

Rising out of the ashes

At 37 years old, I was running an afternoon playgroup and needed some extra income. I found an early morning shelf filling job in Boots in a neighbouring town and then found another shelf filling position nearer home at Waitrose Supermarket. After a few months of filling the shelves with bread products, management asked me to do the ordering. As the months went by, I looked at the younger section managers and thought that I could do their jobs, but nothing in my education had ever made me think that I had management skills. The Managers agreed to put me forward on a Training scheme and the family agreed to me going full-time. I started on Fruit and Veg and progressed quickly. This pleased me because I thought I was getting past it - at 38! Promotion came and I became the Delicatessen Manager in a neighbouring town. The shop was run down and had a very different staff dynamic. It wasn't a happy working environment and I did not enjoy myself. Home life was deteriorating and I was not managing well, though I thought I was. Finally after ten months, I dramatically gave in my notice. It was accepted and I went into shock.

In hindsight I can see that I experienced some sort of breakdown. I drove to my old shop and through tears begged to go back, just as shop assistant. The management were concerned that I would try to manage any team I was part of, but I didn't. One day, I sat on the tills with tears streaming down my face and was given sick leave. The doctor's certificate said, 'Nervous debility.' I took a month off and returned in better shape. From rock bottom I progressed up the ladder again. I became Fruit and Veg Manager and then the Checkout Manager had a serious car accident and I was moved into her position. I became a Branch Councillor, the Chair of Committee for Claims and Social Secretary.

One day at a Management meeting, we were given a memo on new break times. It was ludicrously complicated. There and then, at the table, while the meeting carried on, I doodled a matrix, which seemed to work. I showed to another manager and within hours it was being shown to Head Office. Someone came to the shop to check that it was all my own work, which was fairly insulting. I was awarded a bonus for a good idea. Circumstances changed and I moved to another part of the country, leaving retailing behind me. Twenty years later, a Waitrose opened up in the town and I saw the checkout manager still using the matrix. I was so chuffed that I couldn't resist introducing myself to the Manager. He told me "It cannot be beaten by modern technology." The irony was not lost on me. I had been 42 when I designed the matrix. I had been in the remedial maths group at school and was not good enough to take Math's 'O' Level exam.

My working life had been in ashes. Waitrose gave me a second chance, which I used more wisely than the first chance.

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