

# **IT STARTS WITH ME: An Anthology Of The Magic That Happens When Women Reclaim Their Strength & Their Stories**

**FEATURING SARAH GILES**

## **Stepping out of the shadows**

### **Introduction**

Rollback 6 months when I was dealing with yet another HR drama, who would have thought I would be now sat in my kitchen contemplating my first ever chapter for a book. The only similarity I can draw on from then is the steaming flat white positioned in front of me.

After a 15 plus year career in HR, I quit in lockdown! Yes, I resigned from my Head of HR position back in April and left in June. Some might say that was mad during a pandemic. Quite often we get so caught up in our busy lives that we play it safe and stick with what we know. It was finally time for me to step out of my comfort zone!

It has been one heck of a personal development journey getting to this point. For once, I have had time for reflection and to really work out what I want for the future and who I am. I always wanted an HR career and for some reason thought it would mean I had achieved something if I made it. Then I finally got into those leadership roles and realised it was not really for me. It's funny how things turn out, isn't it?

Somewhere I had lost myself through the constant juggle of motherhood and a career. I had been hiding behind my job title and role of mum. I had to start getting to know myself again. It hasn't always been plain sailing, but I've always been quietly determined.

I rediscovered myself, explored what my passions were, invested in myself, and started a whole new adventure. My own coaching journey is partly the reason why I made this change of direction in life.

I hope by sharing my story, I can help you to realise that you already have the strengths within you. It's time to stop standing on the side-lines and step out of the shadows, feel confident owning who you truly are, and take your place in this world as you deserve it too.

*"Genius is there in all of us, just waiting for us to tap into it." (Robert Toth)*

### **Where did it all start?**

Now I'm not going to go back all through my childhood, but I suppose the thing that sticks with me when reflecting back is how I started out as that quiet shy girl at school, you know the one who never wants to put their hand up for fear of getting it wrong. I always had to work hard to get where I wanted to be. I didn't naturally excel at school, I got average grades, but I had to work hard to get them. I was a trier and kept going.

I decided I didn't want to go to university, mostly for fear of taking exams and worried I would struggle with it all. It was always my lack of confidence that held me back in the early days. So, I started out in the big wide world of work straight after college and got myself a role at the local council in planning. I really enjoyed it, but after a period of time, I started to feel envious of some of

my friends going off to uni. Was I missing out? Was this now my life? Suddenly I wondered if I had made a huge mistake not going to uni. I decided to go back to college part-time and did an HND whilst still working. Then I got promoted and found myself supervising a small team. It was at this point that I found my love of people and fast forward a couple of years which is where my HR journey started.

When I started my HR career, I still had the battle of confidence issues and almost dreaded sitting in team meetings. Sometimes I would sit there dying to say something but too afraid to speak up for fear of being judged. I would sit there and just listen to the voices; often people were fighting to be heard. You see I was a reflector and sat on the side-lines. There were many occasions when I felt like I was never going to get anywhere being the quiet one. I wasn't quiet when you got to know me, I was just more reserved and wouldn't speak for the sake of it. I didn't feel confident enough to speak up in large groups.

I wouldn't describe myself as introverted, but I have some of the traits; I think I probably sit in the middle. When you don't know me, I can come across more reserved and I don't necessarily seek out social engagements. I mean don't get me wrong, I love a good party when I'm there and having fun, but I'm quite happy in my own company.

I got told so many times by different people I needed to have confidence in my own abilities. I always worked hard and put everything into it. Even when I got fantastic feedback I wouldn't ever stop and recognise it. I didn't like getting compliments; quite frankly I found it embarrassing. But now I'm learning to accept compliments and acknowledge them with a thank you. Why don't you jot that tip down and give it a try?

I was always quietly focused on the next thing I wanted to achieve, but people wouldn't have known I was necessarily ambitious. I found sometimes when you are quiet you can quite often get overlooked because you don't shout about what you do. Extroverts are often rewarded with promotions into leadership roles, but this doesn't mean they are always going to be the best leaders.

Businesses are really missing something here! I'm not talking specifically about me, but it shouldn't always be about the big personalities and those who stand out among the crowd. Introverts have extremely valuable assets which may help them become exceptional leaders. I don't like putting a label on people, but we should look at the whole person and what they bring to the table. It's not about who shouts the loudest. So, for all you introverts out there, don't worry. You don't have to change your personality to build that self-confidence. I love this quote by Mahatma Gandhi "In a gentle way, you can shake the world."

The next step for me was to start studying for my CIPD (HR qualification) part-time whilst working for a financial services organisation. I met my soul mate, my now-husband Steve. I worked in Southampton during the week and would travel up to London on a Friday and stay most weekends. I got a little taste of city life. Fast forward another year and I had moved in and was working for a top accountancy firm in the city. Oh, those were the days... we certainly had a good social life, lots of dining out, and just making the most of it. However, I'm not sure I was ever really destined to be the city career woman. It just didn't feel like where I wanted to settle down.

We got engaged in 2008, started our next journey together and bought a house, and got married in 2009. Just over a year later we had our first daughter. Yep, she wasn't far off a honeymoon baby. This is when things started to really change....

## **The balancing act of working life**

Whilst pregnant I was always determined to go back to work. I hadn't quite got to where I wanted to be in my career, and I wasn't going to give up now. Some might say this was selfish. But I knew I would be a better person by trying to get the balance between my career and motherhood. Oh, boy was I in for a shock. Now just to clarify, both Steve and I had never really been around babies nor had any in our family. So, my idea of just breezing through it..... well, you can guess where this is going!

I remember us walking through the front door with Millie and just looking at each other. It's scary really when you're suddenly left responsible for this small person. Where was the handbook?! There were many ups and downs, but like most parents, we learnt as we went along. We must have done ok as we then had our second daughter, Evie in May 2013. Our family was finally complete!

Juggling an often-frantic HR career whilst caring for a family was certainly a challenge, if not chaotic. Let's face it being a parent is never easy, whatever your role, but somehow, we get through it. I had to travel quite a bit in one of my roles. I remember commuting to London one day, running the daily gauntlet between nursery drop off and catching the train, usually with just seconds to spare and I'm looking like a sweaty mess by this point. On this particular day, I managed to lose a shoe between the platform and train, watching in utter horror as the doors closed behind me with only one shoe on board. Honestly, I just wanted to cry but somehow managed to keep it together and it's quite amusing now I look back. I learnt a valuable lesson that day. Always wear flats when traveling. I've had many adventures juggling motherhood and a career. If only we had more time!

For a few years, I just felt like I was on that daily hamster wheel, but I didn't know any different to be honest. As I got higher up in my career there was no time for further development or so I told myself. It's not because I felt I knew everything, more just the lack of time. When I had tried to book a seminar or course, I ended up having to cancel because, yet another meeting had been put in my diary!

Steve always worked in London, so it was mostly me juggling the drop-offs and picks up each day. I would often be clock-watching in a meeting at the end of the day and then end up running out the office door so I could beat the traffic. People often used to ask me how I managed as I was always running between meetings, dashing for the kids, working in the evenings, etc, but the reality is lots of women do this. From the outside, I suppose I looked like I had it all together, but the truth is no one has all their shit together! My resilience was certainly tested at times, but the coaching I received as part of my studies really helped me. I just somehow got on with it.

I had quite a regimented routine as there was no time for messing around, especially in the mornings. The evenings would come, and it felt relentless at times with the bedtime routine, Steve and I would eventually sit down for dinner at about 8, and then I'd be on the laptop again working. There was just no let-up some days, so I knew I needed to find some 'me time'.

## **My escape**

Whilst trying to get through the juggles of modern life, I knew I needed something to keep me sane. I had always enjoyed running and had trained for some events over the years and always said one day I wanted to do the London Marathon. So, guess what? I entered. I didn't get a ballot place but managed to secure a charity place for Children with Cancer in 2017. So just to be clear by this point I

was in a very busy role, working all hours and juggling children and a home. Why on earth did I then think it would be a good idea to train for a marathon. I don't do things by half!

Off my training started through the winter months in the cold and dark. I only had limited time to go out and train and would often get up on a Saturday at 6am and start my long runs so it didn't eat too much into family time. Anyway, the point of me telling you this is that if you put your mind to something and set goals then you are more likely to achieve them. If I'm completely honest the thought of running some evenings after another crazy day at the office was the last thing I wanted to do, but I did it because I wanted to achieve my goal of completing a marathon.

Although this was a big commitment, it was great for my own mental health. It was my escape even though it was tough at times, but I would always come back feeling good and with a sense of achievement. I suddenly felt physically fitter and better for focussing on my own self-care. When we look after ourselves, we feel good about ourselves and more confident in who we are.

### **Was this it?**

As I worked my way up into more senior roles, my confidence grew and I finally came out of my shell, feeling comfortable when speaking up.

The irony of all of this is having worked so hard to elevate my career to leadership positions, the work I loved was missing. It was never really about the status for me, I was always passionate about supporting the businesses I have worked in and the people in them. The downside to this was that often I wanted to do as much as I could to help others, but it left me overworked and frazzled at times. Sometimes I wished I could have been one of those leaders who completely switched off and if it didn't get done, they wouldn't lose any sleep over it.

The trouble with working in HR is you aren't always liked. In fact, you can never do anything right, HR gets blamed for a lot of things. Throughout my career, I've had to do some things I'm not proud of. There were occasions where I've received backlash from angry employees due to the decisions the business had made. They weren't necessarily my decisions, but it was my job to apply them. HR is an emotional rollercoaster! What people don't realise is the emotional strain put on HR professionals today. In all jobs, we get to do the things we enjoy and things we don't like so much. HR is no different! It can be a very lonely place particularly when you move into leadership roles.

This is why resilience is so key for HR professionals. You don't get taught these skills as part of the HR qualifications when you first start in in the profession. This was another reason for me starting to train in wellbeing and resilience. We all know it should be a priority in businesses, but quite often it gets put to the bottom of the pile either because of budgets or the resources to drive it. I wanted to be able to support businesses and HR professionals with this.

When I moved into the leadership roles, I got fed up navigating the politics at the top, even game playing in some businesses. The one thing I just could not stand is when businesses say they act with integrity, but then let their own leaders behave in a way that completely contradicts that. I'm not saying it's always like that, but I have experienced this, and it can be challenging when you're in a HR position.

I have been lucky enough to work with a whole range of leaders throughout my career, some brilliant, and some not so good. Either way, they have all helped shape me into the leader I wanted to be so I'm grateful to have worked with them all.

## **I quit!**

In the Autumn of 2018, I made the big decision to take the plunge and resigned from my job to set up my own HR consultancy. I wanted to support local businesses whilst giving myself more family time. I was very fortunate that I got some client work through my network, so I hadn't really got to the stage of even setting up a website or going to networking, etc. It all worked perfectly for a time, but if I'm completely honest I was a bit bored. I got approached about an interim contract and got lured back into the professional services world, but I kept telling myself it was temporary, so it was ok.

During this period, I had already started studying a wellness and resilience coaching diploma and started a 6-month branding course with Nicki because I always knew deep down, I would go back to doing my own thing. I said earlier I love a challenge, and this certainly provided me with one when hit with a global pandemic alongside a merger, my studies and suddenly home schooling too! Almost immediately the lines between work, home, study, and school were erased and a new era of open chaos descended.

With us both juggling zoom calls/meetings all day it was proving impossible to home-school and work. We did our best but if I'm honest it was total chaos like I'm sure it was in most households. This was really the turning point for me, enough was enough! I had been fortunate to work with some truly great leaders in this business, but I had to put my own needs first.

Was resigning the best option? It was something I had been thinking about for months, and so many scenarios had been playing around in my head. Was now really the best time to lose a good salary? Was it easier to stay where I was comfortable? I really enjoyed the people I worked with and I had built a fabulous team. But there was something inside telling me I needed to do this and now was my opportunity to follow my passion. So, I took the plunge and resigned.

Suddenly it was just me! It's been a bit of a whirlwind journey into entrepreneurship. You see I didn't want to make the mistakes I did last time, I wanted to truly do something I was passionate about. It's interesting how things change in only a short space of time. It was time to finally do something that set my soul on fire.

I had been through such a journey myself over the last 12 months. I didn't realise at the time how much I had lost myself during my career and being mum. We're always too busy juggling everything that sometimes we don't ever stop. It's sometimes easier to keep doing what we have always done. It took a global pandemic to make me realise that life really is too short. If you know you have more to give and keep putting it off, don't. Why would you want to stop yourself from achieving your goals and dreams? Just something for you to think about.

## **My journey of self-discovery**

How bizarre that I didn't even realise this whole online world of entrepreneurs existed until this point. I did get a bit of a shock when I saw the coaching industry online. I looked up at some big names in the industry and immediately thought maybe I didn't have what it took. I saw these

powerful women out there being bold and visible. I knew I wasn't going to make it if I didn't start getting visible myself. I realised I had some limiting beliefs and did a mindset course to help me with this. During this course, I realised this was something that my clients would really benefit from and so my NLP journey began.

For those of you that don't know, NLP stands for Neuro-Linguistic Programming. It provides practical ways in which you can change the way you think, view past events, and how you approach life. In my resilience studies, I had already done some work around mindset, but I wanted to learn some techniques which I could use with my clients. I then got certified as an NLP practitioner and Breakthrough Coach.

By this point, I had a lot of time for self-reflection and I reminded myself about the progress I made in my career. It is easy when you start out in business doing something different to forget about all your past skills and experiences you bring to the table. When I started out in my HR career, I was always looking up at the HR Directors and thinking "one day I want to be in that role", but I wanted to do it my way. And to some degree that's what I did. I have always stayed true to who I am as a person. If it meant I wasn't going to reach those leadership roles, then I was ok with that. But deep down I was always quietly ambitious, just never one to shout about it. I no longer needed a title to hide behind!

At this point, I got a little bit addicted to personal development and have really invested not only in myself but also to support my clients the best I can. I've gone on to train in Timeline Therapy, Energy work, Positive Psychology, and there's more on the list. When I first started training in wellbeing and resilience, I didn't even think about having to be coached myself. Sometimes we are often scared of doing that inner work, but it's been a fantastic journey. It's helped me to find my purpose and what I'm truly passionate about. When you start believing in yourself you take action.

This journey certainly hasn't been an easy one though. When I first came into the online space (and let's face it this year we had no choice), I found it exhausting seeing all the social interaction and live videos etc. I could quite happily go and hide away. But then I reminded myself I got on in my career by staying true to who I was so why couldn't I now. Yes, we talk lots about being visible in business, but we can do it in a way that works for us and in a way we're comfortable with. Sometimes you must remind yourself to stay on your own path and not get distracted by others. I truly believe you can do it in your own way.

And so, my coaching business was born. I had managed to finally step out of the shadows, and I wanted to help others do the same.

I'm sat here with another flat white reflecting back over the years. I don't regret not leaving the corporate world sooner. I think everything we do in life teaches us new experiences which lead us onto the next. Starting my own coaching journey really allowed me that time for self-reflection and to finally see it was ok to get off the hamster wheel, strip away the title, and get to know myself again.

### **My advice: from me to you.**

If you ever feel you still have more to give, but fear or low self-confidence is holding you back then my advice is to go for it. Don't put a limit on your own abilities. Some of the most successful people are the ones who failed many times before they succeeded. If you are feeling stuck and unsure where you're heading, then start by reconnecting with yourself and doing that inner work.

We often try to create that perfect life by changing our outside environment thinking we will finally be the person we want to be. The truth is you won't change you as a person until you are prepared to start working on yourself and letting go of what's in your way. "The scariest moment is always just before you start." (Stephen King). We live in busy times and sometimes we think we must do more just to keep up. We then end up putting ourselves at the bottom of our to-do list. You have to learn to slow down and find that time to reconnect with yourself. Things won't seem so scary when you are truly aligned with your passions and values. It's only when you start believing in yourself that the magic really starts to happen. If I can do it then I know you can too. It's not selfish to want to be the best version of you. When you live confidently you open yourself up to opportunities.

Here's another quote I love.

*"Look fear straight in its ugly face and barge forward." (Helen Mirren).*

We've all had those moments when we'd rather run from what's happening than face it. We pretend that the problem will just go away and put it off for another day. Sometimes you have to face what lies behind those doors and often it isn't as bad as you first thought. It's totally worth it when you come out the other side. It's a journey but just start taking baby steps and don't quit. You will soon step into your potential and show the world a confident you.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sarah Giles



Sarah Giles is a confidence & mindset coach for quietly ambitious women with purpose. Sarah helps them to step out of the shadows, unlock their natural strengths and make an impact as their true self. She uses a blend of coaching and NLP techniques to support her clients on their transformation journey. Sarah also works with organisations offering bespoke 1:1 and group coaching to support with employee wellbeing. Providing people with the tools to help make some positive changes to enhance their health and wellbeing.

Sarah is passionate about coaching others to build the confidence and resilience to be their best self and step into their potential. Sarah has a background in HR spanning over sixteen years and has operated in a variety of roles leading up to Head of HR/HR Director level. She has experienced numerous industries but spent most of her time working in Professional Services.

Sarah is a Chartered Member of the Institute for Personnel & Development, a certified NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming) Practitioner, Life Coach and Time-Line Therapy Practitioner. She is also qualified in Psychometric testing and uses a variety of Resilience and Strengths profiling tools in her work.

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