Alison Jones: I think that's a really thorny issue, self-esteem, it's going below the waterline, if you like, for a lot of people. It's one of those issues of identity, of values, of self-belief, that it's very, very hard for managers to engage with without a lot of training and a lot of understanding of what's going on there. And, in a sense, personally, I always feel you don't have the right to go too far below the waterline, I think it's most appropriate for most managerial interventions to be above the waterline, looking at behaviours, looking at the impact on the business, and so on. So with that caveat that self-esteem I think is actually a very thorny area, it's really important to keep it in mind.

Women, in particular, and this is a huge generalisation, but many women in many situations tend to have less self-esteem than their male colleagues, and less sense of their own self-efficacy. So they may feel, if something goes right they'd be more prone to describe that to external factors, where their male counterparts would quite happily describe it to their own, intrinsic value and self-confidence.

And, of course, then you get virtuous circles, so if you have that sense of your… a really strong sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and you make a success of something that builds your confidence, you learn from it and you take it on and do other things, and that's really how you progress in your career, and it's certainly how you become ready, at least in other people's eyes, for advancement.

If, however, you are hesitant in ascribing your successes to your own efficacy, if you tend to think that it was due to some sort of fluke or some intervention by somebody else, then it's less likely to do that job of building up your confidence, and you're, therefore, less likely to make that progression in the future.

And certainly, a lot of the women I've worked with in the past have been… perfectionists is probably too strong a word but I think there is a tendency, again generalising, for many women to want to get something right before they release it, to want to really polish something and be confident in it and look around from all the angles and so on. And I think that is to do with self-esteem and security and so on, and it's also to do with values like, you know, wanting to get things right, which are really admirable values.

It can work against you though. I think if you have a more opportunistic, relaxed, confident approach to life you can almost be more entrepreneurial about things, you can put an idea out there and be more resilient if it gets knocked back, if it goes wrong, because your own self esteem isn't so much bound up with it. And I think in a situation that we live in today where I do something very quickly, it's a very fast changing environment, that sort of agility and that level of resilience and self-confidence is what's going to generate the ideas that are going to be successes of the future.

So building up and taking the time and putting in place structures to build up self-esteem and self-confidence in the women in the workplace, is going to be good for the business in the long term.

And I think there are a number of things that an organisation can do to support that. I, certainly in organisations I've worked in in the past mentoring has worked very well, and mentoring, it's a lot about actually having a role model, it's for women to see other successful women to see how they do things, which, in itself, is very, very powerful because it gives them the sense of possibility.

But it's not, I think, enough, mentoring is great but it's very directive and it's very much about the mentor telling the mentee how they did things and giving them advice and so on, which is useful but if it's done insensitively, or without any balance, it can be… it can actually be the opposite of empowering because what you're getting is somebody who's trying to be a carbon copy of someone else, and they see that person as a success rather than themselves.

So in my experience the most successful approach is a combination of different interventions, where you have a really strong appraisal system, so you have really supportive managers who are well trained and who are really focusing on that person's careers and needs and possibilities. You also have mentoring in place, which is very, very helpful just to give space, to give them some role models, get some possibilities across the industry.

And, thirdly, you bring in coaching, and the great thing about coaching is that it is non-directive, and it's much more about giving the person the space and asking the right questions for them to decide for themselves what direction, for example, they want to go in, what solutions they want to bring in.

And the process of coaching will give you great results in terms of having solved whatever problem you're facing, and having got to the goal that you've set yourself; even setting the goal can be a really valuable part of that. But almost as important as that, I think, is just teaching somebody the way that they can approach problems and set goals in the future, and break things down, and achieve, and, again, you start with that virtuous circle; if somebody achieves something they've learned how to achieve and then they go on to replicate that in different situations.

I'm thinking particularly of one client of mine who had that very typical female approach to things of wanting to have a really clear view of every detail, and she was very anxious because she felt she didn't know the details well enough to make the decisions that were expected of her and to justify those decisions, just be confident that they were the right decisions.

So we spent quite a lot of time in coaching, working out what it meant to understand the issues, and the implications for the business and for her of understanding or not the various parts of the business. And she articulated really well what she actually needed was she needed to understand the situation well enough, and the metaphor she used was going out to the bathroom in the middle of the night; you need to be able to see where everything is but you don't need to see the detail of it; you need to be able to see where the dresser is so you don't hit it but you don't need to know what colour the things are on top of it.

And that was really helpful to her, so she was able to sort of take a more, well, masculine view, if you like, of just knowing… being confident knowing where the big pieces were, be able to navigate around them, and not fretting about the level of detail that she felt she was in command of in that situation.

So I think that's a good example of where just giving somebody the space to think through and really go below the waterline at their own pace. So she was able to look at her own insecurities, her own need to be in control and to be able to justify things, and understand the implications of that, and understand… and try out the possibilities; what would happen if actually I were to take action based on the knowledge that I have, and work out the [disbenefits] of not acting versus acting, and so on.

So just giving somebody that space and allowing them to reach a conclusion with which they feel really comfortable. And in a language or using a metaphor that's their own rather than one that's imposed on them, that's the sort of thing that coaching can [certainly say] that I think is really, really helpful.