

I was sitting beneath a brilliant blue sky on a bench on the edge of a forest in Bavaria, listening. In the meadow opposite a skylark scurried up an invisible ladder, singing her urgent, ecstatic song as she climbed. The breeze played on the leaves of the trees behind me. Stillness. No cars, no electrical hum of lights and computers, no muzak, no breaking TV news, no deadlines; just the buzz and warble of the natural world. I wondered if when I went home I could run a campaign for quiet, not least in 2011's rattling roller-coaster of change. And as I listened, poised prematurely on its edge, the German word for retirement came into mind: Ruhestand; to be stood quietly. Back here writing this, I recalled a how a colleague at a workshop, feeding back about the supervision experience he'd just had, talked about his moment of change arising in the stillness between words. In coaching we frequently talk about "holding the space", a holding that entails staying still; an economy and purity of language that allows the anxious machinery of consciousness to come to rest. I think one of the gifts we can bring as coaches is simply the permission for our clients to stop for a moment and be still. *Ken Smith*



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Professional, present and transformational - wherever you come from.

A virtual conversation with Justine Ballard and Rachel Frost

The coaching press seems to be saying at the moment that an increasing number of organisations are investing more in internal coaches and making ever more use of them. This may not universally be quite the case for the organisations Network members work in but it took me back to the sometimes knotty question of: when to go internal and when external. Below, two coaches, Justine Ballard as an internal coach and Rachel Frost as an external, respond to a common set of questions from their different perspectives.

How would you typically characterise the purpose of the coaching you do and the associated relationship you have with the organisations in which your clients work?

JB I started the internal coaching provision in the Home Office in 2007, whilst I was leading on learning and development for a large business group there; so it was very much aligned with our Group strategy and the wider Home Office values. The driver for developing coaching was to increase people's options for learning and development and to create a coaching culture which, alongside other projects going on at the time, would also help managers better communicate and develop their staff.

RF As a coach I strive to provide a service that challenges and supports the individuals I work with, in order that they can extend their performance in the workplace. Generally this is the service that is commissioned by the organisation and sets the dynamic of the relationship with the client's organisation.

What do you think the organisation / sponsor expects of you?

JB Because this was a new and untried offering I think my management's expectations were quite vague. They wanted me to lead and to publicise the project and to make it work. I think at first they didn't understand the extent of how it could help, so I had to show them not only what coaching was and how it differed to mentoring, but also the variety of areas it could be used for.

RF For the relationship to work there must be openness and trust; a joint set of expectations about openness from both sides about issues that arise and a trust that boundaries and confidentiality will be respected.

How do you find your clients and what is the typical set up – self-referred or 2, 3, 4-way contract?

JB About half of my coachees were self-referred or they had spoken to one of the other coaches and had been recommended to me. I would always meet them first for half an hour to discuss what coaching is and

the nature of their issue, to make sure that it was appropriate to coaching. I would normally work with the client directly. Occasionally managers have referred people to me and although I always offered the option of a three-way conversation at the start, not many managers wanted to participate.

RF I find clients through recommendation or referral from HR departments or line managers. All of my Central Government coaching work is through formal framework agreements. Individuals or the commissioning client contacts me, either on an individual basis or as part of a wider leadership programme. Sometimes the individuals' line manager is also included in the contract setting meeting.

How would you typically characterise the relationship you have with the client him/herself?

JB In terms of the relationship, once I commit to working with someone I become part of 'team them'. I'm there to support them and to challenge them. I'm there to help them celebrate when they achieve things but also encourage them when they're finding it difficult. I think it's inevitable that when you work with people and develop trust and rapport, you will also develop some kind of bond and friendship.

RF The aim is always to create a relationship which is professional, open, challenging and supportive. The degree to which I achieve this depends on many factors. Along with my own success at facilitating the sessions, other factors include the chemistry between myself and the individual and

the individual's attitude and approach to coaching.

What are the typical coaching agendas you work on?

JB Typical internal coaching agendas include: going for promotion; confidence issues; dealing with change and people having difficulties with their managers.

RF Every set of coaching goals is entirely different. However, common themes do feature. Over the last few months a few typical agendas include; helping individuals address under performance in their staff, working with leaders who wish to adapt their leadership style to a changed environment and helping individuals plan and manage their career through uncertain times.

What kind of ethical issues arise?

JB I would sometimes have to refer clients to other coaches because I knew them or had worked with them briefly in the past and it didn't seem right, but my main ethical issues arose when coaching people who were clearly dealing with symptoms of high stress. A couple of times I had to make a decision about whether to coach them or to recommend that they see somebody else first. I did continue to coach people throughout periods of high stress, whilst strongly recommending that they talk to their doctor, which they did. And related to this was knowing that certain managers were involved in causing my clients stress and upset, but not being able to say anything. You can't breach the client's confidence, so these

managers often are unaware of the anguish they cause.

RF The trickiest ones for me arise when the trust and respect is broken between myself and the client. This situation has occurred a few times when clients reveal in a coaching session that they are actively working against the interests of their organisation. For example, by stealing from their office, bribing colleagues or deliberately setting colleagues up for legal challenge or humiliation.

What sort of things do you take to supervision and how has supervision helped you?

JB At the beginning I went to supervision mainly to check that I was on the right track, asking the right questions and dealing with certain issues in the right way. It was very helpful in building my confidence. Now I use it for more specific and tricky situations. I actually found running supervision groups one of the most useful developmental activities for coaching.

RF Supervision is an invaluable opportunity to talk through ethics, dilemmas and blockers that arise. It also offers a chance to rehearse and practise new techniques and methodologies before going 'live' on a paying client.

What do you think that you bring to your clients that an internal / external cannot?

JB As an internal coach I understand the culture, the work people are involved in and the management issues. I know how the organisation

deals with change because I have been part of it. This sometimes makes it easier to empathise, and gives the client the reassurance that you understand; but in terms of the techniques of coaching, then I believe we should be the same as external coaches, e.g. professional, present and transformational.

RF Having access to a pool of external coaches gives the organisation greater scope to match individuals to a wider range of coaching styles, experiences and approaches. By having the option of an external coach, the individual can be assured of neutrality and confidentiality if they wish to discuss such sensitive issues as named colleagues, personal weaknesses, discontent with aspects of the organisation and their own future career aspirations. I know that some clients are reticent about discussing such issues with a coach who they suspect is likely, either currently or in the future, to work at close quarters with the individuals under discussion.

How do you feel that working as an internal /external in particular has helped your development?

JB Working as an internal coach meant that I met with and built relationships with a wide range of people around the business that I normally wouldn't have come across. It also gave me great insight into our management issues and how people felt about the organisational changes that were going on. This fed into my staff engagement role and helped me better understand, empathise and propose improvements. I also gained confidence through coaching 'in the

moment' and learning how to be flexible and open without structure.

RF Working as a freelance coach has given me privileged insights to many different work practices, sectors and enormously talented individuals. This has stretched me as a coach to adapt my own style to significantly different environments and clients. As well as this, I have learnt new techniques and methods just by working alongside inspirational coaches on the various development programmes I am involved in.

What's next for you in your development as a coach?

JB Whilst constantly striving to develop generally as a coach I'm also starting to develop an area of

expertise. I'm particularly interested in body language and personal and professional presence and want to develop my coaching in that area to help people come across as everything that they want to be.

RF The economic downturn has stretched my versatility as a coach. Central government work, my traditional sector, was directly affected by slashed budgets. Instead, I have been working with private companies as they now emerge from the recession with a clearer focus and vigour. I am optimistic that the public sector is also beginning to come out of its transition period and similarly enter a period of renewal and re-focus. I hope to be able to support leaders and managers through this process.

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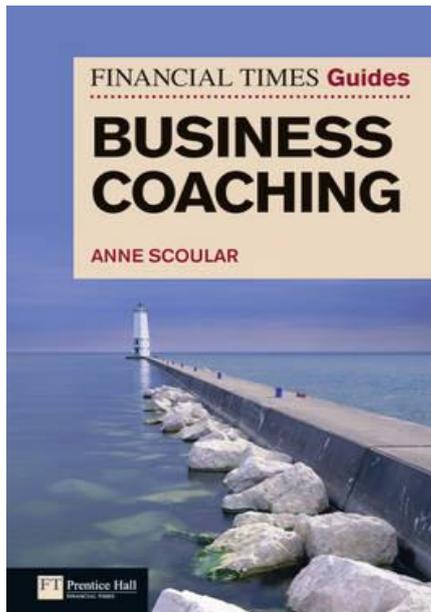
"The Financial Times Guide to Business Coaching": Anne Scoular

Review by Ken Smith

The thing about labels is that they infer and constrict. We have for some years now been required to adopt in Government organisations, occasionally to my mind somewhat incongruously, the vocabulary of business. As my coaching practice is located within Government I was not immediately drawn to a book about business coaching. If, however, there was ever a book on coaching bursting with sound common sense and which unashamedly and tellingly revisits first principles, then this is it.

Anne's book is an admirably sensible, entertaining and occasionally provocative book. It is presented as an introductory text, though there is

much to be gained from spending time with it and it certainly filled a couple of gaps in my knowledge, for example around psychometrics. It has some



useful things to say about the handling of 360° feedback and, typical of Anne's ability to get to the nub of things, she settles the coach-mentoring distinction with a few deft words. Her summary of training and accreditation is to be applauded, as is of course the reference to the Coaches in Government Network in Chapter 4. Written in an engagingly light tone and with several laugh-out-loud moments, it conveys a good deal of wisdom obviously born of practice and many years of training coaches.

At the core of the book are the "Big Five" components of effective coaching. Prominent here is the place of contracting, with a thoughtful consideration of some of the ethical issues that can surface regarding the extent to which the coach privileges the individual coachee above the sponsoring organisation. This chapter also contains the most convincing account of the GROW model I have read in a long while. Out of her irritation at the term "active listening", Anne captures the distinction between listening to

respond and listening to understand, that on the reading of it seems blindingly obvious but is something that so often eludes such clear definition.

Chapter 6 supplements the Big Five with summaries of a selection of coaching approaches that can be added to it. One could quibble about the choices made but given the book's practical purpose and scale, this is inevitably quite narrow in range. Most space is given to positive psychology, with a detailed account of Carol Kauffman's PERFECT model. (See *The Listener* no. 8 Sept 1999 for more on this). She also reminds coaches in this chapter of the importance of having a framework for how people change, advocating Prochaska's framework (Prochaska et al (1998) "Changing for Good"), which she revisits in Chapter 10 where this is placed within the larger scheme of motivation. While this and other parts of the book are necessarily succinct, helpful bibliographies are provided throughout.

Anne proposes career coaching as a growing genre of coaching and dedicates a chapter to it alone, drawing out some helpful differences between aspects of career coaching which are more usually and perhaps unhelpfully conflated. Rounding off the book as a kind of ultimate destination for all that has gone before is a chapter on setting up as a freelance coach, with an extensive list of things to attend to.

Though by the end the humour started to pall slightly, the entertainment and wisdom lay on top of what is undoubtedly a great passion

for and commitment to coaching, as a practice and profession. This comes vividly alive in Anne’s description of a coach witnessing their client’s “a-ha” moment as “like a shark tasting blood”; a description that might seem mocking but that does, for me anyway, brilliantly capture the intensity of engagement and joy between coach and client at these times.

There are a number of references to Meyler Campbell, the coach training company which Anne co-founded, and whose focus is training coaches to

work with the most senior executives. This connects again with the “business” label in the title and reinforces this perspective in way that “organisational” coach may not, but the references are well placed and do not serve to market the company excessively. In spite of its aim to introduce coaching to those thinking of becoming a practitioner, the book does at times assume a degree of knowledge that those seeking an entry level text may not have. Nonetheless, there is much here for the newcomer and the more practiced coach alike.

The Body-Mind in Coaching

Guest feature from Annette Simmons

Quantum physics is saying some very interesting things about the nature of the world around us and when we start to look at some of the pragmatic implications of these scientific findings upon how we fit into and interact with the world and live our lives, this can have a powerful influence upon the way we coach our clients. Some issues seem to stubbornly resist the standard coaching process though and sometimes in your coaching you may feel that you need the Heineken touch – a process that can take you where other coaching tools cannot reach. Well, perhaps some of the thinking emerging from quantum physics can help here.

This relatively new science is saying that everything that exists is composed of tiny particles of energy vibrating at different frequencies. And when we say everything, we mean *everything*. Not just solid objects as you might imagine but thoughts, words, relationships, intentions, events, emotions – *everything*.

So the implications for the coach as you can see are pretty phenomenal, since all these areas touch on coaching issues. The question is how can we use this knowledge pragmatically and

effectively with our clients? The answer is that there are a number of ways and I would divide them into two categories. The first is a set of tools and techniques that you can share with your clients so that they can develop skills in using them to make their lives easier and more fulfilling. The second category contains techniques for you as the coach to utilise with your clients as part of your own coaching toolkit.

I cannot hope to try to teach you these techniques or to explain much

about the connection with quantum physics within the limited confines of this one article but I can give you an example from the first category of tools to allow you to see the possibilities of this approach. This example, in common with most of the other tools, is based upon the concept of the body-mind – that is to say, the mind that is within the body, as opposed to the mind-that-is-in-the-brain. I will explain a little more about this before sharing this tool with you.

The concept of ‘mind’ is a curious one. Scientists cannot fully agree on what mind is or where to look for it, though many think that the brain is a good starting place. It is certainly true that there is a mind in the brain, but there is much evidence also to suggest that this is not the only place where it lives. Doc Childre and Howard Martin in their book “*The HeartMath Solution*” give extensive examples of techniques to work with the brain-in-the-heart, the heart’s own independent and very complex nervous system discovered by neuroscientists Amour and Ardell. Their premise is that the heart has an intelligence - a mind, which transfers intelligence to the emotions.

In the same way, the body itself has a mind or an innate intelligence within every system and every cell of itself that holds all the information about the body. We might also call it body-wisdom. From a coaching point of view the body-mind is a great ally because of its purity. Although a wondrous organ, the brain has an unfortunate tendency to decide what is real by interpreting past events, leading to all manner of false logic so familiar to us as coaches. We all know what a tortuous process it can

sometimes be to ask coaching questions of the mind-that-is-in-the-brain when the client is thoroughly blocked on an issue. Why is this?

It is because when we think about our blocks, we express them to ourselves in the form of thoughts and words and that is how we communicate when we talk to the mind-in-the-brain. But the mind-in-the-body doesn’t use the same language. The language of the body mind is that of our emotions. As human beings we are emotion-driven creatures as Daniel Goleman illustrates so vividly in his works on Emotional Intelligence. One of the marvellous aspects of an emotion is that it is a hundred per cent rooted in the present moment, the place where all healing happens. When we put coaching questions to the body-mind in the language it understands we get very different kinds of answers to those given by the mind-in-the-brain.

The tool I want to describe to you is a technique for coaches to share with their clients, that I call *The Awareness Muscle*. The main premise of this tool is one that is supported by the field of Emotional Intelligence in that it is about developing emotional awareness.

How do we know we are having an emotion at a given moment? The answer is that we can feel a physical sensation within our body. We generally tend to ignore this sensation though and jump straight into labelling the emotion. So instead of simply experiencing the sensation we think to ourselves: “*I’m feeling anxious*”. The act of thinking this increases the intensity of the emotion, creating the next thought of “*I’m*

feeling really anxious” and our next action is one which reflects that anxiety - an action which is unlikely to be one that improves the anxiety-creating situation! It is almost impossible to think clearly and strategically when in the grip of an emotion.

The trick is to be aware of the physical sensation within our body and to work with it at that level without labelling it. If our ability to be aware of an emotion simply as a physical sensation with no accompanying label, was a muscle, then for most of us, that muscle is probably a bit on the flabby side, through underuse – just like any other muscle. So in order to strengthen the muscle and become more proficient at recognising an emotion as a sensation we need to exercise it through practice - hence the term *The Awareness Muscle*. It is an extraordinarily valuable tool to teach to your clients once you have learned it for yourself. The process simply involves putting your attention on the physical sensation of the

emotion and experiencing it, in the present moment, without labelling it or resisting it in any way, for as long as it lasts. Just feel the sensation - the tingling, pounding, flickering or glowing in whatever area of your body that it is occurring. As you observe the emotion in this way, with an almost dispassionate inner eye, with curiosity and interest, you will find that it just starts to diminish in strength or even disappear. As it drains away like this it leaves your brain clearer to consider what to do about the situation that caused it. When we have learned to do this we become free from the tyranny of our emotions leading us by the nose whenever they flare up and goading us into actions that do not serve us. It puts us in far greater control of them and of our lives. This disarmingly simple, intuitive and natural process is typical of many tools coaches can use with their clients to tap into the findings emerging from quantum physics and usefully explore a natural wisdom for living.

Annette Simmons is The Body-mind in Coaching and the Metaphorical Journey at the Network conference in March 2011. annette@anteri.com

“It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”

Chris Goodger

A couple of years ago I was studying for my coaching diploma with the Academy of Executive Coaching and looking for the best way to describe my own coaching framework and model. As I had identified working with my clients’ own metaphors as a key element of my coaching model, I was keen to find a metaphor that captured the essence of my approach to coaching. The metaphor that really worked for me was jazz, in particular its use of improvisation. I’d like to share my metaphor with you and to offer it to you as a way of reflecting on your own coaching.

Influences

“All the music you've ever heard in your life is somewhere in your head. I don't reject that, I use it.” Don Pullen

Although its origins are deeply rooted in Africa and North America, jazz has constantly retained the capacity to absorb and incorporate influences from around the world - from Central and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia. This is what continues to keep the music fresh and alive. As I look at my own key influences, a number of patterns emerge. In the music I listen to and the books I read for example, I notice a love of language, a deep interest in what makes people tick, and an abundance of creativity and improvisation.

What are the influences that led you to become a coach in the first place? What are the influences you have incorporated more recently?

Rhythm

“The whole thing of being in music is not to control it but to be swept away by it. If you're swept away by it you can't wait to do it again and the same magical moments always come.”
Bobby Hutcherson

Because its early history was intimately connected with dance, and because of the influence of African music, rhythm has assumed a significance higher than that of melody in jazz. Yet ‘swing’, the elusive and unique rhythmic quality that gives jazz its distinctive sound, is the creative tension between ‘clock’ time and ‘feeling’ time, of objective and subjective time. I’ve certainly experienced times in coaching



sessions when suddenly the rhythm seems to ‘click’, the level of energy rises and both I and my client feel we’re really getting somewhere. Unfortunately, from time to time I’ve also experienced the opposite!

When was the last time you felt that things were really ‘swinging’ in one of your coaching sessions, when you felt that you and your client were really achieving something great together?

Melody and harmony

“You've got to learn your instrument. Then, you practice, practice, practice. And then, when you finally get up there on the bandstand, forget all that and just wail.” Charlie Parker

Jazz melody first grew from its European connection, as the ‘top line’ of the harmonies of marches, hymns, polkas and waltzes, and their pop song descendants. But melodies used in jazz were often tinged with the bent, sliding sounds of African music. When Europeans agreed on a system for tuning instruments in the 1700s, it released a new music of sonorous clusters and startling key changes that sounded as if they made sense together. In jazz, harmony provides the framework for improvisation. Studying for the coaching diploma made me realise that I have an array

of tools available to me as part of my framework. In particular, those I gained from my NLP training (e.g. anchoring, time lines) and the learning journey I embarked upon subsequently – we were introduced to Solutions Focus and Clean Language for example, both of which I have since explored more deeply and now use extensively.

What knowledge, skills, tools or techniques do you have that provide the basis of your coaching practise?

Improvisation

“One thing I like about jazz, kid, is that I don't know what's going to happen next. Do you?” Bix Beiderbecke

Improvisation is, of course, at the heart of jazz. Its essence is that the players should be free, but its coherence and meaning depend on some shared beliefs. In a good deal of jazz, musicians have favoured song structures as frameworks – because of their cyclical form, improvisers always know where they are. Even in the freest, least premeditated jazz, a rhythmic pulse and a tonal centre are often a constant guide.

In terms of structure, I eventually arrived at a simple overall approach which can be described as helping my clients to work through 3 key stages:

- 1) What's going on?
- 2) What solutions make sense for me (the client)?
- 3) How do I (the client) get what I need or want?

There's a lot more detail contained within each of these stages, but

fundamentally this describes my approach.

My 'rhythmic pulse and tonal centre' are the beliefs and values that guide my coaching:

- Everyone has potential
- Everybody can be creative
- Everyone has their own unique map of the world
- Mind and body are part of the same system
- The person with the most flexibility in thinking and behaviour has the most influence
- We have all the resources we need
- There is no failure, only feedback
- Work-life balance is important

What structures underpin your coaching sessions - how do you know where you are? What beliefs and values guide your coaching?

The feeling

“I wish I could describe to you what it actually feels like to play jazz. Suffice it to say, there is nothing like the exhilaration which the challenge of improvisation invites. Sometimes when I am in the midst of a really good performance my mind will imperceptibly switch to automatic pilot and I find myself just standing there while the spirit of jazz, as it were, occupies my body, choosing for me just the correct note, the correct phrase, the correct idea, and when to play it. It is a profound spiritual experience!” Sonny Rollins

I love being a coach. When people ask me what kind of job I do, it's the first

description that comes to mind.
When I came upon this closing quote,
it pretty much described the way I feel
when I'm being at my best as a coach.

I know that you will experience the
same exhilaration in your own
coaching!

Spreading the Net

Ken Smith

As I look forward to leaving the Civil Service later this year, it seems appropriate to celebrate the history and achievements of the Coaches in Government Network, for members and friends who may not be familiar with them.

One afternoon in December 2006, after a particularly rewarding hour spent coaching, when my client clearly experienced something important, I knew I wanted to do more of this kind of work.

All coaches know that such critical moments are deeply fascinating to witness and a great privilege to be a part of. I was working at that time as Head of Learning and Development (L&D) in the Department for Culture Media and Sport, and found myself wondering why, in spite of the strong reputation my team had for one-to-one work, more people were not taking up the offer of coaching from us.

Perhaps one reason was that they were reluctant to be coached by a colleague in the same and relatively small organisation. So I sent an e-mail to a few L&D practitioners in other Government Departments, asking them if they shared my passion for coaching and if they were wondering the same thing. Today there are 227 members of the Coaches in Government Network, from over 50 organisations.

Through our informal brokering system, we have provided nearly 1000 hours of coaching in other members' organisations. That's 1000 hours of additional practice for coaches and 1000 hours of coaching for colleagues who would very likely not otherwise have had access to it.

There have been many people at all levels of our organisation who have welcomed and benefited from coaching and this inclusive ethos has been at the core to the Network. One client, in a middle management role told me: "I had already taken advantage of a corporate training programme and various other initiatives. However, what really helped turn things around was when I went through an enormously difficult period with my health, family and career all suffering acutely. My new manager arranged a Network coach for me. Within the first couple of sessions I was back on my feet, and by the third there was such a turnaround

that I will look back at coaching as one of those truly life-changing moments.”

Our clients have brought with them a wide range of issues: wanting to be better organised; to manage working relationships more confidently; to be clearer on the next possible career move; to overcome performance anxiety in interviews; to have a richer understanding of what it means to be in a leadership role and how to act on this understanding. I strongly suspect that the flexible arrangements we’ve used for accessing Network coaches means that we have been able to work with clients presenting a greater diversity of issues and objectives than may well have been the case had we been attached to a closely defined programme or strategy. And working with as wide a diversity of clients as possible has I’m sure brought advantages to members in developing their practice, as well as greater benefits in a wider variety of contexts to our organisations.

To be a coaching member of the Network, i.e. to work with a client in another member’s organisation, it’s been expected that you have a coaching qualification and complete a simple coach profile, which gives information to prospective clients on the coach’s experience, credentials and approach. Beyond that, individual coaching members have been free to manage their own development and credibility, to act ethically with their clients and to make their own arrangements for supervision.

In parallel to increasing access to coaching and opportunities to coach, the Network has been a very effective vehicle for continuing professional

development. This journal, *The Listener*, has grown in scope and substance, with contributions from members and from the wider coaching community too, the latter including those who have also generously given up their time to talk with us at our occasional half-day conferences.

Katherine Tulpa, Chief Executive of the Association for Coaching Global, came to join the launch of the Network at our very first conference. Looking back Katherine says: “It is hugely inspiring to see what Ken and his colleagues have created with the Coaches in Government Network – pioneering in fact. This is a remarkable success story of how intra-organisation coaching can work in practice, built on the pillars of sound coaching practice, a light touch which empowered the Network to flourish organically, and heaps of enthusiasm. Other organisations can certainly learn from this!”

At later conferences we’ve been privileged to have input from other distinguished practitioners. They include Dr Alison Whybrow, past Chair of the Special Group in Coaching Psychology of the British Psychological Society, who ran a session for us on Cognitive Behavioural Coaching. She saw the Network as: “a hugely valuable resource of internal expertise and peer learning that is accessible to the individual employees and Government organisations alike. What are particularly striking are the informality of the development and the organic growth of the group.”

The energy in the Network was very clear to Wendy Sullivan of the Clean Change Company: “When my

colleague and I were offered the opportunity to deliver a session on Clean Language we expected an interesting half-day with skilled coaches (which we got), but we had not expected how enterprising and innovative they would be, nor how generous in supporting their colleagues by sharing experiences and ideas. The Network will surely provide a model for how to achieve sustainable inter-agency collaboration.”

And of course there has been a wealth of knowledge in the Network, which members were ever ready to share. For example, Justine Ballard formerly of the Home Office, gives an example of how sharing knowledge made a difference. “It was through the Network that I met Elizabeth Crosse from Legal Services Commission who had already set up a pool of internal coaches there, with ICF accredited training. She inspired me to keep working to introduce internal coaches in the Home Office, and then through sharing her experiences and highlighting the benefits and issues to be aware of, I found it much easier to make it happen. It’s been very satisfying to do this subsequently for others who have been in the same situation.”

Members have also contributed to a number of research projects, including the EMCC research project on the ethics of internal coaching carried out by Katherine St. John-Brooks. Katherine told me: “It was enormously useful to have access to the Network to reach experienced internal coaches. Interestingly, the results very much support the Network approach in that it retains the benefits of being

coached by someone who understands the Civil Service culture while avoiding some the disadvantages (e.g. role conflict or complicated relationships) of working in the same organisation.”

The Network has flourished through the personal contributions of its members, all voluntarily made, often over and above their main jobs. Importantly for us, the Network has been a community and not an initiative; it’s an example of how something can grow organically and emergently, almost entirely by word of mouth. With minimal structure, it has given members the freedom chose how to develop their practice, autonomously and in line with their own interests.

This light structure and taking an inclusive approach has also allowed members to make what is after all an additional and discretionary contribution to the collection of organisations from which we come, in ways that are within members’ control. And by not charging each others’ organisations for the coaching we provide, we have removed a barrier to access, achieved a substantial saving in fees, avoided adding an unhelpful administrative burden, and maximised the available coaching resource.

And looking to the future? The investment made in recent years by some Government Departments in internal coaching disguises a deeper underlying trend across the sector to abandon its internal L&D capability; a trend which has dramatically accelerated in the last year. It’s also doubtful whether the value of

coaching as an effective development method is actually as widely accepted and understood in the sector as might be hoped. And as headcount reductions roll through, the space for members to make their coaching contribution and further develop their practice may be ever more squeezed.

And looking forward for me? After creating and sustaining the Network as a personal project alongside roles in three organisations, I feel very proud of what the Network has achieved and the reputation we have gained in the coaching world; and deeply privileged to have enlisted the support of so many committed and talented colleagues. What started with a tentative e-mail to a small number of L&D practitioners has produced, to put it a little grandly, a fascinating and delightfully successful experiment in how a community of practice can grow when some of the assumptions about how organisations should be, are put aside; as well as a great many new friendships.

And as my departure from the Civil Service approaches, I know that if ever there were a time when access to coaching should be increased, it is now; as so many of the people in our organisations go through change, chosen or otherwise, building their bridges over the gap between the rhetoric of engagement and the reality of their working days; adjusting to new relationships and new ways of working, having lost a familiar psychological contract; looking to survive and prosper where they are or to find a new path.

Whatever shape the internal coaching community takes in the months ahead, I also know that the commitment residing there to improve performance and well-being in our organisations remains. It will I suspect need to be combined with a new resilience to keep alive the passion and belief in the value of coaching of which the Network has been shining evidence. Here's hoping!

This is a revised and extended version of an article appearing in Coaching at Work in February 2010.

And finally:

"Such is the irresistible nature of truth, that all it asks, and all it wants, is the liberty of appearing." Thomas Paine