

# Coaching Case Study

## Stepping up into Senior Leadership

(Names, positions and organizations have been changed to retain confidentiality)

Participants of our 2-5 day “Inspirational Leadership” programmes, with the support of a coach and a small group of peers, have the opportunity to “rehearse” influencing techniques used successfully by Shakespeare’s Henry V.

Vijay wanted to progress to the next level of leadership within his organisation, but had ‘inner voices’ that got in his way. We discussed the voices and honed them down to three critical statements that prevented him stepping up. The first was ‘You’ll have to neglect your family if you are going to progress, and your father did that to you. Your children deserve more than that’. The second voice said ‘You’re a fraud. You didn’t come the conventional route, and they’ll realise you are not as good as they think’. And the third voice said ‘You don’t have what it takes. You are not intelligent enough’. As he described each of them, other group members nodded in recognition. I know from past experience he is not alone in having voices such as these in his head!

He chose one other member of the group to be the support and coach, and en-rolled other group members to ‘play a voice.’ Each voice was given one specific statement. We created a path, to the leadership ‘throne’, and he and I stood at the beginning of the path. I helped him to imagine that when he was sitting in the throne, he would have put aside those voices, and demonstrated his congruence and commitment to achieving his goal. I observed him to ensure he had really visualised his goal of stepping up to the next level; we could all see him truly imagining the future possibility. Then I asked the three voices to step across his path, blocking his way to the ‘throne’.

I coached the voices to really listen for a deeper truth. They agreed Vijay would only be allowed to pass each voice if they really believed him. Vijay had to convince them the words each voice said would no longer be an insurmountable problem to him. If ‘the voice’ picked up any doubt or hesitation in Vijay then they would simply repeat the words Vijay had given them, until either he agreed that was where his block was, or he found a way to convince them.

He took his first step, met his first voice, and was challenged ‘You’ll have to neglect your family if you are going to do that, and you know what that feels like, because your father neglected you. You shouldn’t do that to your own children’. Vijay, when he first heard this voice, visibly shrunk back. It clearly hit home and was one of his deeper fears. However, hearing it on the outside for a change (rather than inside his own head) allowed him to consider it, and the group saw him gather his energy, grow taller, and begin to speak. Even then, his voice still sounded timid. The person playing the voice was unconvinced, and did not let him pass. Vijay paused, to reflect on why it

wasn't working. He rallied...we saw his body language shift again (it looked as if his body filled out, his face became more resolute). This time, as he spoke his voice was stronger, clearer and had more depth and resonance. It was as if he began to believe what he was saying. His voice had strengthened as his conviction deepened. As the minutes passed, he dug deeper and deeper for the place where he really recognised this role was actually going to serve his family, not only in terms of income, but also in terms of his self esteem. He made a promise to find a way to still spend time with his children. He reached the point where he spoke with such authority and integrity that the person playing the voice wanted to let him pass.

The next two voices were met in similar ways. At the 'You are a fraud' voice he needed some support and ideas from his coach about how to approach the issue. The coach, who knew him, helped him to see how well he had done, how far he had come in the organisation in the last three years, and how false that voice actually was. 'I can do this, and I will. I deserve it' he announced. The voice didn't hesitate, but stood aside, completely convinced.

With the support of his coach, he progressed past the next voice. Then he had to face me. I represented the final, unknown challenge. Having worked with him for over a day, I was ready. I questioned his willingness to stand up to people enough to do the job. I wanted to see if he was willing to demonstrate his 'warrior' nature when necessary, or if he would always be 'Mr Nice Guy.' At first he was not up to the challenge, and it looked like he wouldn't make it. I was content to let him 'fail' at this stage; the purpose of the exercise was for him to find out, at the deepest part of himself, where he really was in relation to this issue. Better for him to honestly know and face up to that, knowing what to work on, than for me to collude with him and 'help him' too much to achieve the goal.

And then he began to get cross. But rather than just get angry, he connected to his passion, and the fire. His voice got deeper, he looked me in the eye, and spoke with a new depth of authority and gravitas. 'You have no idea how important this is to me' he said in a very measured and assured way. 'I want this, and I will achieve it'. The words sound simple...but as he said them the room filled with a different energy. I noticed the whole group looked at him with a new kind of respect. We all agreed, if he was willing to engage with that warrior energy when needed, to counterbalance his tendency to please people... then he would make it through.

His smile as he sat in the throne was beatific, and indicated the depth of challenge he had felt in the previous half hour. Later he told me how exhausting it had been. He said that as he stepped on the path he expected just to 'walk through...but suddenly it all became SO REAL. I was amazed'. So were his colleagues, they observed him really step into his power and authority. It was a delight to see the transformation in such a short space of time. Needless to say, six months on, he has the new role and is doing well.