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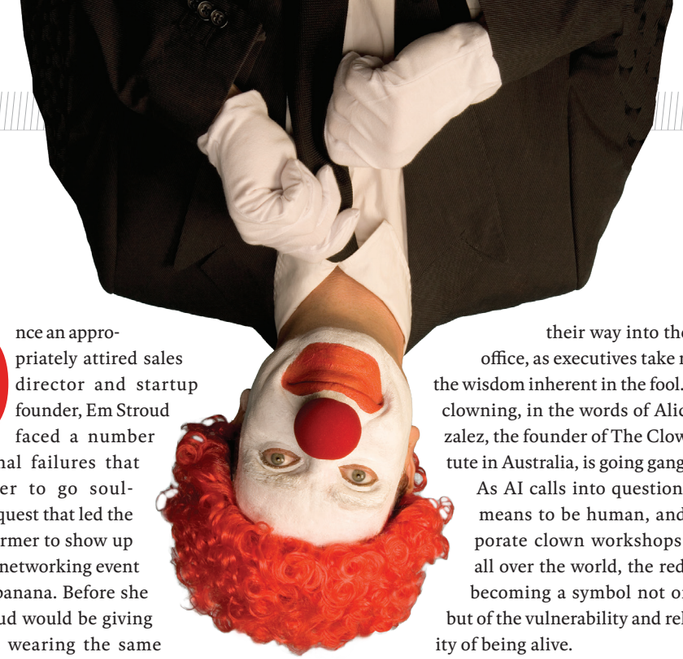
PURSUITS

Playing the Fool

The clown archetype teaches leaders to fail forward with courage and grace.
By Meghan Walsh



Zave Smith Photography/Stone/Getty Images



Once an appropriately attired sales director and startup founder, Em Stroud faced a number of professional failures that prompted her to go soul-searching—a quest that led the lifelong performer to show up to a business-networking event dressed as a banana. Before she knew it, Stroud would be giving a TEDx Talk wearing the same colorful costume and become a corporate clown coach (yes, there is such a thing). "Clowning is about revealing who you really are," the 47-year-old says. "Clowns are observers of life and truth tellers."

Once relegated to children's parties, McDonald's marketing, and horror movies, clowns are finding their way into the corner office, as executives take notes on the wisdom inherent in the fool. Indeed, clowning, in the words of Alicia Gonzalez, the founder of The Clown Institute in Australia, is going gangbusters. As AI calls into question what it means to be human, and as corporate clown workshops pop up all over the world, the red nose is becoming a symbol not of idiocy, but of the vulnerability and relationality of being alive.

Clown training is not about learning to tie balloon animals. Rather, it teaches workers to embrace spontaneity, explore imagination, get in the body, quiet the inner critic, build psychological safety, break down hierarchies, and express emotion. The red nose, known as the smallest mask, conceals in order to reveal. In the same way Tiger Woods wore red on the final day of tournaments and Martin Luther King Jr. donned his non-prescription glasses when orating, clowns use costume pieces to connect to the parts of themselves that are otherwise obscured. Stroud's clown persona, Orange, "helps me access the kindest and most joyful parts of Em," she says.

One of these experiential sessions might start with a warm-up to get professionals out of the head and into the body, followed by a no-holds-barred brainstorm. For instance, think of all the possible uses of a pool noodle. Toothbrush, anyone? The red-nose ritual invites participants into a world of sacred play, where there is only the present and emotions shift in a moment. Flop training teaches how to fail publicly and recover gracefully, while never attempting to hide a misstep. Vulnerability is what connects the clown to the audience. We laugh not at their foolishness but at the cosmic comedy of being human.

But you can't force vulnerability, Gonzalez warns. It only emerges when there is true psychological safety. "The most important teaching is how the executive responds when their plan fails and they realize everyone in the room has seen it," she says. "If they don't stay in relationship, it looks like they're lying and the audience hates it."

When Jan Henderson, who used to teach clowning at the University of Alberta, talks about the psychology of the fool, it almost sounds as if she's giving a dharma talk. "When you find your clown, you find unconditional self-acceptance," Henderson says, an image of a white face adorned with a red nose behind her. "When you accept yourself, then you embrace every single emotion. Your clown allows you to embrace your human conditioning and exploit it for comedy."



Begin with the body and the heart. Use the mind as a cross-reference rather than the ultimate authority.

THE WISDOM OF THE FOOL — CLOWNING OFFERS LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP AND LIFE.

How to create an experience that produces lasting memories and connections.

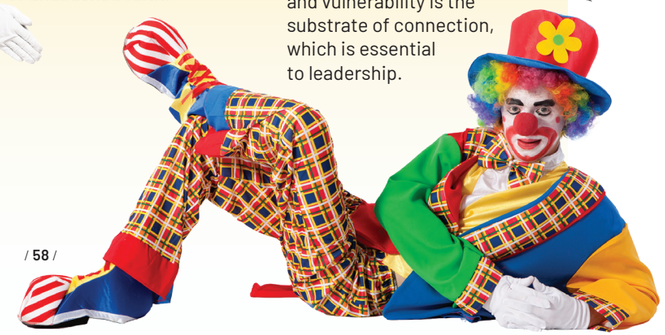


Risk hope. While clowns don't hide their tears in false optimism, they always act from a place of unabashed faith.



Embrace spontaneity. Trust what emerges in the moment without trying to control, knowing that more will be revealed.

Andy Ryan/Stone/Getty Images



Fail with grace. Without failure, there's no vulnerability, and vulnerability is the substrate of connection, which is essential to leadership.

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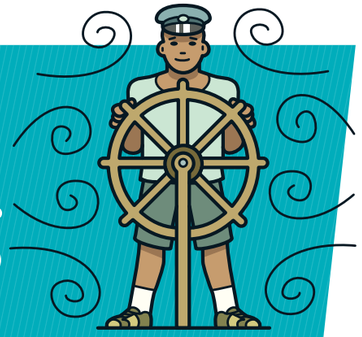


1 Get your bearings. Start by taking stock of where you currently are and the direction you're headed.

THE ART OF

The Art of Setting Intention

You're always headed in a direction, whether or not you're conscious of where to. Intention is the North Star, the destination that guides the gravitational pull of forward movement. It's wise practice every now and again to set the course true. Otherwise, you might end up in some place you don't want to be.



4 Go boldly. Make sure your intention has the heft to hold steady when times are turbulent and the winds of change come howling.

2 Set your values. Let your moral compass be the ultimate guide, rather than desired outcomes, which are by nature fleeting.



3 Stake a claim. Instead of focusing on the negative, state your intention in the affirmative, as if it is already so. For example, "I am on a path."



Illustration by **PETER HOEY**