

IT'S OK TO BE A RISK-TAKER - part 2



In this issue of CoachLines, we thought it might be interesting to revisit some of the people we've featured in previous newsletters

and see what's been happening in their lives since they first worked with a coach.

Back in late 2003, Jenny Radcliffe had just turned her back on a high-flying career as a buyer and was about to embark on a new business venture: rather surprisingly, running her own beauty salon. She'd learned, with the help of coaching, that it was OK to be a risk taker, so she took the plunge.

The salon opened in December of that year, business flowed in and Jenny was enjoying herself. But it wasn't long before she started to realise that the dream of running her own business wasn't turning into the reality she'd expected. "I just couldn't go straight from sixth to first gear," she explained. "To a large extent the salon ran without me, so the mental challenge simply wasn't there. I was doing a bit of consultancy work on the side, I had a couple of job offers that made me see new possibilities and so, to be honest, I think I took my eye off the ball."

The economy didn't help either: business began to tail off and so Jenny, characteristically, took the tough decision to call it a day. "It had been lovely," she admits. "I had a year off in effect, but I knew I had to get out quickly, to minimise the damage, and then move forward."

Before we find out where Jenny went from here, let's revisit what she'd learned from coaching 18 months earlier, as we described in her interview with *CoachLines*: Jenny had discovered she was someone who ...

needed to see where her next challenge was coming from
was naturally creative
couldn't bear to be restricted in her

working life
was unconventional
enjoyed developing people

So, what happened to her? Jenny spotted an ad for a management trainer, but was told by the agency that she was one of many candidates being considered and that her chances were virtually nil without any training experience.

"I knew this job was going to be right for me, so with a strong faith in myself I pressed hard for an interview, knowing I could do the job. My boss wanted someone who could take a chance, who was independent minded, creative and unconventional ... well, that's me!"

Jenny is now running training courses on purchasing and negotiation all over the UK for blue chip clients. And she's good at it, regularly achieving high scores from delegates. "I've found it!" she exclaims. "I know this is what I love doing."

And what about the failed business venture? "Yes, it is difficult to accept failure, but I view it as a learning experience," says Jenny. "I learned so much about business, about my own strengths and weaknesses and, above all, that you must be true to yourself, even if you make mistakes. I actually believe I'm a better trainer because of it - I've been there/done it and that has a genuine impact on how well I communicate with people."

When *CoachLines* spoke to Jenny last time, she was planning to "build an empire". What are her ambitions now? Actually, she has two: to embark on a Doctorate and to write a book based on her experience in the buying business.

"I was quite close to the recent terrorist attacks in London - perhaps I had a lucky escape, it affected me quite deeply. But I'm still here and because I am able to do these things I think I should. After all, nothing worth having comes easily, does it?"

"I know it seems like a bit of departure from the world I used to inhabit, but then I've also realised I'm a bit unconventional ... something else that coaching has helped me to understand about myself.

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Putting psychometrics in their place

While dipping into the BPS (British Psychological Society) coaching psychology discussion group recently, I was encouraged to read the views of a fellow subscriber on the use and value of psychometric testing. Since I couldn't agree more with what she says, I offer her thoughts here (anonymously and slightly edited for length) as ones that I very much share.

"The major problem is not that we are encouraged to use psychometric testing, but that we are encouraged to use it in ways that are too definitive. Myers-Brigg (and similar) ratings and categorisations are significantly context dependent – on the behaviour of the individual's team-mates, managers and departmental and organizational 'personality'. As psychologists, we ought to be embracing human complexity rather than forcing people into boxes ... quite often, ratings/categorisations in occupational as opposed to personal/social settings can be diametrically opposed. How individuals rationalize the very different self-concepts that can emerge is a quite fascinating area of study."



She concludes: *"Much of my coaching focuses on ways to bring the two different behavioural styles close together; not only is this more comfortable for the individual but it can often go a long way towards resolving some of the negative behavioural patterns that emerge in teams and organisations."*

... couldn't have put it better myself.

Are job references useless?

Research carried out by Radford University in the USA seems to suggest they are and in fact say more about the person writing them than the job applicant! ... so reported **The Psychologist** magazine in its June 2005 issue.



Dr Mike Aamodt analyzed thousands of job references and found that there was a greater

correlation between letters written by the same referee for two different people, than between two letters about the same applicant written by different referees!

He also found that referees' evaluations tended to be ridiculously positive: 96% of candidates were rated above average in their ability ... only 0.23% were below average!

Got a problem? – always look for a simple solution

The case of the empty soap box

When one of Japan's biggest cosmetics companies received a complaint from a consumer who had bought an empty soap box, management isolated the problem to the assembly line and tasked its engineers with finding a solution. They worked hard to devise an X-ray machine with high-resolution monitors, manned by two people, to watch all the soap boxes that passed through the line.

When a rank-and-file employee of a smaller company was presented with the same problem, he bought an industrial electric fan and pointed it at the assembly line.

As each box passed, it simply blew the empty boxes away ...

What's it all about?

A stable labour market, greater career mobility and a reaction against fat-cat pay awards and boardroom corruption is, according to **Virginia Matthews**, writing in the May issue of **Director** magazine, causing many of us to question what our work means in the wider world. Finding a good job seems to more about squaring the aims of our employer with own personal set of values.

For those just starting out on their careers, just making good money is not the be all and end all either. According to graduate careers website www.prospects.ac.uk, “a growing number select their employer just as much on their values as on the generosity of their salaries.” Apparently, jobs in the NHS, teaching and local government have never been so popular.

(Ed: a central part of career coaching is to elicit values so that long term real satisfaction can be achieved.)

John McDonald, 23, has spent the past two

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years teaching at an inner city school before joining HSBC's graduate training scheme, as part of a leadership scheme set up by Teach First. “While I know I will enjoy the salary, the travel and the chance to work with highly motivated people [at HSBC] I will inevitably feel a cultural gap between my own values and those of my employer ... I hope I will at the very least become a philanthropic business leader.”

And the search for meaningful work seems to continue as our careers progress. A recent survey of 618 managers (mostly aged 31 to 50) by Roffey Park Institute, found that the notion of an organisation's 'triple bottom line' (i.e. environmental, social and economic impact) “is becoming a source of competitive advantage. Employees increasingly want to work for ethical organisations that respect

not only their own employees, but also wider society.”

83% said that it was of personal importance to them whether their employer acted socially and environmentally responsibly. 65% said they were looking for “more sense of meaning in their working lives” and were unhappy at the notion that their employer's declared values were employed cynically as a PR tool.

Perhaps this partly explains the burgeoning Fair Trade sector in this country. Helen Ireland, a corporate communications manager with Cafédirect, now the sixth largest UK coffee brand, found that, in her old job, she “could no longer be satisfied with being one person at work and a different person at home”. *(Ed: this is often the dilemma that brings clients to coaching).*

And Cafédirect's Chief Executive, Penny Newman, believes that it is impossible to fake values. “The main difference between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and intrinsic 'value' is that CSR is too often used as a fashion accessory. Our vision ... runs through this organisation like its bloodstream.” *(Ed: absolutely; a company's true values will always 'leach' out in real behaviour).*

Neil Crofts, author of *Authentic Business*, believes that “authentic companies are simply better businesses”. He claims that typically they spend 80% less than other businesses in areas such as HR, recruitment and marketing. “Authenticity means finding a purpose that is not only deeply held by the people who work for an organisation, but which is also better for society and the environment.”

As the author sums up, “you've either got it in your heart or you haven't”.

Leading by biography

Most leadership theories view leaders' influence as stemming from their traits or behaviours. But a paper by academics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem suggests that leadership studies have overlooked another potentially important source of a leader's influence, namely his or her life story.

Published in the February 2005 issue of **Leadership** journal, the paper puts forward four arguments in support of this premise. First, a leader's influence is based on followers' perceptions and beliefs. These in turn stem not only from direct observation but also from information from other sources. So, for example, followers may learn about their leader's courage and commitment from stories of his self-sacrifice ... and may develop respect and admiration from stories about his competence and past achievements.

(Ed: even the much-prized 'charisma' may be based on indirect knowledge!).

Second, followers' impressions of a leader tend to be influenced by their initial expectations, which are often based on what they know about his background and past achievements.

(Ed: even when we are in a position to observe a leader, our observations are 'framed' by our first impressions).

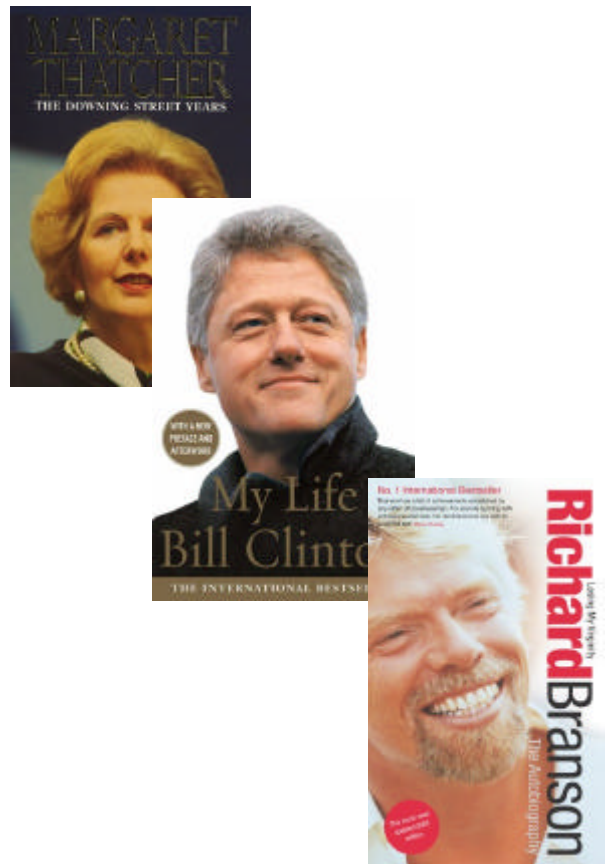
Third, the telling of a life story is itself a leadership behaviour: stories can educate, inspire, indoctrinate and convince, they convey important messages about values and beliefs and they are a means of justifying leadership within a group. Assuming that the leader understands the value of story telling, it is likely that he will articulate his

story to serve this very purpose. Both Gandhi and Hitler addressed their stories explicitly to their followers and claimed to have written them in compliance with

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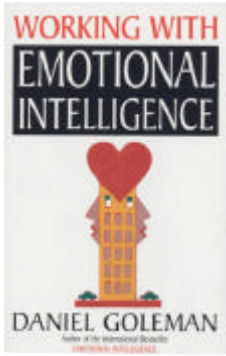
followers' wishes.

Fourth, leaders' biographies may be important for the leaders themselves: in order to lead, people must perceive themselves as leaders and be able to justify to themselves their sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy, that they know better than others.



Working with Emotional Intelligence

A recent project involved attending several sales team meetings to introduce the concept of Emotional Intelligence (E.I.) in relation to career development and selling in particular.



This meant reviewing all the literature since Daniel Goleman published his two books 'Emotional Intelligence' and 'Working with Emotional Intelligence'. Although the ideas were not new, this was the first time this phrase or label came into common use in business settings.

In case you haven't yet come across this concept, the basic premise is that research shows I.Q. is by no means the key to success. It is what have often been called soft skills that make the difference.

Goleman quotes many examples of companies where the CEO has a lower IQ than the people who work for him but is highly emotionally intelligent. (He also quotes research showing that the main cause of executive derailment is low E.I. rather than low I.Q.)

You may find it interesting to take a look at the competency framework he terms the 'Competencies of the Stars', based on his research into business success:

Personal Competence

Self - awareness

Knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources & intuitions

Self - regulation

Managing one's internal states, impulses & resources

Motivation

Emotional tendencies that guide or facilitate reaching goals

Social Competence

Empathy

Awareness of other's feelings, needs & concerns

Social skills

Adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others

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