



Executive Coaching Case Study – Coaching a Would-Be NASA Astronaut (Jan 2007)

Sandra Quiggin – HDA Executive Coach

Didi is an American coaching client of mine, with whom I have been working with for the past 6 months. She was referred to me by another client.

Didi is a 38-year-old Lieutenant Colonel in the US Air Force. At our initial consultation she gave me a detailed account of her background, career and aspirations. With such a high flier it is difficult to put into just a few lines her achievements to date. To give you an idea of her talents; she has attended weapon school, she has worked for NASA and she has flown jets for a private company.

She juggles a lifestyle full of her work commitments, her passion for flying and kayaking, and family life. As one might expect, it is not all smooth sailing. At times stress rears its head - work/life balance can be difficult to maintain, and in the work place her skills as a leader can be put to the test.

As one might expect from a high achiever, she came to me with a number of personal goals:

1. To be an astronaut!
2. To buy property
3. To have a healthier and slimmer figure
4. To release the fear that stops her performing as well as she might when kayaking
5. To be a combat fighter pilot

In addition, other issues have been raised, such as leadership skills refinement and dealing with apparent conflict of priorities between demands of home and work life. The coaching programme we have been following has therefore been varied and tailor-made to cater for the above requirements. Coaching modules to date have included:

Anger/ Stress management – anticipating stressful situations, so there is no build-up and subsequent outbursts. Practical options which are suited for Didi have been found during the coaching process. Some methods were met with resistance, but we persevered and tried and tested a few to find which worked for Didi.

Conflict Resolution – role-playing has proved to be a useful and fun tool. Communication skills have been honed resulting in an improved sense of the team.

Work/ Life Balance – this is also linked into the healthy lifestyle modules. By concentrating on this area of Didi's life, we are avoiding burn-out and instead enjoying the results in the form of a content, productive and committed employee and top boss.

Healthy Lifestyle and Eating Plan – keeping a food and exercise diary for a week was our starting point. It was interesting to note that one of the reasons for this goal was to attain a better body image and therefore have more confidence when she goes for astronaut selection in 2007.

Personal Development Programme – including understanding specifically the root cause of fear and putting into place strategies to overcome fear. This has included pushing Didi out of her comfort zone. Specific tasks have been set and done such as performing an Eskimo roll in the most difficult of rapids. Such new behavioural patterns are now becoming beneficial habits.

The coaching format is results-orientated and practical. The weekly telephone session includes:

- Exercises
- Setting of new tasks with specific deadlines
- Discussion of obstacles and or fears
- Review of progress

As an outcomes-focused coach, Didi and I have just completed our 6-month review. In this Didi went through each goal and stated how working with a coach had helped. For each goal we drew a line with our starting point being our initial consultation and the end point being the specific goal. Didi placed herself where she feels she is.

Goals 2 and 4 have been achieved. One comment during this feedback was that she would have succeeded in buying the property without the help of a coach (as one might hope from a high-flier!), but that she has made huge strides with my help to overcoming her fears.

Regarding Goal No. 1 we are moving in the right direction. At my insistence she is back in touch with her old colleagues at NASA. She has done some research and found out to our delight, that they are taking a new batch of astronauts in 2007 so we have the July deadline to work to. This week her task is to set a date to visit Houston so she has her finger on the pulse before the year is out.

Also, as mentioned we have embarked on a healthy eating plan as Didi feels this will make a huge difference to her. Although this was originally cited as Goal No. 3, it is intrinsically linked to her major Goal No. 1.

Goal 5 – I was especially pleased with the results to date. Didi has just been offered a position flying for a commercial company. Her words to me were 'I would never have been up flying without your help.' Although Didi has all the necessary skills there were some underlying obstacles at force which we faced together. Without going into too much detail, they could be traced back to her losing her whole flying support structure in a tragic accident. Although the incident had nothing to do with Didi, she was deeply affected by it.

Another comment which I regard as a great sign of success of this coaching programme is that Didi said 'I am much happier with my life since taking up the coaching programme'. This in turn has an affect on her friends and colleagues.

Where are we going from here?

Into Space and back!

For more information on any of the above please contact Melissa Nealon, Client Relationship Manager – HDA, at:

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More on HDA:

HDA's range of consultancy services support organisations in all sectors (ranging from FTSE/Fortune 100 companies, to SME's, to public sector organisations), to manage the human aspects of business capability and organisational change.

Our work ranges from closely partnering with client organisations to manage large scale organisational change and restructuring processes, to facilitating behavioural change and development within teams and individuals; both in established and early-stage organisations.

HDA provides consultancy solutions in: organisational change consultancy, group facilitation, career management and outplacement, leadership development and executive coaching, employer branding and talent development, performance and productivity management, employee retention and motivation, stress management and employee counselling.

More on Sandra Quiggin:



Sandra is a dedicated life and business coach, seamlessly combining commercial and wellness objectives which encourage both personal growth and the adoption of a healthy lifestyle. Sandra manages a series of facilitated offsite teaming and leadership development events for HDA, at locations across Europe.

Prior to becoming a business and life coach, Sandra's background was in resort establishment, resort management, sales, marketing and media relations. Her activities in this area have including time in Norway, Austria, France, Germany, the USA, Africa and New Zealand.

University of Exeter - BA Hons (2:2) in German with French Subsidiary.

Life coaching Certificate and Diploma

PSIA - Adaptive Ski Instructor – Level 1

ITEC Diet & Nutrition

PADI – Advanced Diver

RSA Aerobics Instructor

ACA – Kayak instructor + Swift Water Rescue
