



VANESSA MCCAMLEY

# OVERCOMING OBSTACLES WITH THE **BRAIN IN MIND**

**By Vanessa McCamley, Leadership and Performance Consultant, Coach, Facilitator, Author and Keynote Speaker**

Obstacles are part of life. They come in many forms: a large tree blocking the road when you're driving to your holiday destination; working remotely during a global pandemic; losing incorrectly saved data files; losing a big client or experiencing a health crisis. Sometimes obstacles appear insurmountable yet they must be overcome.

The aim of this article is to explain brain-friendly models of thinking and options that enable you to overcome obstacles without draining your precious energy and time.

## **LET'S DEFINE AN OBSTACLE**

The dictionary defines an obstacle as "something that stands in the way or that obstructs progress, a hindrance, impediment, or obstruction." Obstacles can be conceptualised as interfering forces that impede the standard course of action and must be removed or otherwise dealt with if one wishes to reach the desired end-state.

Obstacles come in many shapes: physical; social; mental. They can appear in a variety of settings (eg, organisational, private, clinical).

Sometimes obstacles can be bypassed by a change of thought or action. Sometimes they will slow progress until a workaround can be found. Sometimes they will reduce progress to a standstill until they can be removed or bypassed.

Have you noticed that the more we resist life's obstacles the more stressed we feel? It seems so counterintuitive. Yet when things are beyond our control, we can control only the way we react to them. Often we regret things that have already happened or resist things that may happen and these responses keep us stuck, holding on to what might have been or what we wish would be.

Humans are time travellers. We can go back in time through memories and forward to imagined future events. Our brain is a prediction machine that craves certainty, and the best way to predict the future is to create it. How we perceive and label life's experiences impacts how we store them in our brain's filing system. Faced with the current overwhelming volume of information, fewer resources and reduced budgets, we tend to primarily use our short-term memory. This means we are typically not creating sufficient long-

term memories to draw upon for innovation, problem-solving and decision-making.

**EMOTIONS ARE CONTAGIOUS**

Emotional contagion is the process by which an observable behavioural change in one person prompts the reflexive production of the same behaviour by others in close proximity with the likely result of emotional convergence ([Panksepp and Lahvis, 2011](#)). Our ability to regulate emotions contributes to how we bounce back from obstacles, hardship, disappointments, uncertainty and unexpected change.

How you show up every day and respond to life and work challenges affects those around you. You can affect the performance and productivity of those around you if you're in a bad mood or sending out negative energy. The reverse is also true; if you are happy, joyous, positive and calm you can lift the performance and productivity of those around you. In our current frenetic world being calm is critical to creating ideas and solutions and making sound decisions. I recommend not making important decisions when your emotions are heightened: it can result in more challenges than you bargained for.

Emotions are like the weather: you get to decide each day whether you are bringing the sunshine, clouds, rain or lightning.

Research indicates that leaders of high-performance workplaces and teams make their people laugh and smile three times more than those in low performing workplaces. Leaders in high-performance workplaces create an environment where people feel more rewarded by being valued, proud and cheerful.

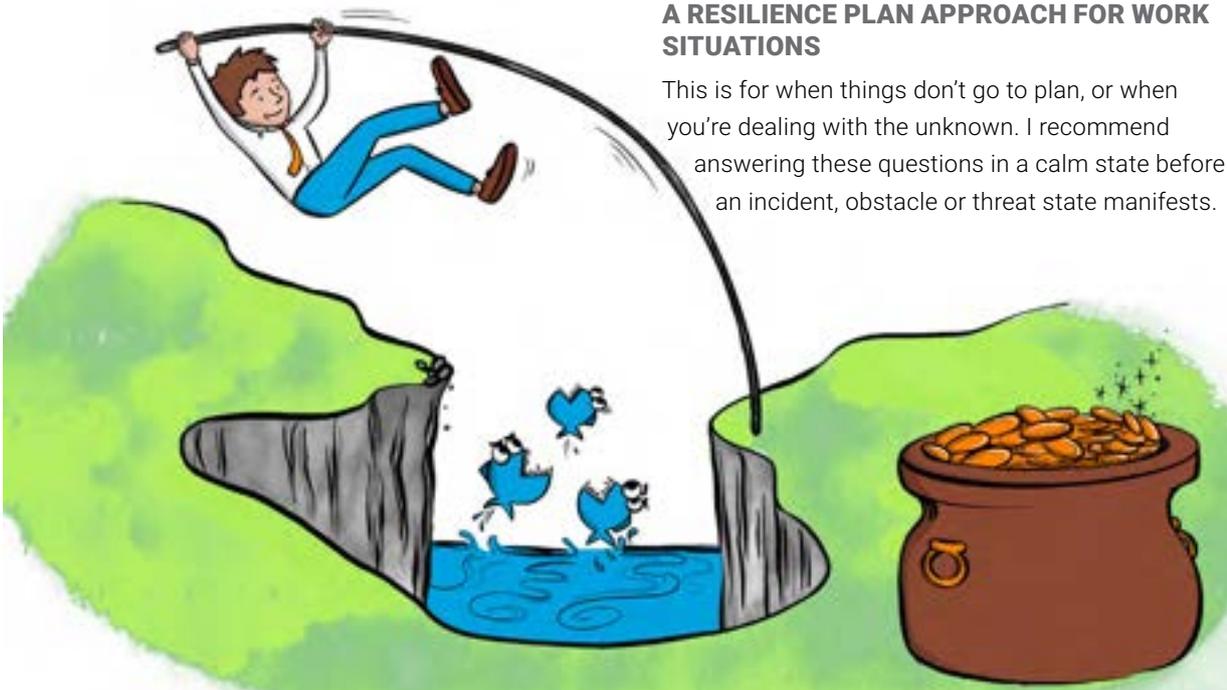
**RESILIENCE STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**

When I worked for an IT security organisation the company offered clients a fantastic service called an incident response plan (I am sure this is familiar to many of you). This is a set of instructions to help clients mitigate any potential IT security risks and breaches, and so reduce the chances of cybercrime, data loss and service outages that threaten daily work.

We sometimes have great processes like this in place for our professional lives, but not when dealing with our day-to-day challenges. We don't have a resilience plan as we do for our response to a fire in the workplace.

**A RESILIENCE PLAN APPROACH FOR WORK SITUATIONS**

This is for when things don't go to plan, or when you're dealing with the unknown. I recommend answering these questions in a calm state before an incident, obstacle or threat state manifests.



Introducing the PIR Model to prime the brain for obstacles

**Proactive protection** – What can you do every day to prevent known and unknown issues from interfering with your plan, goal or intention? Examples: exercising, taking brain breaks, protecting your deep thinking time, prioritising tasks, scheduling time in your diary for the unknown and reflecting on what is and isn't working.

Identify your threat and reward triggers. What is in your circle of influence? What do you spend significant time thinking about, even though you have no control or influence over the outcome? What can you do to mitigate or reduce the risk?

**Incident response** – Consider the steps, processes and options at your disposal. Identify people who can provide advice on the obstacle or incident. Consider creating a communication plan that incorporates internal and external stakeholders. Check that your 'go-to' people are happy to be on call and know how best to reach them.

**Tip** - Have some draft communications prepared ahead of time so all you need do is fill in the detail/blanks of your particular challenge. What are some of the goal posts you can move closer? Feeling you have accomplished even a small task will keep you motivated. Feeling 'on purpose' in your work is a key contributor to positive emotional wellbeing.

**Remediation** – What is your plan for applying the key learnings and removing the issue, challenge or obstacle when you next face a similar challenge? Aim not only to quarantine the problem but prevent it from recurring. It's time to get off the roundabout of doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different outcome (the definition of insanity).

When it comes to generating ideas, identifying options or finding solutions to problems our brain is like a filing cabinet. In busy situations, we tend to use the first drawer in the cabinet (our short-term memory) for our initial ideas, especially if we feel under pressure to deliver. For some people the first

idea may be the best option. For others allowing time to dig into long term memories to evaluate options is better. By creating a plan with evaluation options whilst calm, you are prepared when the storm or lightning hits.

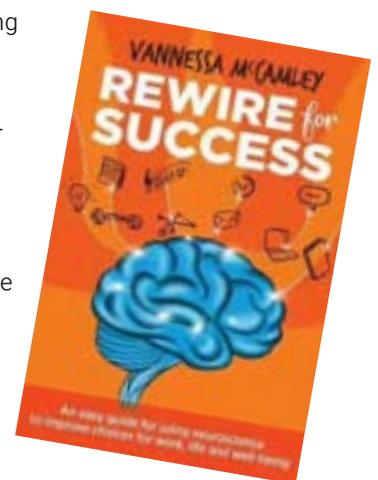
Obstacles come in all shapes and sizes that every human being must deal with regardless of who they are and where they come from. How you perceive and approach an obstacle is key to the choices you make and the outcomes of your decisions. In my experience it is not what happens to you that is most important, it is how you respond.

### ABOUT VANNESSA MCCAMLEY

Vannessa McCamley is a leadership and performance expert specialising in neuroscience practices that help individuals and businesses grow in meaningful ways whilst delivering measurable results in healthy ways.

She has a passion for helping people and businesses to overcome obstacles and enabling them to reach their strategic goals. She brings a strong background in IT security and more than 20 years of business experience in working extensively with individuals at all levels and from several industries.

She is the author of REWIRE for SUCCESS – an easy guide to using neuroscience to improve choices for work, life and wellbeing.



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