If it causes so much stress and how can we kind of get out, how can we bring our whole selves either to the workplace or in our general lives?

David 16:13

I think that, you know, be a professional psychologist, better place to answer that than I am, but I think we learn that from a very early age. We learn, we watch our parents, we work in peer groups around school.

David 16:27

We know, we learn very quickly that presenting in one particular way will get us what we need, you know? And we like friends, we like affirmation, we like validation. So we present in a way to get those payoffs.

David 16:43

And I think that's just normal human progression. I think when it gets to be unhelpful and dysfunctional, as it did for me, you are either consciously or subconsciously focused on getting these payoffs all the time.

David 16:59

You've worked out that the best thing to do is, you know, you work out quickly what your boss wants, what your client wants, what your staff want, what your wife or husband wants. And in that whole dynamic, the question that never gets asked or answers is what do I want?

David 17:17

Sure, yeah. And then you begin to lose that because you're so invested in what does my client want, what does my boss want? And you get payoff from that, you get psychological payoff of validation and then of promotion and then of money and success.

David 17:32

But in all those conversations with yourself, you're never asking what you want. And then if you do too much of that, as I suspect I probably did, you then don't even know what the answer to that question is because you're so used to the process of school exams, university exams, professional exams, promotion.

David 17:57

You're so invested in delivering against that. You never ask that question, well, what do I want and what do I need to be happy? You're all stuck on a treadmill essentially. Yeah, you're almost addicted to this kind of validation rather than really asking yourself what is fundamentally important to me and what do I need?

David 18:18

And I think that's a kind of human existence problem. It may be exacerbated in certain industries and it may be exacerbated in the West and it may be more challenging now, but I think it's been there part of our condition really.

Karam 18:36

You say that, I know that was going to be one of my follow up questions was, I mean, you know, in the working environment, we're talking about kind of globalization. We're talking about kind of constant work emails.

Karam 18:46

We're talking about people being on all the time. It's actually in a work environment. Do you do you think things are getting worse for the kind of mental health from that point of view in terms of people not having the space to think and to take the time to talk to themselves essentially about what they want?

David 19:03

I think that's possible. I mean, I think, you know, over a workplace stress and ambition and challenge is not anything new. I think I do think that, you know, everybody has said this before. I think the mobile phone, the on all the time culture is is very challenging, whether that's particularly work email, you know, you can have and I saw a number of my colleagues will say, well, you know, I'm I worry more if I don't check my email, so it's better for me to check my email, then I don't have to worry again.

David 19:44

I think there's a higher order answer to that is that if you're going away as we all will be in a few days or weeks for Christmas, there's the temptation in a in a slow moment in a dull Christmas movie to pick up your phone and check your email.

David 20:03

I know and I believe this will be true for anybody. One stressy email where something isn't quite right and you've just read that. That will take you to a place that will take three days of relaxation to get you back to where you were before you read that email.

David 20:22

The problem with that is that. Do any of us really relax and unwind? And I think what I've you know, if I've learned anything, I've learned a lot since being in hospital is that it's not just your body that needs to relax, it's your your mind as well.

David 20:47

And the dualism, there isn't any they are connected. You know, if you have a thought, it impacts you here. And and so the risk that we run is we are trying to continually control something that is not capable of being controlled.

David 21:06

So the world just throws up quirks. Things go wrong from time to time. Clients get annoyed that we've not delivered rightly or wrongly. Occasionally, we don't deliver because it's just the nature of it.

David 21:18

If we are if you are trying to constantly keep all those balls in the air and not drop one of them. You simply that's just simply impossible. And the solution is certainly not to remain online 24 seven.

David 21:35

That's just going to increase the likelihood, in my view, of dropping the ball.

Karam 21:39

Do you think as leaders, we should be doing more to kind of combat that? I mean, for instance, in France, banning work emails after a certain time, or do you just think it's the technology in the world to move on?

Karam 21:50

It's not kind of possible to decide that to stop things, which has to come from with a self and a personal choice.

David 21:58

I think leaders and organisations have a responsibility to be thoughtful about how they behave and the modeling that they promote to their people. I think banning in after hours emails is just a clunky, unsophisticated approach.

David 22:22

I'm not sure that that works. I think what is it more a principle around if you're a leader of a business and you regularly send

emails on a 7 o'clock on a Sunday because you as far as you're concerned you've finished your Saturday, you've finished your Sunday and now you're kind of getting ready for Monday.

David 22:41

If you're sending them a 7 o'clock on a Sunday, I think there's a question that as a leader of people you want to ask whether that's helpful. You might want to send them just because it's your choice when you want to work.

David 23:01

That's absolutely fine. But you might just want to leave them in your outbox until you connect on Monday because the impact that we have as senior leaders, if we are sending emails on Sunday night at 7 o'clock and our staff get in on Monday and they see when it was sent, subconsciously or even consciously, you say, well that's what it takes then.

David 23:23

That's what it's about. Is that what I should be doing? So there does need to be much more of a consistency and a connection between leadership rhetoric and leadership behavior and reality. And so I think we were able to serve our clients very successfully and very capably before mobile phones existed.

David 23:51

And I'm old enough to know that because when I started there was no such thing as a mobile phone. So going on holiday, in my view, means going on holiday. Given we're in a client service industry and the world is in Starburn, those of us that are partners have both the benefits and the responsibility of those roles.

David 24:18

So my view and what I would encourage colleagues to do is that you need to be contentable because occasionally situations occur that require your involvement. Sure. And so you need to be contentable.

David 24:34

That's a landline that can be a mobile phone, but you can delete the app on your mobile phone that gives you 24 7 access to your email. And I would encourage people to do that. I have encouraged people to do that.

David 24:49

If something of significance happens on one of your clients whilst you're away, then you can always access email somehow. You can just put the app back on. Your secretary, your staff can contact you.

David 25:02

So it's not about abrogating your responsibility because that goes with the territory. It's about taking care of yourself so you can then take care of your people and take care of your clients. If you remain, in my view, if you remain on call 24 7 52 weeks of the year, there has to be a question around can you possibly be bringing your best to work every day for your people and your clients?

David 25:34

And the answer is you can't possibly be doing that. So it's in the interest of you as an individual, the organisation you work for, the people that you lead and the clients that you serve to take time off and turn your damn phone off.

Karam 25:51

It's about role modeling, isn't it? But it's more than just role modeling for other people. It's role modeling for yourself. It's making sure you take that time for yourself as well. I think that quite neatly leads on to a question I had around.

Karam 26:02

Obviously, you talk quite frequently now in conferences and events and to people about the issues that you faced and the events that you've been through almost as a role model yourself. But why do you put yourself through that if it's, surely that creates a stressful situation for you as well?

Karam 26:18

Or is it something that you feel that you want to talk to people about to raise awareness? Why do you decide to talk to people about these things?

David 26:25

It's not remotely stressful. I can assure you of that. I'm sure most people like talking about themselves and people phone me up and ask this. I don't find it stressful. If I find it anything, I find it humbling and it's a kind of responsibility in that if it helps people, then it costs me nothing.

David 26:48

I confess, you know, I've only got one speech, so those people that have turned up more than once will have heard it more than once.

Karam 26:55

It's a very good speech.

David 26:56

I only have that story. If that is helpful in any way on an individual level that people have been touched by it, then that's wonderful.

David 27:09

I'm proud of that. If it's helpful on an organisation level because it encourages firms, organisations to seek to embrace some of the challenges that we're all under now, then that's a good thing. So it's just a good thing to do.

David 27:27

It's not stressful. It's not people quite often write to me after the event or come speak to me after the event. And to say how brave I am, it's not brave. I mean, I'm not exposing myself in terms of my story is well known already.

David 27:53

It's well known in the organisation that the organisation here has been nothing other than supportive about me. So I'm not being brave. All I'm doing is and I think that's what most people would do. Other people might find it difficult to get up in front of people to speak.

David 28:18

I understand that. I've done that professionally for a long while, so I don't find that. But most of the people I've met during those kind of events all make a contribution. Most people that are fellow travelers, fellow sufferers, whatever we might call ourselves are all making some sort of contribution in some way.

David 28:42

In another way, I think it's a good part of my health to remind myself, to talk about that process, to remind myself about how I stay healthy, and to go through the process of talking to people about that, I'm hearing my words as well.

David 29:06

So that's a good reminder. So it's neither stressful, it's not exposing, it's not brave, and it's enjoyable.

Karam 29:15

Brilliant. And just what advice would you give to, I know you're not a big fan of this question, but what advice would you give to someone who's feeling things raised by this conversation, who's listened to you talk and thinks that they need some advice or they need some help?

Karam 29:29

What would your one piece of advice be?

David 29:35

My one piece of advice, if you crunch it down to one, would be talk to somebody. Now that, you've got to make the decision about whether that's a close friend, whether that's a husband, a wife, a work colleague, somebody in the medical profession, a therapist.

David 29:55

Most large organisations have a support structure, so you could take advantage of that. I can't say whether one of those is better than any of the others. It depends where the individual is at the time and how comfortable they are with it.

David 30:08

But certainly, that's what I do now. So if I find myself in a position where, you know, I'm drifting in an unhealthy direction, I



will speak to somebody. And it won't be, you know, I'll just pick up the phone and have a chat.

David 30:24

I might even not talk about how I feel. It's just the act of having a conversation with another human being is very helpful to me. The previous version of me would not do that. Would sit and wallow and disappear and withdraw.

David 30:42

So my point of encouragement is to have a conversation and share with another person how you are feeling and trust that that's a good thing to do.

Karam 30:56

David, thank you for your time, it was really helpful. Pleasure, thank you.

Host 31:06

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