

# How wellbeing can build confidence at work

## Episode Transcript

**Joy Burnford:** Hello, Helen and welcome to The Confidence Conversation.

**Helen Ashton:** Hey Joy, pleasure to be here.

**Joy Burnford:** It's wonderful to have you. And today's episode is all about how wellbeing can build confidence at work. And today, we're going to talk a little bit about your career and background, the importance of wellbeing and self care, managing emotions at work, and how all of this can affect your confidence in the workplace. So I'd love it, if we could start a little bit, tell me a little bit about your career journey, which started being a trainee accountant to becoming Chief Financial Officer at ASOS plc.

**Helen Ashton:** Oh, it feels like a bit of a long and winding path really. I'd love to say that I always had a plan that I wanted to become a listed CFO. But that was kind of never the case, really. I did a chemistry degree. And then decided that finance felt like a good job to have, because everybody else all my friends at that point decided that they were going to finance so you know, I decided to take a trainee role. And I went into British Steel actually, which was really heavy manufacturing, very male dominated, but I absolutely loved it. I love the excitement of just being in amongst all of the, you know, the steel manufacturing and I learned really quickly, I think that in finance, you get to see all sides of the business, you get to understand how businesses work, and how they make money, and how you, you know, all of the different pieces fit together. And, you know, right, throughout my career, I've loved that. I've never really planned to move between jobs, more opportunities have come up, and I've kind of made the decision on the spur, you know, does this feel something that's interesting? Does this feel something that I'm going to learn from, and mostly, the big tick for me is always are these people that I really would like to work with. And so as a result of that, I've worked in quite a lot of different industries, from manufacturing, to business services, to retail, and in financial services, as well. And every one of those different roles has been brilliant, because I've got a chance to see different cultures. And I think when you're learning to be a leader, a good way to do that is to look at the leaders you work with and go, Okay, I really love that about them, or those are the things that I'm going to, you know, I'm not going to be as I become a leader. So I've kind of taken the opportunities and just moved through lots of different industries, lots of different roles. And then really, by complete chance, ended up moving through from CFO roles into more operational roles, CEO roles back into CFO roles, just to see what really fit with me, and what really made me tick. And then finally ended up at ASOS mainly because I always wanted to move into fashion at some point in my career and ended up going to work for ASOS, which was fantastic.

**Joy Burnford:** And you're clearly demonstrating that today and your lovely dress, I was just saying.

**Helen Ashton:** First chance of sun coming out and I've got my sundress on!

**Joy Burnford:** I'm still wearing my winter woolies! And this is the first time we're recording the podcast for YouTube as well. So if you happen to be watching this on YouTube, this is very exciting. This is my sort of first foray into doing the podcast visibly as well. So that's really amazing. And tell me a little bit, I know you've started your own retail consultancy called Shape Beyond, I'd love to know what inspired you to start your own business.

**Helen Ashton:** I think I've always wanted to start my own business, to be honest, I just never had the confidence to do it nor really had the idea of what that business was going to be. And I kind of have worked in corporate, the corporate world for about 30 years now. And I've gone from corporate into private equity backed businesses back to corporate into private equity. And, you know, private equity is interesting, because it does kind of feel like you've got your own business, but it's not the same as being able to build something that you're really proud of. And for me, I think there's a place in the world for a new breed of consultancy, and one that's hands on, it can add real value into businesses. And also, you know, I can pick and choose the types of businesses that I want to work with. So in the same way that my business has purpose, I really want to work with purpose led organisations, and really support them as well. So I think I'm just I got to the point in, in my life where, I don't know, I just, I want to take the 30 years of experience I've got and do something that feels valuable for other people and valuable for me as well. And I think if that means I can balance my day to day life with managing a house with five

children as well, then for me, you know, I'm at that stage now where that's just become so important for me to be able to do that. So you know, that that was the that was the key reason for doing it. I haven't looked back!

**Joy Burnford:** Amazing. And I think it really ties in nicely with the topic of this conversation actually about health and wellbeing and self care and, and actually taking that time for yourself and looking at life and thinking, well actually, am I doing what really what works for me, creates a purpose for me. So, as you know, I've just written a book, I've just literally put my manuscript into the publisher last week, and one of the topics I've talked about is about wellbeing and self care, because it's such an important thing, especially for women. And I'd love to know, you know, how important have you found it looking after your own well being whilst navigating the world of work sort of in the past, when you've been in your corporate life?

**Helen Ashton:** Well, I would say up until the age of 46, I didn't manage my wellbeing or health in any shape or form. If I was really honest, so for me, you know, I was very focused on you know, success in my mind with the career which was becoming more and more senior. And that was at the forefront of my mind. And any spare time that I had, I really felt like I had to give that to the children. And you know, even my husband would say that he was, you know, after work, five children, two hamsters, a dog, some fish, and then at some point kip, I used to say, well, that's fine, but I actually then come after you in that as well. And then, so I used to, I never really did any exercise, other than rushing around all day as you do, I didn't really eat very healthily, I often went through the day with coffee. Luckily, I've never smoked or anything like that, which is a good thing. But you know, coffee, not really eating very well. Probably didn't even really know about mindfulness or even I'm kind of one of those people that really don't, I don't really like silence very much either so for me this busy, busy, busy was what drove me and then out of nowhere, I just ended up having some back pain and ended up going to see a consultant and overnight really finding out I had a grapefruit sized cyst on my ovary, a full hysterectomy. And, you know, no driving for six weeks, and at that point, I was I was at ASOS so I was in a CFO role. You know, I'd just done full year announcement, we were travelling in the US doing results and all of a sudden, then out of nowhere, I was in hospital and told that there wasn't a choice, they needed to get on and do that. And all of a sudden, I think that completely reverses, I guess you know, your own thought about, you know, health and wellbeing and actually, you know, I think the thing I remember most about it was in hospital. I was next to a lady who was in her 20s who was having exactly the same thing is me only her, the tumour that was removed was was cancerous for her. So she was having to have treatment. And also she'd not had any children either. So all of a sudden, you know, for me, even though I was in that situation, you step back, and you know what, I've got five really lovely, healthy children. You know, once I get over the operation, I mean, I'm in good shape, but actually, you recognise that, you know, your body isn't, you know, just can't be abused endlessly. And I think you recognise that, you know, when you see, you know, the faces of your kids looking at you and going, Oh, my God, you're in hospital, are you alright? That you recognise that there's so much more, I think, to life than just working and actually, you know, fortunately, and ever since then, for me, I now live this world of going, you know, there are three things in my life, there's work, and there's family, and there's my own health and well being. And I think, if any one of those three things go out of kilter, then you can kind of manage it. But if two go out of kilter at the same time, that becomes a very difficult situation to be in. So therefore, balancing your time across each of those, I think, for me, has just become so important. And it's the thing now with the children as they're growing up, and, you know, through teenage years and into university, that I try as best as I can to kind of get them early on to really thinking about balancing those three things and how important they are. And, you know, and, you know, you got to put the time and the effort and the energy into that.

**Joy Burnford:** And I think, you know, you're really lucky that you have, well, not lucky that you had that incident, but you know, the fact that you had the chance to then make that adjustment, because these things can happen in a split second, can't they, you know, health.

**Helen Ashton:** I think that's the shocking thing about it, it wasn't that I felt particularly ill, I just had a niggly pain in my back. That's all it was. It wasn't I mean, I went to see the consultant, I didn't take anybody with me, it didn't even enter my head that there was going to be an issue. And then all of a sudden, yeah, out of nowhere, your life changes. And I think so many people who, you know, you know, the more I speak to people, the more people that do go through, you know, these experiences, either through, you know, with themselves or with a family member, or whatever, and it just changes the whole perspective on life.

**Joy Burnford:** Yeah, absolutely. And the other thing I'd like to chat to you about is when we spoke last time, you were talking a bit about how sometimes it can feel lonely being the only women within a C suite. And I wondered if you could just tell me a little bit about that. And your experiences, you know, working in fairly male dominated environments.

**Helen Ashton:** Yes, I often talk about, or people often ask me to talk about sort of diversity and inclusion. And people always ask why, why there aren't more females in really senior roles. I think we've made really great progress within the boardroom getting more women around the table, particularly non executive roles. I think it's much more difficult if you're an executive female in the business every day. And whether we like it or not, I think that for all, for everybody, everybody has their own needs for what works for them in a working environment. And I am not convinced that the cultures in today's corporates have yet adjusted well enough to be able to support not just women, but also, you know, other minority groups as well. So I think you know, for me, I think what is tricky being a female, so if I think about when I was at ASOS, you know, the average age, there's kind of in the 20s you know, very vibrant organisation, people really liked socialising and all of the rest of it, I had just come from 10 years in financial services, five children trying to manage that, you know, I was driving into Camden every day, so I was probably doing about two or three hours of travelling. And actually, you know, this idea around flexibility. I think the pandemic has really helped actually on the flexibility side, but this idea of being a listed CFO, and not been in the office 12 hours a day, or, you know, if you've finished your work then you know most people were down in the pub or socialising or whatever. I think that is hard to manage. Because, you know, although I recognise, I think, as a working, you know, parent that you can't have it all, and there's always compromises. For me, there's only so long you can go, neglecting spending time with the family. So for me, I think that, you know, for more women to move into the executive ranks, I think cultures have to become more open and inclusive. And it's not just, you know, women, you know, ethnic minorities, or now, you know, if I think about neurodiversity, I've got, you know, I've got one child with dyslexia, two with dyslexia, one with autism, and you look at them, and everybody's an individual, and everybody has different needs and thoughts. And actually, organisations, unless they get better understanding those needs, and recognise that each individual wants something different and being flexible around that, I think you find yourself you have to mould yourself to fit with what the organisation is, versus the organisation being flexible to you. And I think, once you go too long doing that, I think you lose who you are, you almost become something that you're not. And I think for me, that's the difficulty because life is short, and actually everybody brings their own strengths and personalities and best selves to an environment. But actually, you know, unless you enable that and allow people to flourish in the working environment, then unfortunately, I think people will just go, you know, what, I'm not getting enough out of this, I'm going to go do something else. You know, I think women are brilliant, because, you know, I think purpose for us and that feeling of fit, I think is really important. And therefore, you know, I talk to a lot of women who just go, I just, you know, I didn't feel it, I might have been paid a lot of money, or I might have felt that I was successful. But it just didn't. It didn't feel right. I needed something else in my in my life. And I think women act on that.

**Joy Burnford:** Yeah. And I think, as you know, it's my soapbox as well, it's about changing the systems, it's not changing the women. And it's about, you know, so many organisations were built by men, for men, and it's just a cultural thing that's happened over time. And it's not that men are to blame, it's actually just that the systems or the cultures are the way they are because of a long time and changing those cultures can take time to change. And I think the quicker we get more women around those board tables and executive roles with that flexibility. And, you know, thinking about personalised culture and stuff, I think would be, will be, can only be a good thing. So I know, you've previously been told to be a little bit less emotional at work. How did that impact you? And do you have any tips, because I think it's brilliant to be emotional at work and actually show that vulnerability and empathy and, you know, do you have any tips on how to manage those emotions in the best way in the workplace?

**Helen Ashton:** I think I think I've been quite, I've been on a journey with this, because I think, you know, you start your career. And, you know, I've always been quite open and honest about, you know, what I think and you know, how I feel about things. And then I think you go through this career, as you get more senior where all of a sudden, particularly in you know, more corporate worlds, where talking about your feelings and emotion, you know, is not the done thing. So then all of a sudden, you kind of close that down. And then you then go back through the, then everybody will look at you and say, Oh, you're very unemotional about things. And you know, you need to show your vulnerability and, you know, you come across as a little bit cool. And you think, well, like, you know, how do you navigate through? And, you know, it's really tricky. And then maybe, you know, just because I've got a bit older, I think, then you get to the point where you kind of go, you know what, I don't care anymore, it's just going to be how it is. I think for me, I've been really lucky through my career to have access to

some really brilliant leaders, some really brilliant coaches, some friends, and people who, you know, really I felt had my best interests at heart and they would sit down and they would say, look, you know, these are all of your strengths. So you know, one of my strengths is passion. So you know, I believe that if you turn your mind to anything you can do it. Because you know, you can be tenacious and passionate and doing it, the problem with being passionate is you tend to be a little bit more on the emotional side. And therefore, you know, there's always little tricks that you can learn around things like for me, things like if you're going to send an email, love email, gets things done quickly. But it can be really bad, I think for somebody who maybe is a little on the emotional side. So therefore, you know, you go, Okay, right, write your email, leave it, don't send it, look at it the next morning and nine out of 10 times, you won't send that email because you're looking at and go oh, you know.

**Joy Burnford:** Or just pick up the phone instead!

**Helen Ashton:** Yeah, I've learned a lot. I think, for me, I mean, speaking to people just tends to be better for me. I think you know, that that will work as well, because often the emotion doesn't, it just doesn't come through in the same way in the written form. So I think, you know, there are tips like that to maybe moderate some, you know, my view is, you know, if you're quite emotional like this, I don't want to stop being that, I just maybe need to, like, just narrow the edges a little bit to make sure I kind of stay, you know, in what's considered kind of, you know, the more appropriate kind of world. So I think there's just some tips there. But, you know, I think the key thing is to have people around you who, you know, want to help and support and have best intentions, and you need to do that back to other people as well. Because often, I think, in my career, not many people that you come across, are not well meaning. Most people, you know, want to try and do the right thing. And most people mean well, by what they say, sometimes when you say something, it doesn't quite land in the way that you maybe expected to. And I think there's a piece around, I always work on best intentions, and therefore trying to accept that, you know, even if something that is said you think, oh, you know, I'm not sure about that, you know, actually, by stepping back and thinking, you know, well, you know, let's come up this from there, they meant well, in the first place. So let's, you know, let's have that conversation. I think it's really important. And for me, not dwelling on things. So just, you know, if something happens that maybe I'm not sure of, or, you know, it frustrates me or whatever, to kind of, like have that conversation, like straight away, because for me, that dwelling on it, or not wanting to engage, I think it is not great. And you know, when I was at ASOS, when you deal with when you're working with 20 somethings and dealing I guess with some of the challenges that they openly talk about, I've learned so much off that generation around being brave and open around what they think, they'll give feedback, and they're brave, and they're open about that. And they're not worried about their emotions and I think there's a huge amount to learn actually, from that generation coming through who seems to be in a way, quite a lot wiser than maybe, you know, we are in, you know, the older generation.

*\*\*\* Joy Burnford: I really hope you're enjoying the conversation so far. I want to take a moment to tell you a little bit more about my reasons for doing this podcast. My mission is to work together to navigate a path to gender equality. I'm passionate about enabling every woman to have the confidence to progress in their career, and I love talking to, and sharing women's stories to inspire others. This podcast forms a small part of what we do, and if you think there's room for improvement in the way your organisation understands and manages the obstacles that women face in the workplace, please get in touch or tell your HR contact about us.*

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**Joy Burnford:** Yeah. And I think talking about emotions, I think I'd like to, if it's okay with you talk a little bit about sort of moving on to your personal life, because I know you've very sadly had three miscarriages whilst you're working full time. And I think, you know, managing that emotion around that must have been hugely difficult for you. And I know, this is something else I've written a lot about, and how a lot of the time people just hide these things, and then try and carry on at work. And I think that that culture of just, you know, not being able to talk about it is really can be very toxic. Obviously, not everybody wants to talk about it, but I'd love it if you could just share a few bits of advice around that, if you can.

**Helen Ashton:** Yeah. So, my first three children that I had, I had no problem I was so you know, super lucky conceiving and having having the three and then after that, we really struggled and we had you know, we had a number of miscarriages and, you know, I was, I was in my early 30s, I was working at the time in financial services. So in banking, so pretty male dominated, and not an environment where you talked emotion at all. Quite a brutal environment. And, you know, I was working on an international job as well. So I was travelling a lot. And, you know, and I had one, one of the miscarriages I had, I was going to a board meeting in Scandinavia, and I ran to get the plane. I was late as I usually am, I was pulling like, you know, a trolley behind because I didn't want to check it in, I wanted to carry and put it on and got on the plane, I didn't feel that great. Got to the other end, got to the hotel. And I miscarried. And I remember being in the hotel, and you're in a hotel in in Stockholm, going to a board meeting the next day. And you've not got anybody with you, you've got not really got any access to health care or anything like that. And you're in this world of, well, what do I do? I've got a board meeting tomorrow. I've got nobody around me, I can't get home. And I don't really know who we could even have a conversation with. So what do you do? You go, you know, what it is what it is? Do the board meeting, carry on, and you know, and that's it. And I think what happens when you do that is for me, all I did was put that in a box in the back of my mind, and close the lid on it, and went to a board meeting and pretty much pretended it hadn't happened, to be honest. And that was the only way that I could deal with it. And that is so unhealthy, that is you know, nobody should be in that position. Why couldn't I tell my boss, I couldn't tell my boss, because I'd only just been promoted. You know, I already had three children. So if the thought that I was trying to have another child, then I wasn't sure what the impact of that was going to be. And therefore and also, how do you have that conversation with a boss in a Hermes tie who is telling you that you need to be less emotional? I mean, so you have this, you need to be less emotional, you go, Oh, my God, how do I have this conversation. And there was just nobody. And I think that that is, that's, that's just, it's just so unhealthy. And I think those are the things that at some point, do catch upon you. And when I look, you know, look back at the career, my career I've been, you know, I've been ever so lucky with the people I've worked with, and the opportunities I've had, and all of that. But there are times like that, that you know, I will, you know, I'll never I'll never think that that was fair on either myself or my husband or, or anybody else. Because nobody should be, nobody should be in that position where they have to deal with something like that, and don't feel that they can have that conversation.

**Joy Burnford:** Absolutely, I think it's so important to make those things, you know, even if people don't want to talk about it to know that they can, and there is a way to talk about it if they want to.

**Helen Ashton:** And you know, for you to have access to, you know, there are plenty of leaders who you know, don't like to have more personal conversations, and I get that. But you've got to make sure that there are other people around that people feel they can have those conversations with. And that can't just be women. I want to point that out. But you know, as I became more senior, often if there was some personal issue, then, you know, somebody would come to me because I dealt with personal issues because I was female. I don't agree with that. I think we're all human beings and part of leadership is to be able to empathise and understand, you don't have to know all the technicalities of what everybody's personal issue is but you do need to be able to listen and empathise and support. And I think that you know, all that. I'm a great believer in all of the leadership training we put people through in terms of commercial skills or performance feedback or all of these things. Well, what about the basic human skills of listening and caring and giving emotional support? What about those? Because for me as a leader, if you get those, right, that's what people remember. That's what makes the difference to an individual.

**Joy Burnford:** And people wonder why women leave organisations in their 40s and 50s. You know, it's these kinds of issues, isn't it that people just feel that I'm not being supported.

**Helen Ashton:** Of course it is. You know, and, you know, you see, with all the conversations now about things like, you know, menopause and all of the rest of it. I mean, you know, we, you know, we should all have that conversation at work that, you know, we starting to go through the menopause and I want some support. Oh, my God, you know, my husband doesn't even know what the flippin menopause is. Nor probably wants to, to be honest!

**Joy Burnford:** And a lot of women don't know, either. And I didn't know until I hit perimenopause, what perimenopause was!

**Helen Ashton:** Exactly, you know, it's really tricky. But, you know, in my mind, it doesn't matter what the issue is. People just want to be heard, they just want to know that they're not a number. They're a person and not a number. And, you know, I think that that's, that's probably one of the biggest learnings of you know, all of my career when it comes to leadership.

**Joy Burnford:** Yes, absolutely. And I think, what I'd love to do, just as a touch on briefly is about confidence, because obviously, this podcast is all about confidence. And we've touched on elements of that in the conversation today. And I know we've talked before about imposter syndrome. And you know, that you've, you still suffered impostor syndrome, even when you're at the pinnacle of your career in corporate. And I think I'd love to just talk about that briefly. Because so many people see women in senior roles and think, wow, they've just done it, they've got to the top, they don't have any issues, that they're really confident. And I'm really passionate about looking through the surface and saying, you know, everybody suffers from lack of confidence from time to time, impostor syndrome, I do all the time. You know, I'd love to just finish off with any advice around dealing with the moments when you've lacked confidence. And what's helped you to come through that?

**Helen Ashton:** I think your brain can be your own worst enemy sometimes. And I think you're right, I think, you know, impostor syndrome isn't, you know, it's not just women that suffer it, you know, many people, many people do. And I think for me, again, it's funny, isn't it? When you think back through your career, the certain phrases, or certain things somebody has said to you, that really sticks in your mind. And the thing for me, and yes, I have, I have impostor syndrome in pretty much everything I do, whether it's to do with, you know, going to see the teachers at school for one of the kids or whether it's going to the gym, and you know, going, Oh, my God, everybody's watching that walk through the gym off, or, you know, or it's sitting as, you know, an audit chair in a PLC, you know, all of those things, you sit in there and going, Oh, my God, you know, I don't know what's going to come at me. And I don't know what I'm going to say, and oh, my god, like, does anybody realise that I really shouldn't be here, because I really, I really, I really don't know, like, what I'm going to do? And then somebody once said to me, what evidence have you got that you can't do what you think you're going to be able to do? And you kind of go well, I haven't really, I haven't really got any evidence at all. It's just the feeling. And I think there is that piece for me that, you know, whenever that happens, I still come back to the Okay, what evidence. I remember, I'll tell you this one, I don't think I've told anybody this before. I remember we were going to do the results, one of the financial results, sessions at ASOS, and you have to go in front of like loads of city analysts to present and you have to do that. And you're reading off a script. So it's fine, you know what you're going to say. But then at the end, you'll do questions and answers, and you don't know what they're going to be and you know, that there's only certain things you can say. So you can like, oh my god, what are these questions going to be? And I remember, I remember I was going to do, it's one of the first ones I did, and I just remember and going and sit in the loo beforehand, and putting the seat down and sitting down and sitting there going, oh my god, like, I'm not going out. I'm just not. I'm just like, I don't know, like what on earth, what if I can't answer the questions? And you do have that moment where you go, what evidence have you got. You've spent, you spend every day in the business, you look at the numbers every day, you understand how it's going work. And, you know, so as a result of that somebody who isn't in the business, someone who doesn't understand it, what are the chances that they're going to be able to ask a question that is so brilliant, that you can't stand the chance of answering it? And even then, even if they do, you can always say, well, unfortunately, I can't share that information.

**Joy Burnford:** Or I'll get back to you, or you know, and I can come back to it another time.

**Helen Ashton:** Yeah, so then you kind of go, you kind of go, there is no evidence for this irrational, oh, my God, you know, what's going to happen? And I think for me, I, you know, I just keep I keep coming back to that, and I say a lot to, you know, one of my one of my daughters who, you know, she's a real perfectionist, and it's always like, you know, well, what happens if what happens? What, you know, what evidence have you got that, that that is that is true, I understand, you might be worried about it, but actually step back and think about the reality and really, is that true or not? And, but, you know, it doesn't take away that the feeling still comes, it's just managing that through and making sure that it doesn't stop you doing from what what you want to you know, what you want to do.

**Joy Burnford:** Great bit of advice. Thank you. I hate questions, too. That's my worst bit of doing any presentation. It's that kind of not knowing is horrible. Fantastic. Thank you so much Helen. And so if listeners want to find out a bit about you and your work that you're currently doing, how can people find out?

**Helen Ashton:** Well, if you want to go to our website, so [www.shapebeyond.com](http://www.shapebeyond.com), then go on to that and have a bit of a look at a look what we're doing. Other than that, I'm on LinkedIn as well. So feel free to get in touch. And I'd love to speak to anybody who wants to speak to me.

**Joy Burnford:** Amazing, and we'll put all the links into the show notes as well so people can find you. Thank you so much, Helen. It's been a pleasure to chat to you today. And thank you for giving me your time.

**Helen Ashton:** Thank you Joy.

**Joy Burnford:** And that's it for this week. Thank you very much for listening and I'll be back again soon with another Confidence Conversation. If you know anyone who might find this podcast useful, please do pass on the link and it would give me a real confidence boost if you could subscribe, rate and leave a written review (on Apple podcasts here or on Podchaser here). If you like what you've heard, sign up for updates where I'll be sharing tips and notes from each episode and you can send in your ideas for future topics.

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Thank you, and until the next time, bye for now.