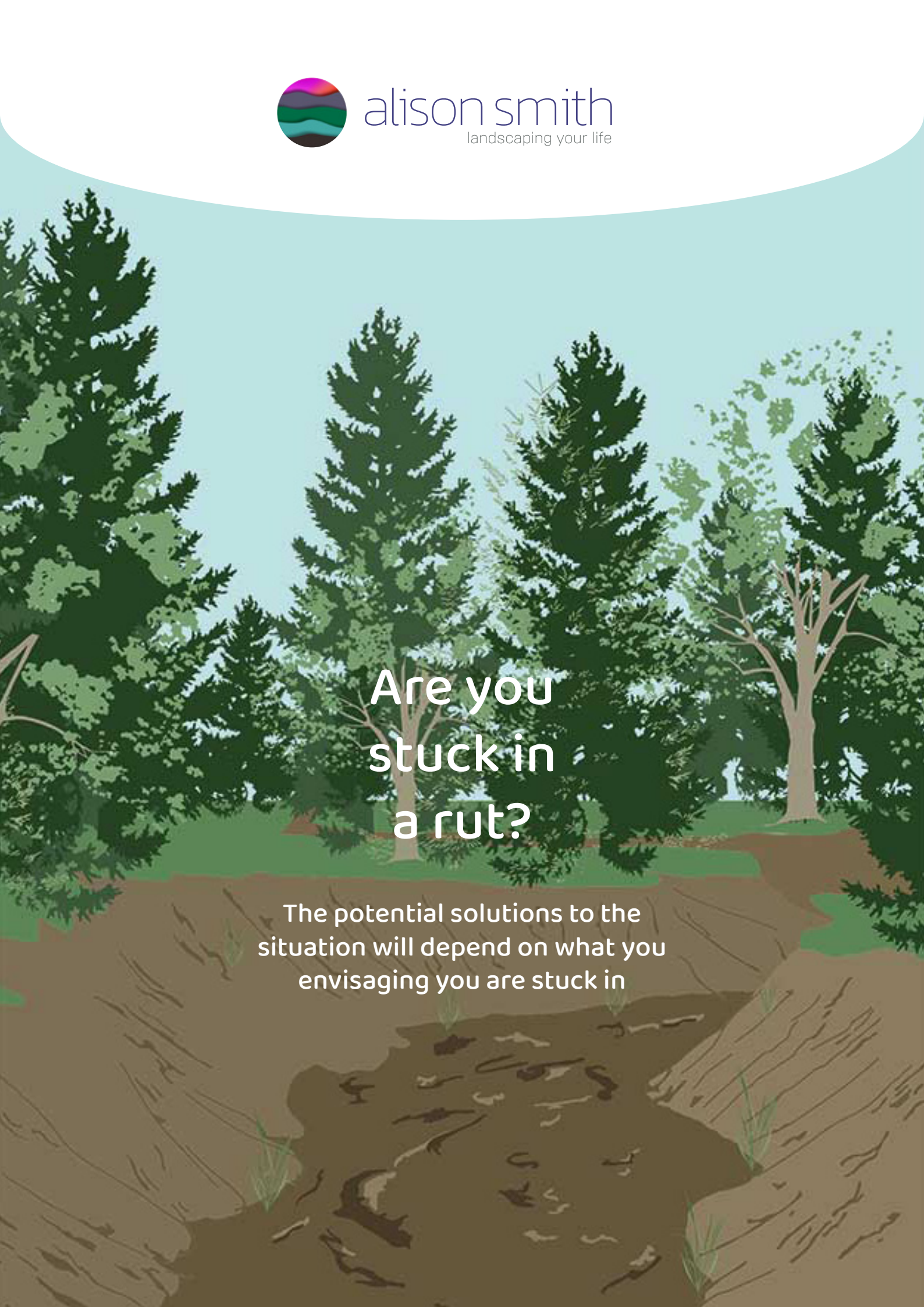
alison smith
landscaping your life



Are you stuck in a rut?

The potential solutions to the situation will depend on what you envisaging you are stuck in

Can I have a quick word? I'm stuck in a rut and don't know what to do.

As a manager, when a team member follows “can I have a quick word?” with “I’m stuck in a rut and don’t know what to do”, it’s very easy to jump in with questions about the current situation. Before long you’ve a whole load of facts and data and yet there’s no solution in sight. It’s as if with every additional fact, and they can certainly keep providing more of them, the level of stuckness increases. You may even start to join them in feeling stuck. Yet what we’re trying to do is release it. That’s where metaphor comes in handy because we can explore the patterns of thinking, and behaving without the specific details of the situation making it foggy and less clear. “What would you do if you were in a real rut?” might be an unconventional question, but I promise it’s not a silly one. Not silly if they are feeling a little stuck and wanting to find options to get back on track. Words have power and the language we use conveys so much more than we think. Specifically, the language we’re using to describe a situation has the seeds of the solution contained within them. Which means the potential solutions to the current situation will depend on what they’re envisaging they’re stuck in, ie do they really feel like they’re stuck in a rut, or might it be a hole or even, something else people can get stuck in, going round in circles.

Stick with me and, even better, if you can think of a situation you feel like this about just keep it at the back of your mind as you read these potentially unconventional solutions. It will certainly make more sense to have experienced it for yourself than try it out for the first time on a team member. I say unconventional although I have been using metaphor with business leaders for over 25 years, and find them particularly helpful and insightful when they’ve been circling for a while and have explored and failed to find a solution using more conventional means. Taking this exploration out into nature can also add additional insight although business suits/and polished shoes don’t always cope well with muddy paths. Trust me I know from experience and dry cleaning bills!

Let's explore the rut, hole and circles we might be stuck in.

STUCK IN A RUT

1

If you were stuck in a real rut in nature what would you do to get out of it? Start with sensible and logical solutions such as:

- Step out of it
- Fill it in
- Walk back to the start of the rut
- Ask for a helping hand out
- And so on

2

Then move onto weirder solutions such as:

- Flood the rut
- Trampoline out of the rut
- Dig a tunnel out of the rut

Absurdity can be a great technique for uncovering solutions.

Don't jump too quickly into trying to understand how this translates back into the real-life situation.

The idea is to explore the problem metaphorically for as long as possible, and as thoroughly as possible, so none of the thinking about the situation gets a chance to jump in and put barriers up such as:

- That won't work
- We've tried that before
- This is useless
- But Fred is too set in his ways, and Jane won't be happy and I've already tried everything and I'm just stuck and someone else just needs to solve the problem for me

Let's explore the rut, hole and circles we might be stuck in.

STUCK IN A HOLE

As a hole isn't that much different to a rut you could therefore find the above solutions for the rut shift the mindset about the situation you're stuck in a hole about. I was particularly taken, however, with a LinkedIn post from Kelly Barner some time ago who shared a post in the Washington Post with the following quote.

> "Be ready to help people when they need it most. Get set to yank them out of a hole. The 'glad hand' is all right in sunshine, but it's the helping hand in a dark day that folks remember to the end of time."
> Amadeo Peter Giannini (1870-1949), Bank of America Founder

If you need yanking out of the hole – who can you ask to do that?

In other words, perhaps you're being a little too gentle and you need a firmer hand to make progress, (and I'm laughing now as I write this about why I was so taken with the quote. I think it's because I'm more like a coach who yanks you out of hole than one who coaxes you out 😉. I can coax but am certainly at my best when a little more forthrightness is needed.)

Other solutions to get out of a hole rather than a rut might include:

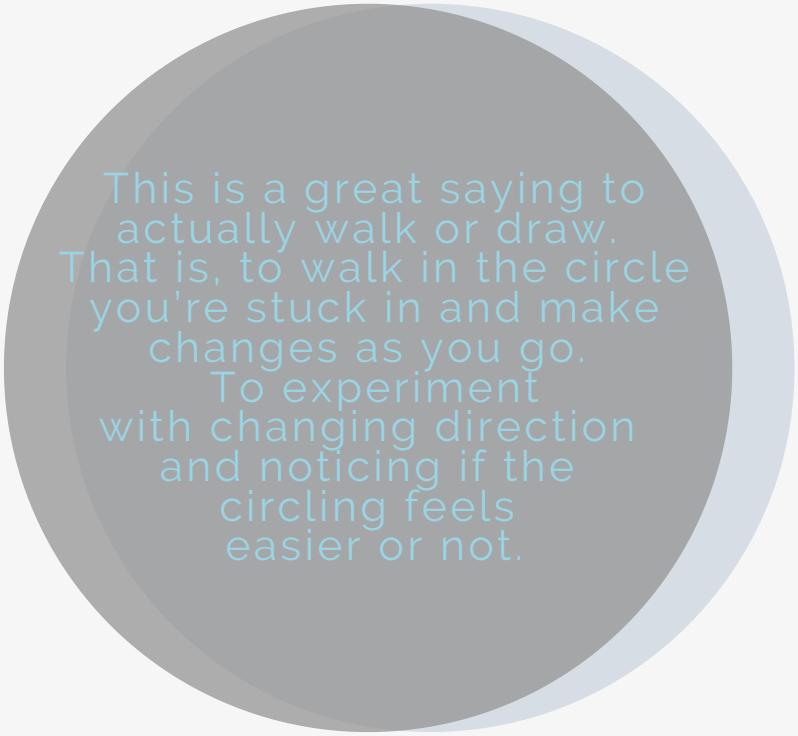
- Making the hole shallower
- Envisaging gentler slopes so you can walk out, or
- Putting a cover over it to stop people falling into it in the first place

Let's explore the rut, hole and circles we might be stuck in.

STUCK GOING ROUND IN A CIRCLE

Here it's the circling that we're stuck in and so the solutions might include imagining:

- Slowing or speeding up the circling
- Changing direction of the circling
- Making the circle bigger or smaller
- Going round in squares, triangles or some other shape (this suggestion was surprising insightful and quick with one client)
- Walking in a straight line away from the circling (An expanding spiral worked a treat with another client)



NO RIGHT OR WRONG

No right or wrong just an exploration of the metaphor gathering data about what action feels worse and what action improves the feeling/thinking.

In all instances we're using the metaphor to explore the situation. To find solutions within the metaphor that potentially represent what is hidden from view in real life. As these explorations speak to a part of you that loves and understands the language of metaphor you may not need to engage your mind to translate these suggestions into real life options. That is, you may simply have done the translating unconsciously and already feel very different about the original situation, no longer feel stuck and have the sense of an action plan emerging. (In fact it happens often.)

Notice what you notice.

You may want to get your metaphor phrase book out and translate these ideas back into practical solutions, which might mean:

- Noticing the trigger that always has you headed for the hole/rut/circling
- Find a disrupting activity that stops you in your tracks and stops you following a familiar unhelpful pattern that starts the circling
- Stopping doing the same thing and expecting a different response (eg it's the realisation of the futility of giving someone their 200th chance that shifts the thinking and therefore the behaviour)
- Remembering what you're passionate about – revisiting your vision or purpose and connecting to your why
- Writing a prescription for wellbeing – one small thing you can do every day to keep your mind and body healthy and on a route towards flourishing
- Writing a list of all the options available to you (however silly or boring)
- Asking for help

METAPHOR IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Of course, as metaphor is in the eye of the beholder, and as you've been reading this you may very well have noticed other insights as you reflected on the rut, hole or circle you were thinking about.

Your insights are always going to be richer and more impactful with respect to the situation you find yourself in than anyone else's perspective. It's as if it's your inner wisdom tapping on you on the shoulder and saying "here's the answer".

Which means as a manager your role is to ask the stuck team member to explore the rut, hole or circle, and not to impose your thoughts about it on them. After all, as you explore the rut with them you may find the biggest reason for staying in it is the cliff edge just the other side that needs to be made safer before they venture out.

I'd love to know how you get on with your own ruts, and also how you get on trying this with your team when they offer a metaphor in their language and instead of exploring the options logically you decide to try a metaphorical exploration.

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landscaping your life

Alison is an inspirational Speaker, trainer, coach helping you and your teams to see the wood for the trees.

Alison is also author of Can't see the wood for the trees – landscaping you life to get back on track which uses nature as a metaphor for our lives.

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