

“A powerful and
provocative book”

Dorie Clark, Author of *Reinventing You* and *Stand Out*.
Executive Education Faculty, Duke University
Fuqua School of Business

JUST ASK



Why Seeking Support is
Your Greatest Strength

ANDY LOPATA

With additional research from a pilot study conducted by John Jameson

Just Ask

First published in 2020 by

Panoma Press Ltd

48 St Vincent Drive, St Albans, Herts, AL1 5SJ, UK

info@panomapress.com

www.panomapress.com

Book layout by Neil Coe.

978-1-784529-23-9

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For Richard

And for anyone who feels alone and unable to ask for help.

Also for my Dad

Thank you for taking me on this journey.

“Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers.”

Voltaire

*“We might impress people with our strengths,
but we connect with people through our weaknesses.”*

Craig Groeschel

*“Vulnerability is not weakness;
it’s our greatest measure of courage.”*

Brené Brown

What Others Say

“A powerful and provocative book that takes on one of the biggest challenges facing both business and individuals today. A combination of candid case studies, expert insight and practical tips makes this an essential read for anybody who needs to be more confident asking for help.”

Dorie Clark, Author of *Reinventing You* and *Stand Out*. Executive Education Faculty, Duke University Fuqua School of Business

“I have spent my life developing incredible teams which go on to build exceptional companies. The invisible ingredient of the most successful companies is an extraordinary culture. But culture is not an abstract happening, it is the combined effort and shared spirit of people. Such alliance can only come about through communication and must be underwritten by trust.

In this book, Andy Lopata explains how authentic leaders understand that asking for help and revealing their true self establishes trust. Further, he explains how leaders can be strong and purposeful whilst still encouraging open dialogue.

Asking for support helps individuals and teams to overcome adversity. Teams where members are willing to ask for help achieve higher goals. Individuals achieve higher levels. Collaboration becomes the basis of growth and development.

I thoroughly recommend this book to anyone who wishes to lead, or to be part of, an extraordinary team and create a winning culture.”

**Kevin Gaskell, Ex-MD Porsche, BMW, Serial Entrepreneur,
Corporate Trailblazer**

“Too often, when we have an idea or a challenge, we are blinded by the accompanying emotions. We have our blinders on and aren’t privy to the challenges and opportunities before us. As the book explains, gathering multiple perspectives is critical to enhancing our work.

Learning how to process the varying guidance is equally as important. Lopata’s Review, Reframe, Respond framework is a useful and actionable model for seeking and processing guidance from others. It teaches how to tease out the useful information, pull apart other people’s biases and leverage the feedback.”

Ruth Gotian, EdD, MS

Chief Learning Officer in Anesthesiology

**Former Assistant Dean for Mentoring and Executive Director of
the Mentoring Academy**

Weill Cornell Medicine

Forbes and Psychology Today contributor

“As someone who would give you their last dollar, but wouldn’t ask you for a penny, this book really resonated with me. The strategies that Andy shares about how to ask for help are simple, pragmatic and powerful and I feel inspired to give them a try. This book is going to be a great help to many people who will now have the courage to ask for help, before it’s too late.”

Gordon Tredgold, Author of *F.A.S.T.*, International Keynote Speaker on Leadership, Forbes Coach, Contributor and Columnist for Inc, Forbes, Entrepreneur, Fortune and CEO World.

“This book should be required reading in the boardrooms of UK PLC and beyond. It is both thought-provoking and surprising.

Andy argues we have to stop lying every day responding to the question ‘How are you?’ with ‘I’m fine’. Often, we are not fine and actually could do with some help, but few ask because they perceive it as a sign of weakness.

Yet this ability to ask, says Andy, is vital for a healthy office culture and case histories he has gathered from around the world underline this, showing a trend towards compassion in business.

These are extraordinary times in which to live and thrive but Andy thinks people are beginning to realise they need to start being open and vulnerable. This book definitely proves you need to ‘Just Ask’.”

Lady Val Corbett, Founder of Lady Val's Professional Women's Network, The Corbett Network and Robin Corbett Award.

“Andy has done a brilliant job of making this difficult topic real through stories. He both normalises the extent of and variety of mental health challenges and then sets out a toolbox to start the journey of moving forward. All in an easy read too!”

Perry Burton, Head of People and Culture, Grant Thornton UK

“Entrepreneurs are under a lot of pressure to perform – often they encounter stress, complexity and difficult choices. For many entrepreneurs, they struggle to know who to talk to for support and camaraderie as they face these challenges. Sometimes they share too much publicly and damage their brand. Sometimes they bottle things up too much and it weighs them down.

This book explores the right way to ask for help so you can rebound feeling better and stronger than ever. You might also find you make deeper connections and lifelong friendships with trusted peers who go through business and life challenges together.”

**Daniel Priestley, Author of *Entrepreneur Revolution*,
Cofounder of Dent Global**

“Andy’s pragmatic and no-nonsense writing is refreshing to read. He challenges some of the thinking that has become the norm in society and encourages us to look at life through a different lens. A worthwhile read with lots of useful considerations.”

Jack Ismail, Partnership Director, Specsavers UK & ROI

“This book could quite easily have been speaking about me.

It’s the mirror so many of us have been holding up for so many years. Don’t show your vulnerable side, it’s career limiting. Don’t trust anyone. Throughout our careers we are told lots of ‘don’ts’.

Things have got to change; the world has changed. During the early part of 2020 and Covid-19, I lost four family members in one hit. I had no choice but to reach out to my genuine friends in my huge network, who couldn’t wait to provide me with virtual hugs, love and support. Andy was one of them.

So a very timely read for us all and to share with our family and friends. As Covid-19 swept into our lives like a tornado, it was also a timely reminder that we should let others in to help in the way that we are always helping others.

Congratulations Andy, for being brave, authentic and just the beautiful way you have articulated this message for us all to see the value of networks and friendships.”

**Dr Heather Melville OBE CCMI, Director,
People Networks & Client Relationship Programmes, PwC**

“In this book, Andy Lopata empowers the reader by demonstrating the art of asking for help and how it could be a powerful strategy for a successful leader and entrepreneur. Andy addresses how asking for help is not a weakness from different perspectives.

Having read this, I now feel confident asking for help, which I didn't before. *Just Ask* provides a mind shift for any leader and the knowledge to use it for better outcomes.”

**Shaikha Al Rahoimi,
Director of Strategic Planning Division,
Executive & Life Coach,
Board member of Emirates Strategic Planning and
Future Foresight Association**

“The world of work and how we as individuals interact is ever changing and never more so than in the past 12 months. In this new book, Andy Lopata helps the reader explore vulnerability, team work, sharing and seeking help. An easy to digest format with compelling stories to help the reader grow and develop. In my opinion a must read.”

**Michael Strawbridge,
Global Head of Content, Networks and Member Services,
The Learning & Performance Institute**

“*Just Ask* is the antithesis of a ‘self-help’ book but is rather a clarion call that we need to have both the courage *and* the strategy to ask for help and develop the capacity for others to do the same.

Where this book differs from conventional books is that the author role models his message by sharing his own story with vulnerability, among the other diverse and inspiring stories.

This brings his important message to life.

When someone asks ‘How are you?’ your reply will never be the same again.

Highly recommended.”

Steven D’Souza, Head of Executive Development, Bestselling Author, Leadership Consultant and Coach

“I found *Just Ask* full of insights and strategies, but most interesting for me were the real-life stories of so many people in different walks of life who had each benefitted from eventually asking for help.

I wish I had been handed a copy of *Just Ask* 30 years ago. Well done Andy for creating something that everyone should read.”

Richard McCann, Times No1 Bestselling Author of *Just a Boy*

“Andy Lopata’s new book *Just Ask* is a revelation!

Andy has created something which all of us absolutely need to read. This inspiring book has a fundamental message for us all: share how we really feel and don’t be afraid to ask for help when we need it. While global leaders demonstrate macho attitudes to solving problems, Andy reminds us our ultimate strength lies in allowing ourselves to display vulnerability and demonstrating authenticity. *Just Ask* allows us to become our own role models.

This book is an inspiring read. It motivates us all to take the plunge while providing an invaluable roadmap on how to reach out for help and in so doing, be an inspiration to others.

Seeking support truly is our greatest strength.

I loved it!”

John Stapleton, Co-Founder, New Covent Garden Soup Company

“Insightful, powerful, relevant book about understanding the change in mindset and courage needed today to fully appreciate and embrace the power of our networks. A must read.”

Charles Marcus,

President of The Empowerment International Group Inc.

**Ranked as one of the “Top 60 Motivational Speakers in the World”
by hunger2succeed**

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Prologue

This book begins with a dedication to Richard. Let me explain why.

In late March 2016 I heard the news that Richard had died suddenly. He had always been a fit and healthy man and no more information was offered.

Richard was one of the nicest men you could ever wish to meet. Known to family and friends as a ‘gentle giant’, he always wore a warm smile and was generous with his time and willing to help and support people in his network. He actively strived to make a difference to the people around him in his life.

As we waited for news of the funeral, many of Richard’s mutual friends exchanged shocked condolences and sought an answer. Nobody seemed to know what had happened. Richard was cremated in mid-April, a few weeks after his death. I couldn’t attend unfortunately but was told by several people that there was standing room only at the church.

A week later over 50 people travelled to Richard’s hometown for a walk in the surrounding hills (something that Richard loved during his life) followed by a memorial lunch.

Over half the people there took the opportunity to share a memory of the friend we had lost, and each of them told stories that had a common thread. Richard was one of life’s givers. He was always there for his network and friends and his attention would always be on what he could do for others, not on what they could do for him.

One mourner had flown in from Africa and she shared how Richard had travelled at his own cost for a week to help her to set up a charity in her native country.

Another flew into this small English village from the US just to pay his respects. He said something that was later to have huge resonance.

“You know what,” he started, “I still don’t know what Richard did for a living. Every time we met he was only interested in me, in what I was doing and how he could help. He never talked about himself.”

The next day I found out what had happened. My worst suspicions were confirmed. Richard had taken his own life.

His wife, Caroline, told me, “Richard was helping many people but wasn’t necessarily using his ability to develop the business that he strived for. You see, helping others to do what they strived to do and teaching them to do that was the way that he should have made a living. Giving was more important to him but that philosophy was to some extent his downfall.

“The fact that he helped others but didn’t leverage that gift to generate an income meant that he suffered financial difficulties. Those difficulties contributed greatly to his ultimate decision to take his own life.”

It’s a twisted irony that, when it mattered, Richard wasn’t able to allow that same network to help him. And I have no doubt that the people at his memorial lunch, those at his funeral and many others who couldn’t be at either would have had no hesitation in helping in any way they could.

Caroline ended her eulogy at Richard’s funeral by saying, “There are many memories to treasure, Richard was a unique and much-loved gentle giant with a very big heart, he will always be remembered with a smile.”

There was a lot of love for Richard in that room and, I’m sure, enough resource, both financial and emotional, to have ensured that he could have got back on his feet.

I’m not saying that Richard was wrong or at fault for not sharing his woes with his network. That oversimplifies a very difficult and complex situation and he sadly wasn’t the first person to have

chosen this drastic route rather than open up to people and let them help him. And he won't be the last.

So many things stop us from asking for help. What we don't always realise is that people want to help, they like to help and they will feel hurt if we don't let them help.



So many things stop us from asking for help. What we don't always realise is that people want to help, they like to help and they will feel hurt if we don't let them help.

Everyone at Richard's funeral and memorial lunch was hurting.

I believe that the world was changing dramatically, even before Covid-19 and the global lockdown that made us more aware of our own vulnerability, that of people around us and the need to ask for help.

Not least, we are moving away from an insular, macho attitude that is mired in the last century where we were judged on our strengths and ability to solve our own issues. An attitude that didn't discriminate; it impacted all of us, irrespective of gender or personality type. Richard certainly wasn't an 'alpha male' yet still he felt unable to share what was happening and ask for support.

We are moving towards a world where it's OK to share, OK to not know all of the answers. We are moving towards a world where 'vulnerability' is no longer a dirty word and where 'authenticity' is a buzzword.

But we're not moving fast enough.

About This Book

What's Holding Us Back?

As a society I believe that we are too slow to ask for help. The vast majority of us are brought up to believe that we need to know all of the answers, find solutions independently and look good. The rise of social media and the Instagram and Snapchat-fuelled selfie culture has compounded that belief, driving an obsession with creating the perfect look and the perfect life for our online followers.

It's not just about online interactions with relative strangers though. How often do you truly open up and be honest with your friends and family when asked how you are?



How often do you truly open up and be honest with your friends and family when asked how you are?

A decade or two ago we were overwhelmed by self-help gurus telling us to stop responding to the question 'How are you?' by simply saying 'I'm OK' or 'Fine thanks'. Instead, they told us to be positive. Suddenly everyone was saying 'I'm brilliant', 'I'm fantastic', 'I'm great', with a broad toothy grin that often hid a very different truth.

I noticed something similar within the professional community. I've been lucky enough to be a member of the Professional

Speaking Association (PSA) in the UK since 2003. The people I have met through the PSA are more than competitors, associates and colleagues; many of them are my friends. We call each other ‘our tribe’ and we mean it.

Yet even though we identify as friends, we are still not honest enough with each other. When we meet and catch up at regional meetings and conferences, behind the pleasure of seeing our friends we still want to shine. The same drive to look good is prevalent within a community of people who enjoy supporting each other.

So, when people ask us ‘How’s business?’ we reply ‘It’s fantastic’, ‘It’s great’, ‘I’m so busy’.

But we don’t always mean it.

I remember attending a regional PSA event a few years ago. One of the speakers was Steven Houghton-Burnett, who made a fortune by starting, growing and selling one of the UK’s first internet service providers and went on to be an excellent business and motivational speaker.

Steven was running a workshop that day and handed every delegate a questionnaire to complete at the beginning of his session.

One of the questions was: ‘What stage is your business at in its development?’

- A. Brand new (less than six months old)
- B. Young (less than two years old)
- C. Mature and stable
- D. Growing
- E. In decline

Not one person in the group was prepared to admit that their business was in decline. Everybody had a business that was either in its early stages, mature and stable or growing.

There were liars in that room. I know that there were liars in that room. I was lying! At that stage my business was in the middle of a slump. It was definitely ‘in decline’. But I didn’t feel comfortable owning up to that fact at that time and with that group. I’m sure I wasn’t the only one in that room pretending that their business was stronger than it really was.

The need to look good can often stop us from sharing, even with our closest family, friends and colleagues. We want them to think the best of us and that need overrides the possibility of getting support or advice that might change our situation, or at least make it more bearable.



The need to look good stops us from sharing. We want people to think the best of us and that need overrides the possibility of getting support or advice that might change our situation.

Prince William and Prince Harry have spoken out a lot about the ‘toxic masculinity’ that prevents people from sharing, particularly young men. In a 2017 interview, The Duke of Cambridge said, “For too long there has been a taboo about talking about some important issues. If you were anxious, it’s because you were weak. If you couldn’t cope with whatever life threw at you, it’s because you were failing. Successful, strong people don’t suffer like that, do they? But of course, we all do. It’s just that few of us speak about it”¹.

Myth Busting

I believe that people are now ready to see these myths busted and create a new world view. One where it is not only OK to be open, honest and vulnerable but also where it's positively encouraged. The success of Brené Brown's books and TED Talks² on the power of vulnerability and the willingness of big business to embrace the message suggests that we're more receptive to the need to change our approach than ever before.

It's important for individuals to know that it's OK to acknowledge what we feel, what challenges us and what is holding us back. You don't need to be positive all of the time.



You don't need to be positive all of the time.

Hippo Time

It's OK to be negative occasionally too. In Paul McGee's excellent book *S.U.M.O. (Shut Up Move On)*³ he talks about the importance of 'Hippo Time'. McGee explains that one of his friends told him that he didn't want to 'move on', as the book encourages when something goes wrong, he just wanted to wallow.

"None of us want to hear some well-meaning person telling us to cheer up when we've just experienced a major setback or disappointment," said his friend. "Telling someone to SUMO might in some circumstances be both insensitive and unhelpful, particularly if what they have experienced is serious and significant."

McGee explained, “When Steve used the term wallow, a picture of a hippopotamus wallowing in mud immediately sprang to mind. It was then that I realised that on occasions, before people can SUMO they may need to wallow – to have, as I call it, some *Hippo Time*.”

I love this concept of ‘Hippo Time’ and confess to wallowing myself on occasion. My objective in this book is to encourage you to be more open with your network. But timing is key and if you need time out first in order to process your feelings, move through the stages of frustration or grief and clear your head, then that’s fine. The important thing is not to wallow for too long, otherwise the negative feelings will start to take over and control your actions and responses.

I want you to feel that it’s OK to share. To recognise that constantly being independent and self-sufficient is counterproductive. Pretending that you know all the answers doesn’t serve anyone. It damages your morale and confidence; it means you repeat mistakes that others have already made and learned from; and it leads to inefficiency that costs you and the people around you.

Vulnerability doesn’t need to be framed as a sign of weakness. Saying ‘I don’t know’ doesn’t mean you’re not a star performer, high achiever or ambitious. Changing your mind or admitting your mistakes shouldn’t indicate weakness. It’s a strength and, in fact, humility is becoming increasingly important as a business skill.

People do want to help you. We enjoy helping people we care about.

Like everything there is ‘a time and a place’. It has become clear in the interviews I’ve carried out for the book that there are times when it’s definitely not appropriate to share. For the Premiership footballer, voicing doubts and a lack of confidence can mean the loss of their place in the team and their livelihood. For the New

Zealand marine it can be the difference between the rest of their squad relying on them and feeling secure in combat or not.

You can, however, create a strategy for sharing:

- Build a strong network of trusted contacts in whom you are comfortable confiding and with whom you are happy sharing.
- Have clarity about where in your life or career you need support and the people you'd be happy to turn to.
- Develop deep relationships with key people who will meet with you regularly, listen to your challenges, explore them with you, help you find solutions and hold you accountable for your actions.

When we hide in the shadows hoping that our anonymity will preserve our reputation, we don't allow that help to flourish. Without the support of others we're far more likely to fail. Help and support are all around us: all we need to do is ask.

The Just Ask Journey

It finally came together in a dream.

After months of frustration, high emotion and near despair, the elusive structure of this book came to me in a dream at about 3 o'clock in the morning on the Saturday before Christmas. And, appropriately, it was the unwitting help of two of my professional colleagues that brought it all together.

I dreamed that I finally found the right format for this book by collaborating with my colleagues, each of us taking one key area to focus on. Why those two colleagues I don't know. I hadn't actually spoken to them about the book and their expertise as represented

in the dream didn't reflect their expertise in real life. But that didn't matter.

I woke up with a start, scrambling to remember the details of the dream. I knew the answer was there. I knew that I was writing about courage – the courage to ask for help. I knew that the sections my colleagues were writing were planning and taking action. For the next three hours I sat in bed writing up a new chapter plan, bringing the themes in the previous manuscript into line with the new structure, before collapsing into a weary sleep around 6am.

But how did it come to this, over three years since the start of this project and nearly a year after the original manuscript had been completed?

Not Good Enough

Just five weeks earlier I had stood on stage at Ambition 2019, a conference I help to organise every year to support charities in my local area, and delivered my 'Just Ask' talk for the third time.

Originally this had been planned to be part of my launch campaign, a chance to celebrate the publication of the book with my local business community. We had even arranged with the key sponsor the purchase of a copy of the book for each delegate.

But I had no book to deliver.

Two weeks beforehand my publisher had emailed me to tell me that they didn't believe in the latest manuscript, the third draft of the book, and recommended that we agree to tear up our contract. This represented a huge setback to me. Not just to my dreams of seeing this book published but also, it felt, to my reputation. I had agreed a contract with one of the best known publishers in the world, celebrated it publicly and now they were declaring that I was not good enough.

I hadn't told anyone. I was well aware of the irony of not telling my network about this huge setback when it related to a book about transparency, vulnerability and asking for help. But I needed my Hippo Time. I didn't know whether I would share what was happening with the book in my talk but I knew it was a possibility. It was too raw to plan. However, as I came towards the end of my presentation, I knew that it felt right.

The response from the people at that conference was incredible. So many people came up to me and urged me to carry on and offering support. I even had the offer of an introduction to a new potential publisher the next day.

I needed that boost. I knew that this was an important book for me to complete and get out there but the frustration had been building up for months and I couldn't see a clear way ahead. I needed other people to confirm that my instinct was right.



I needed other people to confirm that my instinct was right.

Life Imitating Advice

My journey of writing *Just Ask* reflects much of the advice offered within its pages. Some books are easy to write and come together naturally. This hasn't been one of those books.

The feedback from my publisher wasn't the first time that they had been unhappy with the manuscript. The first was way too long, which I knew and accepted, and the second wasn't deemed a fit either. The second rejection really impacted me. I didn't agree with

the feedback and my initial response was anger. I had worked so hard on this book and was so attached to it that brutal critique of the end product wasn't well received.

But after a period of stewing and then reflection, I realised that I was far too close to be objective. I decided to follow my own advice and just ask. I reached out to a few people in my network who I really trust. Among them accomplished authors of highly respected and successful books and senior leaders in the corporate world.

A couple of people loved the book and, of course, I wanted to latch on to that feedback.

However, there was a common theme from a few more that I forced myself to listen to. As one reviewer put it, "You have a brilliant book here Andy but this isn't it."

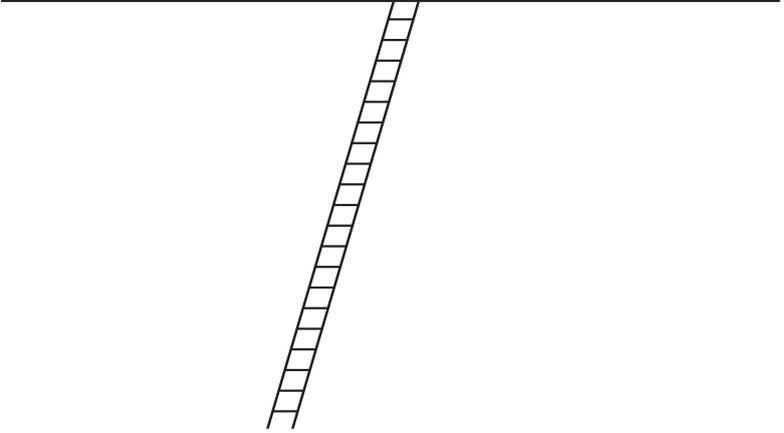
It was back to the drawing board. I went away to the mountains in Ireland and I restructured the book. Again, I went to more people in my network for their objective feedback and again the message was that the book wasn't quite right. I knew it needed to be restructured but didn't know how. I felt lost – until my dream.

Still, I asked for help. I reached out to a good friend and one of my reviewers, David McQueen, and asked for his time. He very generously gave me his time and attention and we went through the manuscript and brought the existing content into the new structure. Now, with a new publisher, the book finally sees the light of day.

From day one of this project, when I posted my intention to write this book on social media, I have turned to my network for help and support. It might be my name on the cover but it's definitely been a team effort. Even in my dream it was others who came to my rescue!

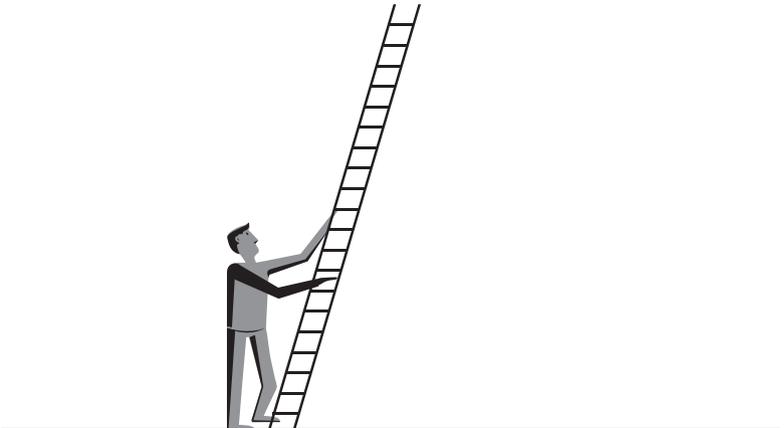
I've had plenty of moments of frustration, anxiety, anger and desperation. Ultimately though, the book has been published and you are reading it and there's one simple reason for that.

I was always willing to open up, be vulnerable and just ask.



SECTION ONE

FINDING THE COURAGE



1.

PROCESSING YOUR EMOTIONS

One of the biggest challenges for me in the journey of writing this book, as shared in the previous chapter, has been managing my emotions throughout the process. There have been times where I wanted to just publish what I had, even if it meant walking away from a prestigious contract, and others where I even felt like giving up entirely.

My book journey is just a microcosm of life as a whole. All of this happened during a period where my business was struggling (given the number of hours invested in interviews, research and writing, the two challenges may not be completely unrelated). Meanwhile

the strongest temptation was to internalise all of the pain and keep projecting a successful image to the world.

Are things any different for you? Whether in your job or your day-to-day life, how many challenges are you faced with that peck at your ego, make you question your abilities and right to be who the world thinks you to be?



How many challenges are you faced with every day that peck at your ego, make you question your abilities and right to be who the world thinks you to be?

How often do you want to lash out at your boss, or your team? Feel lost and unable to perform or wait for people to praise or reassure you but not feel able to ask directly?

My objective in writing this book is to encourage you to share these emotions more readily. As wonderful as it would be for you to put the book down and simply start sharing, life doesn't work like that. Despite focusing on this topic for the last four years, I still had to recognise when I wasn't asking for help and force myself to do so on more than one occasion. And the chances are that, as you are reading these lines, I'm going through the same emotions yet again.

Very few of us find it natural to be vulnerable and ask for help. Years of conditioning mean that we are driven by a number of fears and emotions that actively prevent us from doing so. There is a process that we need to go through before we are able to ask and it starts with finding the courage.

Make Some Space

Paul McGee's concept of Hippo Time has been central to my coping with the challenges I shared in the previous chapter. As I explained, when the third manuscript was turned down, for two weeks I told no one. I simply raged. And I needed to do that.

I needed to create the space to think more clearly. Once the emotions had run their course, I felt far more able to take the right steps. And, interestingly, I was able to listen objectively to feedback, take it in my stride and positively decide on the right course of action.

It's not always possible, or even desirable, to open up immediately about everything that is bothering us. If we don't allow ourselves the space to process our emotions, we don't allow ourselves the opportunity to be objective when seeking advice. And we lack clarity going forward as a result.



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seeking advice.*

However, there is a balance. And we need to ensure that we limit our Hippo Time before our wallowing becomes deeply entrenched and therefore counterproductive.

When you feel the rage or despair rising, listen to yourself and your thoughts and set aside a time to begin to share and to ask for help. Feel free to stand still for a while but keep your eye on a point where you know you have to start moving forward.

Billy the Boxer

One person who let the rage and despair take over was former World Light-welterweight Boxing Champion Billy Schwer. When Billy lost his hard-won world title after a bruising 11-round battle with Argentinean Pablo Sarmiento in July 2001, his life went off the rails.

“My whole life I had been Billy the Boxer. Now I was just Billy. I did not know who Billy was,” he told me. “The end of the road for me was when I was in hospital once I lost the world title. There was no way back from there, it was different. I went through a really tough time. I went through an identity crisis. I really struggled.

“I could not see a future for myself outside of a boxing ring. I was lost and I felt alone and empty. I had nothing to get out of bed for. I had been a world-class athlete, a world-class champion, so now what?”

Billy describes the next two years as the worst of his life. He struggled with depression, his marriage fell apart, he went bankrupt and he found himself considering suicide. From being on top of the world he had plummeted to rock bottom.

“I would not listen to anyone. I was so pig-ignorant, so single-minded, so selfish. Those are the attributes that helped me become a world champion but the paradox is the things that helped me become a champion in the ring were helping me fail outside.

“I didn’t know how to be anything other than Billy the Boxer. I was trained and conditioned to fight and attack, defend and resist, from eight years of age. That is who I was, that is who I thought I was.”

A chance meeting with an old friend rescued Billy from his descent and would ultimately help change the trajectory of his life.

Reinventing Billy

Soon after he lost his title his friend had told him about a self-development programme. The Landmark Forum⁴ completely changed Billy.

“It was only when I did the Landmark Forum that I started to unveil other parts of myself. I have still got that fight in me but it is not who I am. There is so much more to me. I did not know that at that time, as a 31-year-old. Billy the Boxer had me survive and get me to where I was at that point. But at that point Billy the Boxer was redundant.”

The Landmark Forum is a challenging environment. Participants are encouraged to share openly and honestly, revealing their deepest fears and insecurities, peeling the layers away from their lives and identifying the events that shaped them. I wondered how Billy the Boxer, a very single-minded entity, used to punching back in the ring, handled the process.

“It took me three days of getting battered. I was hammered and I loved it because I love a fight. It was taking me somewhere I had never been before.

“I now know that after that last time in the ring I made an unconscious decision that my life was over. To somebody who thinks that their life is over, you just do not care. I went off the rails. After Landmark I took the responsibility of getting back in control of my life and being responsible for my future and I pulled myself back together. I was losing the game; I was losing life.

“Then I looked back. I had been top of the bill in Las Vegas. I had enjoyed an extraordinary career. I had an extraordinary life. Yet I knew there was something else if I wanted. When you're in that place you have to be willing to find the courage to go to work and have a look. You have to break the habit of being yourself.”

Talking to Ourselves

I took the Landmark programme myself a few years ago and one of the most important lessons I learned from that experience was the power we have to tell ourselves a story. We all have an inner voice, the Landmark programme calls them ‘rackets’, which tell us what we can and can’t do.

It’s these rackets, formed from a lifetime of creating stories about our lives based on our experiences and what others say to us, that can get in the way of opening up and asking for the help that we need.



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We tell ourselves that we’ll look foolish if we share our challenges, that other people don’t want, or won’t be able, to help us or that they won’t trust or respect us anymore.

But how often is our perception accurate? Time and again people are pleasantly surprised when they ask for help and others leap to their support. Ultimately, we like to help other people but we don’t allow others to help us – because of the voices in our head.

Think Like a Four-Year-Old

It’s easy to see rock stars perform effortlessly night after night in front of tens of thousands of people and figure that it’s easy for them. The world of self-doubt, of nerves and anxiety is not one they seem to inhabit. But that would be far from the truth.

By 2010 Hattie Webb and her sister Charley had been touring as backing singers with legendary Canadian singer Leonard Cohen for two years. At a concert in Odense, Denmark, in front of about 20,000 people, Hattie fainted.

“Touring is extraordinary and very strenuous,” Hattie told me. “On tour with Leonard, the shows were four hours each night, often in quite challenging environments. It demands a lot of energy from everyone involved and I had fainted during a show and hit my head.”

Hattie was OK. She got up and carried on with the concert. But the incident affected her going forward. Hattie found that she developed an anxiety of fainting that she later identified as a fear of failure.

She underwent a lot of coaching and therapy to resolve it. She reviewed how she was living her life and how she was treating herself but she also examined how her internal dialogue was affecting her.

“All of us isolate; we all have negative thoughts, that’s natural. It’s not whether or not you have negative thoughts, it’s what you do with them. The anxiety was suddenly very present.



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It's not whether or not you have negative thoughts, it's what you
do with them.*

“When I look back there were signs that I could have made changes earlier. If you don’t listen to your body, the voice gets louder, the symptoms get more intense and the anxiety increases.”

Hattie believes that she is often very hard on herself and that was the cause of much of her anxiety. Learning to stop and accept that other factors can influence outcomes and, if necessary, asking others to help, has been a key factor in helping her to recover her confidence and composure.

“I often see when you are hard on yourself that it’s not necessarily just from your own mind, it’s how you have been taught to be with yourself by teachers and people in positions of authority. It’s not anyone’s fault, but to actually claim how you want to treat yourself moving forward is very empowering.

“There is a wonderful meditation which Louise Hay, the founder of Hay House Publishing, encourages. She asks you to imagine yourself as a four-year-old; if you have any four-year-olds in your life you know that if they do something wrong or if they fall over or if they spill something, you try and say, ‘Oh don’t worry’ or ‘That’s OK’ or ‘Let me help you’.

“So, you use that kind of dialogue with yourself, particularly when something goes wrong. You’re not shouting at yourself on the inside. You are actually treating yourself kindly, it makes a huge difference.”

I suggested to Hattie that such an approach would make it easier for you to let other people help because if you’re being easier on yourself then you’re going to be more open to finding resolution and stop worrying about looking bad.

Hattie agreed. “That’s so true; being a fortress means that it is more difficult to share easily. It’s so important to know your worth and be open and flexible to being vulnerable. I always think that being vulnerable takes strength. It’s not a weakness.”



Being a fortress means that it is more difficult to share easily.

Don't Procrastinate

Building up the courage to ask for help means having an understanding of what holds us back in the first place. Being able to recognise your inner voice and challenge it is the first step. And yes, you may need to take some time to process those emotions and thoughts before moving forward.

But don't let it hold you back for too long. It is easy to procrastinate, putting off the key conversations because of everything that might go wrong. After all, if we don't take risks then what have we got to lose?

The answer is everything. The solutions to your challenges live in the world around you. The people who trust you and who like and love you have probably been through something similar – it is amazing how often you find that you're not alone after all.

We all feel alone with our fears and vulnerability at times yet in truth that's not necessarily the case. But if we procrastinate, holding back those fears and not expressing them, then we can't identify the people around us who share the same challenges or who might have the great ideas to help us to overcome them.

We all need our Hippo Time. We need to process our emotions and understand what we need to share and with whom. And then we need to take that leap into the unknown and ask for help.

About the Author



A specialist in professional relationships and networking for over 20 years, Andy Lopata was called ‘one of Europe’s leading business networking strategists’ by the *Financial Times* and ‘a true master of networking’ by *The Independent* and Forbes.com.

A very experienced international speaker, Andy is the author of five books, has been quoted in a number of other business books and regularly quoted in the international press.

Andy is a Fellow and a board member of the Professional Speaking Association UK & Ireland (PSA) and a Fellow of the Learning and Performance Institute as well as a Master of the Institute for Sales Management. He is also one of just 26 recipients of the PSA’s top honour, the Award of Excellence.

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