

Coaching Case Study

Finding an Authentic Voice

(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.

Lisa, a Senior Executive of a communications company, talked at the beginning of her coaching session of her difficulty in speaking up during board meetings. She shared how colleagues often described her as “a little cold and detached”, and sometimes claimed she could not be heard at all. The feedback I gave her, after seeing her present the day before, was that although she came across in a calm and authoritative way, she lacked energy and connection. It didn't feel like the “real” her, and this detachment gave her a slightly icy quality. I also confirmed her voice was indeed, very quiet.

Ironically what I had observed of her so far in the group and as she spoke to me of her work, was a woman with huge passion and warmth. This was the Lisa everyone wanted to see, and the one we needed to help her feel comfortable showing.

To begin we needed to establish she had no vocal impediment, so we began her session by doing some simple voice work. I asked the group to join in with this so she didn't feel too self conscious (and as a beneficial exercise for all). I asked Lisa to stand at the back of the room and “speak as if she wanted the trees outside of the window to hear”. She found this very difficult. She couldn't raise her voice above a quiet speaking level. We paused and I asked her to talk to us about why she was passionate about her work. After giving a really clear and 'good' answer I pushed her more, continuing to ask her why again and again until she was almost angry. Suddenly she began to speak of her mother and how she had been such an inspiration to her, succeeding against all odds to become a successful business woman. She spoke of her time at school, and her passion and conviction that anyone can succeed in becoming who they want to be. This was at the core of who she was and what she stood for. She had connected to her Sense of Purpose.

Everyone spontaneously broke into applause. She had, in that moment come alive in a vital way, with her voice connected and strong, her warmth and humour, which were so lacking the day before, shining through.

At this point I invited the group to give immediate feedback to reinforce this positive progress. I encouraged Lisa to describe how she felt expressing herself in this new way, with such authenticity. She became a little tearful, saying she had never imagined speaking so passionately. Needing assurance she questioned the group as to whether it was 'too much'. After a resounding NO, I invited her to ground the experience in the final session of the day; a presentation to the whole group, embodying all the learning from the programme. She was brilliant and courageous.

Practice will be needed to develop and embed this new 'voice' back in the workplace, but Lisa now had a "felt sense" of how to communicate in a very new way, one I doubt she will ever forget.