

Coaching Case Study

Results Through A Better Work/Life Balance

(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.

Kurt was a newly promoted team leader working for a large multi-national high tech company. When invited to describe the issue he wished to work with during the coaching exercise, he expressed a deep concern about his work/life balance.

In this section of the programme, participants are invited to name the main challenge or blocks that they are facing in their working lives (or in terms of the Henry V myth, what is their “France”) and to identify what their internal “voices of doubt” are saying to them about this issue.

Kurt began by describing the “real” but unwritten working culture that existed in his company. Since a recent promotion he felt more pressured to conform to these “expectations”. In his mind this consisted of very long days (being seen in the office often for 10-12 hours every day) and weekend home working.

This working pattern was causing in him a kind of grief. He feared it would end his much loved leisure activity as a top amateur tri-athlete, by robbing him of the time he needed for training and competing. His dilemma was that although competitive by nature and ambitious to do well in his professional career, he was determined to preserve his sporting life, as it brought him such satisfaction. In a nutshell he felt that “he couldn’t have it all” and was finding it difficult deciding whether to sacrifice the chance of future promotion in his company, or his passion for athletic pursuits.

So we named his “France” as: “Achieving a satisfying work life balance”. We identified that one of his voices of doubt was saying, “You will not progress any further in your career without total dedication” and a second “If you give up your sport, you will resent your work”.

“The Journey to the Throne” exercise is an individual coaching session conducted within a small group, giving each participant the chance to be the focus, whilst being assisted by their peers. One of its main benefits is to allow people to “say out loud” perceptions or sub conscious fears and to test their validity in a supportive environment.

Kurt nominated Michelle to represent the voice that says “You will not progress any further in your career without total dedication” She symbolically blocked his route to the Throne. His task was to examine the validity of this statement and respond until Michelle was satisfied he had an understanding or strategy that would satisfy this doubt.

In the conversation that followed with appropriate prompting from myself and his colleagues, he explored his perceptions of the working culture, his attitudes to dedication and winning and where these had come from. The feedback he received alerted him that they seemed to be slightly punitive in nature and perhaps beyond the concept of appropriate self discipline.

Movingly his colleagues expressed their concern at how conflicted Kurt was and that maybe he had misread the need to spend so long at work. They also worried that he was heading for a burn out that would be accelerated if he gave up his passion. This provided him with a compelling new perception.

Michelle stepped aside at this breakthrough allowing Mike to block Kurt’s progress with the statement; “If you give up your sport you will resent your work”. It became immediately clear to Kurt that this was a voice of “truth”, not one of doubt to be overcome.

In the light of these new perceptions I invited him to come up with a prototype strategy that would allow him to be effective at work and still maintain his passion as a triathlete. He decided he would leave work early (i.e. on time) three evenings each week for training and would use his weekends wisely for competition and relaxation.

He admitted to feeling “slightly shocked” by this declaration, but using the group as witnesses he promised to give it a try for six months. At this we invited him to sit on the throne to see how it might feel to achieve a satisfying work/life balance.

Some time later I received a welcome email from Kurt. He reported success in a recent Triathlon event, and a conversation with his boss who had congratulated Kurt on not “burning the midnight oil” and told him to keep it up. According to the boss whatever he was doing was working well; his team was much more productive than it had previously been.