

When Work Becomes Identity

Why leaving a role can feel like losing yourself — and how to build a steadier sense of who you are.

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QUICK CHAT • 4 MINUTES

Finish this sentence

“At work, I’m usually the one who...”



Drop it in the chat — a few words is plenty.

Then we can see what comes up: role, function, value – or something else

The pathway from session one



Today we go deeper into one part of Protection: identity.

When the role becomes the self



“I am a lawyer.”

“I am a director.”

“I am the one who delivers.”

Leaving a role is rarely just a change of job. For many people the role has quietly become part of how they understand who they are — so when it goes, it can feel less like changing direction and more like losing a part of yourself.

When identity fuses with role, the role isn't something you do. It becomes something you are — and what you are can't be allowed to end.

Achievement-based identity

For high performers, self-worth can often become tied to output.



In transition, output stops — so the thing that confirmed your worth disappears.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Signs that identity has fused with role

“Who am I without the title?”

A feeling of unease when you can't introduce yourself by role.

Worth tracks output

Good day = worthy. Unproductive day = restless, guilty.

Should over want

Hard to know what you actually want versus what you ought to do.

Status anxiety

Comparing, feeling behind, needing to explain yourself.

None of these mean something has gone wrong with you. They mean the role was carrying more than the job.

Sarah and James, one step further



Sarah

Corporate lawyer, 22 years. Made partner at 38. Took redundancy after a restructure.

IN SESSION ONE

Rewriting her CV endlessly, sleeping badly, applying for roles she doesn't want.

WHAT'S UNDERNEATH IT

Used to introduce herself as “I'm a lawyer.” Now avoids the question. Finds it difficult to rest or relax — feels she should be doing something.



James

Operations director, 18 years in financial services. Left by choice after repeated restructures.

IN SESSION ONE

Three business plans started, none finished. Confidence quietly dropping.

WHAT'S UNDERNEATH IT

Left on his own terms — and still lost himself. Was always the one who held it together. Without that, the plans have no one to belong to.

THE RULE UNDERNEATH

Identity runs on a hidden rule

OLD BELIEF

“I am what I achieve.”

THE RULE

“I must keep producing to stay worthy.”

IN TRANSITION

No output = no worth. The system reads it as threat.



The rule isn't irrational. It probably built the career. It simply never gets reviewed — until the output stops.

How it runs — Sarah

Corporate lawyer, 22 years. Made partner at 38. Took redundancy after a restructure.



PRESSURE



THREAT



OLD BELIEF



RULE



PROTECTION



SHORT-TERM PAYOFF



LONG-TERM COST

The role disappears — redundancy after restructure

“I don't know who I am without it.”

“My worth comes from achievement.”

“I must keep producing to feel valuable.”

CV rewrites, applying widely, LinkedIn at night, avoiding stillness

Temporary certainty. It feels like progress.

Identity never expands. No space to ask what she actually wants.

This isn't weakness. It's a pattern that makes sense — and it can be interrupted.

How it runs — James

Operations director, 18 years in financial services. Left by choice after repeated restructures.



PRESSURE



THREAT



OLD BELIEF



RULE



PROTECTION



SHORT-TERM PAYOFF



LONG-TERM COST

The role ends — on his own terms, after 18 years

“Who am I if I'm not the one holding it together?”

“I'm valuable when I'm needed.”

“If I step back, people will think I've failed.”

Starts a business plan. Never finishes one. Keeps exploring, avoids committing.

Stays in motion. Avoids committing to a new self.

Nothing lands. His confidence starts to drop.

Same mechanism. Different route. She speeds up — he stalls.

SMALL GROUPS • 8 MINUTES

Breakout 1

Map your own pattern



1 What part of your identity feels most under threat?

2 What hidden rule might be operating? (“I must...” / “If I don’t..., then...”)

3 What has that rule helped you achieve — and what is it costing you now?

Example:

- *Identity threat*: “If I’m not the one who delivers, who am I?”
- *Hidden rule*: “I must stay useful to stay valuable.”
- *Helped me*: Build a strong career.
- *Cost now*: I can’t stop proving myself.

8 minutes

What came up?



The rule made sense.

It probably built the career.



It's still running.

Long after the context changed.



And it has a price.

Usually paid somewhere quiet.

The aim is not to get rid of the rule. It is to stop it deciding who you are allowed to be next.

THE SHIFT

Two ways to hold identity

The issue isn't having a professional identity. It's how much of you it's carrying.



ROLE-DOMINATED

"I am my job."

- The role carries the whole identity
- Worth is granted by title and status
- Change feels like loss of self
- When the role ends, so does the answer

VALUES-ANCHORED

"My role is one expression of who I am."

- The role is part of the identity, not all of it
- Identity is anchored in what you stand for.
- Change alters the expression, not the person
- When the role ends, the thread continues

The goal isn't to stop identifying with your work. It's to make sure work isn't carrying your entire identity.

From fear to values

Fear isn't the enemy — it's trying to protect you. It just can't tell you where to go.

FEAR ASKS

- How do I protect what I had?
- How do I avoid getting this wrong?
- How do I prove I'm still relevant?
- How do I get certainty back?



VALUES ASK

- What matters now?
- Who do I want to be here?
- What is worth moving towards?
- What fits the life I want to build?



FEAR *"If I stop producing, I'm falling behind."*

VALUE Curiosity **CHOICE** Explore before applying.



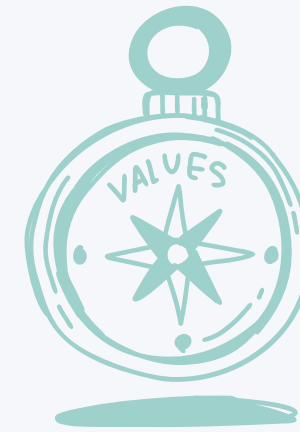
FEAR *"If nobody needs me, what am I for?"*

VALUE Contribution **CHOICE** Contribute without having to run everything.

Fear asks **"How do I stop losing?"** Values ask **"Who do I want to become?"**

The Values Compass

What matters to you regardless of title — the through-line across every role you've held.



Integrity

Courage

Craft & mastery

Curiosity & learning

Autonomy

Connection

Contribution

Developing others

Creativity

Fairness

Purpose

Balance

Choose three that have some pull for you right now.

Start here. Pick three. If yours is not here, write your own.

You'll use the worksheet after the session to explore and refine them.

MAKING IT REAL

Values become real through choices and boundaries

Behaviour expresses a value. A boundary is what keeps it alive when pressure returns.

Value	Behaviour expresses it	Boundary sustains it
Curiosity	Have two exploratory conversations this month.	No applying for roles just to feel productive.
Connection	Talk honestly to two people about how this feels.	Don't spend the conversation performing certainty.
Integrity	Say the difficult thing sooner.	Don't soften it into something I don't mean.
Autonomy	Choose one thing this week on my own terms.	Don't say yes before I've checked whether I want to.

A value you never act on remains an intention. Behaviour expresses it. Boundaries sustain it.

Value → behaviour → boundary

Take your three. For each one, name what you'd do — and what you'd protect.

Your value	One behaviour that expresses it	One boundary that sustains it
EXAMPLE Curiosity	<i>Have two exploratory career conversations this month.</i>	<i>No applying for roles just to feel productive.</i>

Fear protects. Values direct. Behaviour expresses. Boundaries sustain.

SMALL GROUPS • 6 MINUTES

Breakout 2

- 1 Which value feels strongest right now?
- 2 What behaviour would express it this month?
- 3 What boundary would sustain it?

One round each. Listeners: reflect back the value you heard, not advice.

6 minutes



GUIDED REFLECTION · 3 MINUTES

Imagine ten years from now

The roles may have changed.

The titles may have changed.

What do you hope has remained true about you?

What values can you see in the way you're living?

Cameras off if you'd like. Pen and paper. Take your eyes away from the screen.

WHERE THIS LEADS

The next chapter

NAVOMIND



The role may change.

The title may change.

The salary may change.

Your values can remain.

They become the thread connecting every chapter of your life.

You are not starting again. You are continuing — with greater awareness.

THE SERIES

Where we are

1

Why Transition Feels Harder Than It Should

The model, the patterns, the reset



2

When Work Becomes Identity

Re-anchoring from role to values



WE ARE HERE

3

Making Decisions When Nothing Feels Clear

Acting from values when certainty isn't available

4

Building Capacity for What's Next

The four needs and what sustains change

10 MINUTES

Questions & reflection

What landed for you?

What are you taking away?

What would be useful to explore next?

Thank you

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