

# Coaching Case Study

## Asserting The Right To Say No....

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

As part of the Leadership Presence programme, we offer a coaching session exploring our “Inner Critic” - the voice, or voices, of doubt, uncertainty and criticism inside us that hold us back from fulfilling our potential, and sabotage what we are trying to achieve.

Alisha is an HR manager and young woman from an Asian cultural background. Her Inner Critic was accusing her of being selfish every time she said 'no' to someone who wanted to come into her office to speak. She had an open door policy and was consequently finding it impossible to get her own work done, due to the very high level of interruptions.

She chose one of the small group of 6 we had formed for the coaching afternoon, to play her Inner Critic, thus externalising her inner voice and making it more possible to observe its impact. The voice was male, severe and accusatory, and she placed it directly in front of her. 'You are selfish and have no right to say no to people who need you,' it said. It was very hard, virtually impossible in fact, for her to argue with it.

We then created an antidote - an Inner Coach - who could help her take her own side more. Alisha selected a woman from the group to play this part and placed it whispering into her right ear. 'It's OK' the voice said. 'You have every right to say 'no' and to set clear times when you are and aren't available.' She found this voice reassuring, even if it was almost unbelievable for her to imagine living into what it was saying.

I had the two voices speak in turn. Not unnaturally, she found the first, critical voice much more believable. She had, after all, lived with it for over 20 years.

Then, as the voices continued to speak in turn, I invited the Inner Coach voice to become stronger and more powerful, while the Inner Critic become weaker, softer and moved away, until in the end only the Inner Coach was left, repeating its voice of reassurance. I asked her how she felt. "Great!" she said. "This is how I want to feel and work." I had Alisha 'anchor' this new feeling by taking an internal snapshot of the situation: The voice of the Inner Coach; the feeling of reassurance and relaxation she was experiencing; and the feel of what had become a comforting hand on her shoulder offered by the woman playing the Inner Coach.

I decided to put it to the test and set up a simulated role play with the HR Manager sitting behind her desk as one by one the other members of the group attempted to enter her 'office', sit down

and start talking to her. Her job was to remember the feeling and voice of her Inner Coach and then find a way to say 'no', to set a boundary in an appropriate and realistic way, perhaps by offering another time to meet. She was doing really well until the last person tried. He was an older man from her own culture and spoke to her in her first language. She crumbled! She realised that all her cultural upbringing made this the supreme test - for her a young woman to say no to an older male. We practiced this particular scenario several times until she had also found an appropriate way to set a boundary in this case too.

The session closed with her both believing in her right to say no and feeling confident and assertive about doing so.

Over the next couple of years I was fortunate enough to work with Alisha's company on several further occasions. Each time I saw her she would smile and say, "It's still working!"