CASE STUDY 4: EXECUTIVE COACHING FOR TOP TEAM MEMBERS

ANDREW SHERIDAN, EXECUTIVE COACH

A senior manager and Executive Committee member of a Luxembourg-based fund management company sought out coaching as a means to evaluate her leadership strengths, as well as her personal focus and sense of dissatisfaction at work. The coaching engagement lasted approximately 7 months, and consisted of a total of 12 hours of coaching.

As an HR director with Europe-wide responsibility during the peak of the financial crisis, the manager found herself stretched to capacity and in need of some new perspectives on her role, and the impact she wished to have. With the crisis in full swing, the manager was faced with significant, and often overlapping challenges. These included a fractured senior management team that struggled to respond to change; a divided HR team that had split into opposing camps and was effectively in outright conflict; inevitable budget cuts imposed from the hierarchy, and ultimately, the impact that these challenges were having on her personal well-being.

With an understanding of the context within which she was operating, the coaching began by considering what would need to be different about her everyday experience at the conclusion of the coaching engagement, in order to consider it a success. The manager was very clear: she wanted to feel at ease in her work; she wanted to feel empowered and know that her contribution mattered, and was in service of others. She also hinted that her family life was suffering as a result of her stress. Thus, in her ideal outcome, she would have a healthier balance between her private and professional lives, and would find satisfaction in both.

In the early stages, topics of personal fulfilment, vision and values were explored, as a means to evoke better understanding of what was and was not important to the manager. These were then further examined through the lens of her work life, to better understand the correlation between the two. At a macro level, it can be said that the coaching aimed to clarify what motivated and satisfied the manager, and then explore what choices needed to be made in order to achieve greater equilibrium in both the private and professional aspects of her life.

On a personal level, the manager was clearly devoted to her husband and young children. She was passionate about design and the arts, and was an accomplished musician. Driven by a strong sense of fairness, she was a sociable and energetic contributor to her local community, and found great satisfaction in the simpler acts of life, such as hosting dinner parties for her close friends, and travelling with her family. On the professional front, she was passionate about her work and was motivated by evoking change and development opportunities for members of the organisation; she drew great satisfaction from contributing to people's growth as they advanced in their professional careers.

In exploring her personal values, the manager was able to name the ones that were most important to her at the time: people, contribution, family, achievement, fairness and friendship. In these early sessions, the manager was thus able to achieve greater clarity between what truly drove her to do the work she did, and what the challenges or limitations were that impacted her every day reality at the time.

Indeed, with newfound awareness and understanding of her personal values came the realisation that the private and professional elements of her life were in conflict in a greater number of ways that she had previously believed. She struggled to make herself available to her family, given her demanding workload. Paradoxically, she felt demotivated at work, as she was unable to be present with her family as much as she wished. Her conclusion was evident: she needed to focus on finding a way to live those values more, in order to impact the misalignment she was experiencing.

As the sessions evolved, the theme of values was constantly linked to the topics that were brought to coaching. By way of example, the manager chose to focus on the management team; fractured and struggling, she believed that if she could motivate them to approach their current challenges in a new and more resourceful way, it would do much to generate support for the ideas she felt would be of significant benefit to the organisation. Her values of *contribution* and *people* were a useful gauge against which she could assess the validity of her chosen actions.

She wanted the management team to work off-site for two days to pause and reflect on their needs as a team, and importantly, their inter-personal relationships. With practical limitations including resistance from others (a lack of budget and fear of change were key elements), the coaching explored what resources the manager *did* have, and how to be creative in order to achieve her desired outcome. It also explored why it was important for the manager to pursue such an action: what did it provide her with personally? Ultimately successful in making a case for budget to be accorded (and thus, also honouring the value of *achievement*), the manager's confidence increased and she started to draw upon her resources more frequently. With greater clarity about how doing so was in service of something important to both to her and to the organisation, she was also able recognise the evolving impact of her personal leadership.

This outcome proved to be exceptionally relevant for the manager, as a further central theme of 'purpose' emerged repeatedly through the various topics that were explored in coaching. The manager had been in an almost permanent state of *reaction*: to events, changes, challenges, confrontation, and often, ill thought out management of staff. Through the experience

of coaching, she was able to *pro-actively* respond to challenges with a greater sense of purpose: she was able to clearly articulate why any action was important, and what it was in service of. She was successful in creating alignment within a management team, and in provoking a change in behaviour within the warring HR team. She implemented development changes that are now inherent in the everyday career-path programmes of staff, and ultimately, was able to calibrate the time she spent with her family.

At the conclusion of the coaching engagement, the manager spoke of feeling more empowered. With a broader perspective of what was important, she was able to consciously make choices that aligned with her values, and to choose relevant actions in relation to her sense of purpose. She spoke of feeling far less reactive, and of satisfaction in her ability to respond with agility and clarity to events as they emerged.