

Coaching Barbara

by Razia Aziz March 2016

It was a first for Barbara, Director of Resources, when she decided to engage a coach. A highly capable, self-made woman, she had never relied upon anyone's judgment but her own to make her way up the ladder. When I first remarked that few in her professional circle were female, Black, from a working class background or had acquired a degree in their forties by virtue of the Open University, she claimed it had never crossed her mind.



Before she arrived for her first session she had put me on notice that she was not coming for “tea and sympathy”, but “to focus on two very specific issues” which stood between her and her career goals, namely “repeated misunderstandings with her direct reports, which were getting in the way of outstanding team performance” and “tensions with her peers” which sometimes left her “in the cold” in the boardroom.

Barbara had had wind that the CEO would be retiring in 12 months' time – and she wanted his job. However, she had also been pointedly told by the Chair that the incumbent had “set a very high bar” with his “people and political skills”. Barbara had taken this as personal criticism. I suspected that, to progress professionally she would mean thorough re-examination of her personal philosophy, her self-image and the narrative she had stuck to for so many years – one that had served her so well, thus far. This could mean exploring some ‘no go’ zones – perhaps to do with race, class and gender, but possibly other veiled issues.

The context was uncertain, complex and volatile: the company was vulnerable to a take-over bid, which could see her, and the other executives, back in the job market. She felt she had all the industry knowledge and technical business skills to ride this storm and escape the clutches of larger competitors – but she *knew* in her gut that she would *have to bring people along*. And that was the one area in which she lacked confidence.

When Barbara was finally seated on the sofa, and we had completed initial formalities, I asked her a question which I could see from the look on her face, she was not in the least expecting: “Barbara, what do you believe is the true purpose of your life?” At first she looked as if she was about to get up out of her seat. Then, after a very long pause – clearly a new experience for someone who is accustomed to having all the answers on the tip of her tongue – she started to recount to me a conversation she had had with the Pastor of the Church her family used to frequent in her home town of Bridgetown, Barbados. “Babs”, he had said to her, “when you grow up, don't grow up so much that you forget how to be a child”. Little did she

realise, she told me, at the time what a challenge this seemingly innocent comment would prove to be.

Barbara's experience of migration to England as the eldest of 6 children turned a playful and carefree child into a substitute 'responsible adult' at the age of 10. As if through a newly opened floodgate, a stream of memories tumbled out of her, telling of her Christian faith, her 40 years of marriage to a bus driver, her three children, bereavements, losses and failure, hard earned triumphs, and other details of her life which she had kept meticulously hidden behind her fiercely private, virtually impenetrable, professional exterior. She did not directly answer the question I had posed - not right away at any rate.

We spent much of the next session detailing a timeline of the key experiences she had had which had disconnected her from the 'child' Pastor Jones had appealed to. By the third session she was ready to explore the question of appropriate disclosure at work about her personal life, and appropriate solicitous questions to others about theirs – in addition to their experience of, and performance in, work.

We always allowed time in sessions for a strategic discussion her next 'moves' in her bid for the top job, and actions related to this. But we also explored her deeper reasons for wanting, and her attachment to having, the top job.

More delicately, by session 4 she had opened up about some experiences of discrimination and harassment which *had* in fact affected her, and helped to drive that 'child' further from her grasp.

As it happened, Barbara's company was taken over by a larger concern much more quickly than anyone had imagined. Barbara was offered a demotion, but chose instead to leave. By then she no longer saw "The top job at any price" as the pinnacle of her career. She had started to attend her local Church, much to the initial consternation of her atheist husband and agnostic children, and had begun to do some voluntary work there. She started to cast more widely for her career progression.

After ten sessions, my coaching with Barbara came to a natural end, initiated by her. We both knew our work together was complete. Last I knew she was the CEO of a much smaller financial services company – a job which she loved. She hadn't lost her ambition, or her appetite for success – she just knew that her life did not depend upon it anymore.

Barbara is a fictional character, based upon an amalgamation of different executive coaching clients, created for the purpose of illustrating our approach to leadership coaching.