

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE COACH



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Melinda, how did you become a coach, and why?

I've been a human resource consultant for over 30 years and have worked with companies and individuals going through change in many guises, starting in search and selection and later outplacement, into larger scale organisational change programmes, then management training and development. I was a co-director of a small recruitment firm which floated in 1988 and have been MD of Portland International since buying the business out from a larger group in 1991. At this time I also started training as a counsellor to help me in my career transition coaching work. This culminated in the completion of an MA in Counselling in 1996 which coincided with my marriage and desire to start a family.

When we established our specialist coaching practice in 1997, and I started coach training with Coach University, coaching as a profession was only really in its infancy, but I recognised that this was a way in which I could integrate and apply a lot of my learning and fulfill my desire to make a difference in people's lives as well as their organisations. Because of the structure of the coaching programmes, I hoped it would also allow me more flexibility to integrate my work with being a mother.

What makes you successful as a coach?

I think I have the benefit of several different competency sets which all seem to combine to give me an edge. The knowledge of organisations and how they work from consulting in so many different sectors and interviewing or counselling thousands of executives and managers over the years in so many different environments; psychological training both in terms of counselling psychology (as a counsellor I would say I am an 'existential integrationist') as well as qualifications in Psychometric Assessment to Level B and training in NLP; finally considerable commercial knowledge and awareness from running my own business – floating a company, undergoing a buy-out, negotiating a sale, then buy-back and reconstruction into a niche semi-virtual business. I have more recently embarked on the launch of what I hope will be a global e-commerce social networking and on-line retail brand as well as an SME funding and advice company to franchise. Then I suppose the final ingredient is the ability to sell my professional services and negotiate contracts with some of the largest international companies. Languages are sometimes an advantage here too. I graduated in French and German and have added some Italian and Spanish along the way.

What type of individuals do you work with?

I am usually retained by large UK-based organisations to coach their most valuable people, generally at operational board or functional head level or with high potential to get there soon. I have also had several CEOs entrepreneurs in my portfolio who often agree their own agenda with me, and it can be more mentoring than coaching in these cases. I have recently started working with so-called 'intrapreneurs' those executives and senior managers who want to be inspired and coached to generate their own business within their employer's business. Finally I am occasionally called to work with the 'seriously stressed' and intervene with my Lifeturnaround Programme where there is risk of a fatal 'crash' of confidence which could otherwise lead to long term sickness absence.

What sort of objectives do you set together?

I generally have two clients in a coaching programme, the corporate sponsor and the client him- or herself. Where this is the case, the agenda for coaching is often driven by the organisation's own performance management system, ie their success criteria. Sometimes the need will be to strengthen the individual in a particular aspect of their leadership skills, quite often helping them to develop emotional intelligence and improve their interpersonal style. In other cases, the individual has been recently promoted or moved to a new job, in which case he/she will need help in determining their objectives and getting to grips with organisational and people issues. Many times, the brief is to help the individual 'raise their game', increase their visibility, impact and confidence, preparing them for a more strategic board role within the near future. Of course, there are some cases where the coaching is remedial and a final attempt to help a person change when other interventions have failed.

What sort of assessments do you tend to use?

I am qualified to administer most of the usual psychometric instruments for the assessment of personality and aptitude. The most common ones are OPQ, 16PF, 15FQ, NEO, Myers Briggs and the like. However, I tend more often to use a DISC- based instrument for the assessment of communication and behavioural styles and a parallel test of Work Place Motivators. However, there are a range of special assessments I can use selectively to help people do an audit of their broad executive skills or evaluate their career tactics etc. Most coaching programmes are preceded by a full 360 degree assessment as well. This is where you ask your boss, colleagues and direct reports to assess you against agreed criteria (usually using your organisation's competencies). They do this in confidence and we feed back the overall evaluation which gives the client plenty of data on which to build his or her Personal Development Programme which becomes the focus of our coaching.

How does the coaching actually work?

Coaching usually takes place face-to-face unless the client's geographical location and their work schedule really necessitate telephone coaching. Each coaching conversation lasts 2-3 hours and is in total confidence. It takes place ideally in our Cheshire office; alternatively, we can meet in your offices or at an agreed third location. In London, I often use the IOD in Pall Mall. An initial programme lasts 6-12 months and it is usually best, because of the difficulties of diaries with very busy people, to set up several dates in advance. We also request that our coachees make contact with us in between sessions by booking a telephone call or exchanging emails. Whilst we hold responsibility for ensuring you get to your main monthly session, the onus for the fortnightly 'touch base' is upon the client.

We set an agenda for each session, ideally in advance, review your progress and breakthroughs, discuss your current issues and challenges, brainstorm your options, explore possibilities and agree actions / plans for change. The coach will challenge your thinking, stretch you in terms of what you believe you are capable of doing, give you honest feedback and hold you accountable to deliver changes we have agreed.

How would you describe your coaching style?

Whilst I am compassionate and an almost tireless listener, I believe that it is sometimes 'tough love' which is required. Trust has to be the main ingredient in a coaching relationship which can only be built up by true empathy with the client. When the trust is there, the client is ready to receive direct and honest feedback and to respond to the challenges set. I am very

resourceful and a strong creative and lateral thinker who also benefits from a wide range of business experience which can intuitively help the client move to the right commercial decision. I believe I can help my client to find their true values and to remain in integrity with these values whilst doing what is right for the business as well. In terms of my coaching methodology, I have learned to integrate many different skill sets drawn from an eclectic mix of training in business – especially human resources, counselling / therapy and coaching. My many coaching testimonials describe my style and achievements with a range of clients from CEOs to top police officers to scientists.

What kinds of people do you work with best?

Open-minded, challenging, pro-active individuals who are honest and direct and who do what they say they are going to do. Those who are highly commercial and confident in themselves but who are also prepared to recognise their blind spots and have sufficient humility as well as determination to work on themselves. In response to this question, I often reply, “Super Stars and Problem children – and I’m quite happy if these are in the same guise!” I love a challenge and like working with people who will “give me a run for my money”! In Myers Briggs terms, I am ENFP / ENFJ borderline and I have learned to adapt my style to all the different MB types. Whilst it is true that I probably most enjoy working with types who are closest to my own type, I probably have to work harder to model behaviours of opposing types and this has been good for my own personal development as well as my clients’.

Are there any people you can’t work with?

I used to find it difficult to work with my opposite type (eg ISTJ) who are introverted and detail conscious individuals who are technically very competent but find it difficult to see the big picture or really think commercially. However, over time, I have learned to adapt my style to work with most types. However I find it very unsatisfying to work with people who lack integrity and don’t do what they say they will do, who only pay lip service to their development but are resistant to any form of real change which is reflected in either an arrogant or cynical attitude. Luckily I’ve only come across one or two such clients and we’ve agreed not to proceed.

What about your own coaching? Do you have development needs?

No, of course not! Seriously, there are several areas I am working on at the moment. I am a big picture person who works very fast, and can have a low tolerance threshold for time-consuming detailed work. We were awarded ISO 9001:2000 accreditation a few years ago which required me to give greater attention to compliance with our own quality processes. Being your own boss for several years can make you very independent-minded, even a bit of a maverick at times and I sometimes need to learn to be more respectful of convention. I also think I need to be even more challenging of my clients and be prepared to give tougher feedback when required – I probably like to be liked too much. My own coach is a Swiss-American who is a Master Certified Coach, has two Masters Degrees and a PhD. Actually we co-coach each other on the phone. I am a member of several professional bodies – Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the British Association of Counselling, the British Psychological Society and the International Coach Federation and keep up with latest thinking in my profession in this way.

What are your personal values and interests?

I have a number of interests outside the business, though with family as the main one now, there is really too little time but to skim the surface of many. I have two children, Nathan who is now 13 and Isabella who is 11. They are very adorable and very demanding so I'm still coping with the fact that when you get to the weekend you just start another, much more tiring job of being a proper mother! And since I became a single parent, the job has been even more demanding, though the way the kids have handled the change has been a lesson to me in itself.

I am quite a spiritual person which expresses itself in involvement in various aspects of the Christian church and community. I attend a very dynamic church in Manchester and have been involved in quite a lot of the childrens' work. I have recently stepped down as a Director and Trustee of the Community Foundation for Greater Manchester which links donor companies and benefactors with small community groups and 'community champions' - which would otherwise not receive funding. I also set up our own charity, the Portland International Charitable Trust in 1994 (renamed The Ayuda Foundation in 2011) to help needy individuals to get their 'first foot on the ladder' and am planning some new initiatives, here too in conjunction with the Community Foundation. I have an ambitious plan to lead a creative fund-raising project 'The Hero's Journey' based on a photo-journal project and leadership retreat – see www.portlandinternational.com/userfiles/file/Heros_Journey.pdf

Other interests? Gym and swimming, especially the latter and have been known to swim a mile in an outside pool before sunrise in the Winter! I love cooking, particularly Chinese and Thai food and reading foreign novels. I am also writing a humorous novel about life as a single mum and business woman 😊

What have been some of the most successful outcomes of your coaching?

There have been many instances where, as a result of coaching, a client has extended their remit and/or been promoted as this is so often an objective set for coaching. I am proud to say that four board directors of one of the UKs largest retailers have been coached by me including the current and past CEO. Increased earnings are a usual outcome too (I sometimes wish I was paid on results by commission on such salary rises!). Some clients have decided on a complete change of direction or have decided to restructure their businesses and/or personal lives. Other outcomes are very personal – a nervous breakdown averted, a saved marriage, a dream fulfilled. Many of my past and current clients would be happy to talk to prospective clients about how coaching has benefited them.

What is your vision for the future of your business and your profession?

I want our consulting business to continue to grow successfully in all areas of our operation, especially the change management and executive assessment, development and coaching practices (including now the SME coaching business www.ayudachange.com). I have recently set up PI Corporate Wellness Ltd as a division of the Portland group with two brands Fresh Corporate Wellness (www.freshcorporatewellness.com) and a residential holistic intensive care programme for seriously stressed individuals (www.lifeturnaround.com) I shall continue to grow and run the business, but concentrate the largest part of my consulting time working with selected individuals at director level, who I believe I am in the best position to help and influence. I would like to grow my brands into entities which can function more independently of myself; then I shall have more freedom to concentrate on my greater mission – to help change the world, one small step at a time, through bringing people into a greater

understanding of their unique gift and their potential to serve the communities to which they belong and to ensure that a positive legacy is left from such efforts for the future.

I believe that the community of coaches, both personal and corporate have the potential to be a great power for good in our current society, to help alleviate a lot of the stresses of modern living and to enable people to live successful and valuable lives in line with their truest values and their highest potential. I hope to continue to provide a service to this community and to help it grow and prosper.

Melinda Beckett-Hughes – December 2011