

Two stars and a wish

Former BBC news correspondent Rachel Ellison MBE is known for her robust presence as a coach. Her challenging and direct approach is much admired by the many senior leaders she coaches. Liz Hall reports

By Liz Hall

"I hired you again because you're the only person prepared to be rude to me," one of Rachel Ellison's CEO clients told her.

Ellison has built a reputation for being challenging and direct in her coaching, an approach valued by her clients, many of whom are top executives.

It helps, too, that Ellison spent time working as a BBC journalist in war-torn Afghanistan – she's shown she's a tough cookie. And high-achieving too – *Afghan Woman's Hour*, the BBC programme launched in 2005, which Ellison edited, saw her awarded an MBE for "the promotion of human rights and the empowerment of women in Afghanistan" and her team of local Afghan female reporters win *BBC Team of the Year 2007*, citing Ellison's coaching style of leadership as key to its success.

"Seeing Afghanistan on my CV usually establishes some level of conscious or subconscious respect or admiration," she admits. "You have to be intellectually credible and have leaders' respect from the start."

But of course it's then down to what Ellison does once she's with the client.

"As with all coaching, you have to go in and coach with utter presence and resilience. With CEOs in particular, there's little tolerance for wishy-washy approaches. You have to know your models, theory and influences. Even if you're deploying them with a light touch, you're coaching at your edge, knowing that they're testing constantly to see if you're good enough to coach them. Some C-suiters want the challenge, but then feel threatened; you have to hold steady when your client may feel they've lost their footing. It's important to never apologise for a challenge, and not be

drawn to rescue them," says Ellison.

With her team of associate coaches, Ellison works with CEOs, executive board members and high potential leaders, in international organisations in the corporate and public sector. Commercial clients include HSBC, Linklaters, Samsung, Hyundai, Diageo, Asda Wal-Mart, Myanmar AWBA Group, Astellas Pharma, McKesson Pharma and Sky. Public sector clients include the Foreign Office, HM Treasury, the Department for Transport, HM Prison Service, the NHS, Public Health England, Teach First and UNICEF.

Ellison recalls bumping into a CEO on the Mastery in Professional Executive Coaching masters programme she took with i-coach academy and Middlesex University, which she completed in 2009.

"He said I had all the hallmarks of a CEO. I said, 'That's funny, as only one of us is a CEO, and it's you, not me!'"





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Above: Ellison as a BBC reporter in Afghanistan, and right, her team of local Afghan female reporters, winners of the BBC Team of the Year 2007

But it planted the thought – a bit like someone giving me some feed-forward of what I could become, the level at which I could coach... and it happened! With my company – small though it may be – I think of myself as a CEO and businesswoman, not a freelancer.”

But she hasn't got any illusions of grandeur, and quotes the late Mike van Oudtshoorn, who said there is power over, power with, power under and power for. “In coaching, it's power for. You want the person to fly higher than you could, because you helped them. Letting go of your ego to help people.”

Although Ellison describes her personal coaching style as “combative”, she says “it's always preceded by warmth and rapport, depth of connection, and integrity, which permit me to be highly challenging”.

Ellison is a regular contributor to *Coaching at Work*, and we meet from time to time to brainstorm. I can testify to the warmth she mentions – she's caring and considerate. And she indeed offers insightful challenges, resulting in some highly creative exchanges.

EXCELLENCE

Is Ellison competitive? She says more caring than competitive, but she does seek excellence. “If I'm any good at something, I want to be very good at it, and to stay very good. I don't really think of myself as competitive. I don't enjoy competitive sport, I find that stressful, but I do appreciate quality. I am on a quest for excellence. As a coach, I am ambitious.”

That said, one big influence is the work by child psychologist Bettelheim (1987) on being a ‘good enough’ parent. It's helped her not only explore what good enough looks like, but also the impact of how we're parented on how we show up, including with any offspring – she has two sons. “And being a ‘good’ parent also means that at work I can be as clean and present as possible.”

Ellison's own family background has been marked by cultural diversity,

resilience and a love of learning. The choice of photographs of her travels on her office wall highlight her love of exploring, her curiosity about the world and its people. She's “grateful to my parents for making our home a multicultural experience”.

On her father's side, her grandparents were Jewish refugee Holocaust survivors, who ran to England with almost nothing.

“My grandfather spoke 15 languages, but not English back then. A highly able law student, his first job in the UK was washing up at Lyons corner house in London. Humbling.

“My grandmother was an educated business woman, but was prepared to cook and clean in order to survive and get started in a new country.”

On her maternal grandparents, she says: “My English grandmother was unfailingly kind. My English grandfather who was denied his academic potential because he was born in the wrong class, remained

passionate about lifelong learning – even taking a GCSE in his eighties!”

LEARNING

Originally qualifying as an internal coach with the BBC's ICF & EMCC accredited award-winning internal Coach Foundation Course, Ellison has since trained in approaches including Solution Focus BRIEF Therapy, Cognitive Behavioural Coaching, Psychoanalytic Systems Coaching, Existential Coaching and Clean Language Coaching, and is also informed by mindfulness, self-empowerment, and attachment theory.

“I find the psychoanalytical stance really creative. And it's audacious – it can punch right through to the core. But I also want to see solutions and actions.” Ellison's supervisor, Anton Obholzer, has helped her develop this particular stance.

I have been struck many times by Ellison's commitment to exploring the learning and impact on her coaching of pretty much anything that comes

her way. She has a knack of seeking out the pearls of learning in all that life presents. According to Ellison, this intention “to integrate our learning from multiple sources” has been fostered in part by Caroline Horner, managing director of i-coach academy. And she inspires this in clients too, resulting in a rich, diverse and highly creative approach.

“An art exhibition, a foreign trip, a cookery programme, a dance documentary, gardening – there's learning everywhere. And I find these influences and experiences provide a metaphor with which to work with a client the next day. It's about being able to draw from a tapestry of richness, rather than having the mere specialism of being a coach. Being able to bowl in cricket (two brothers!) is a huge help with a client who loves cricket and is struggling to solve a work issue, for example. Another CFO drew on gardening imagery to help him view his company differently.

“Learning from everywhere provides wisdoms, sayings from different cultures, metaphors, enables rapport and respect, with the client perhaps thinking, ‘OK, she understands me, now let's focus on my job interview.’”

Ellison has written in this magazine about how giving birth prematurely to her first-born impacted her practice. “It was another source of learning – specifically neonatal care, with the sense of emergency, adrenaline, resilience to keep going – a huge test of managing your own emotions and sitting with ambiguity around survival and in what condition your child might survive. Again, humbling stuff.”

Coaching helped her be a better negotiator when managing her son's care in the intensive care unit, as well as in business, she says. “It's helped me be a better parent, too. It's a way of being. I'm more likely to ask open questions, and it's improved my quality of listening.”

Another source of learning and

wisdom for Ellison was a maternity nurse who helped her mother who, before Ellison's birth had never held a baby. “As a family, we stayed in touch with her until she died aged 100. She encouraged me to visit her and I thought nothing of the three-hour drive to hear her experiences of being a global female executive 60 years ahead of her time. Amazing wisdoms, many of which I now realise were psychoanalytically informed... but I just put down to her being psychic! Her listening skills were tremendous. She was never rushing off to do something else... she was fully present. Classic coaching, before I recognised these skills as ones that influence how I felt and how I solved.”

INFLUENCES

Among those who have inspired her in the workplace is Caroline Horner “for her rigour and quality, her depth and knowledge and minimalist steer. She is someone of few words, but every one is worth hanging on to.”

Her former boss at the BBC, Penny Berry, is an inspiration too. “Penny was my best boss ever. She seemed to not do anything, but produced confidence and creativity in me. It turns out she was coaching, but none of us realised!”

She also cites Liz Macann, who set up and headed the BBC's internal coaching scheme, for her “quality of teaching and modelling coaching as a way of being.

“And she knew I was coach material before I did.”

CLIENT WORK

These days, Ellison sometimes works with Berry and Macann. The trio recently designed and delivered a coaching skills programme for 30 top executives in Myanmar's Shan State, marked by “mountains, pure air, bright sunshine, farming country, quiet villages, tribal communities”, she says.

They were asked to give individual coaching sessions to an international

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top team at a family-owned Burmese agricultural conglomerate serving an economy of seven million smallholder farmers who typically still use hand or ox cart ploughing.

The country's regime change set in motion last year is bringing about sweeping economic and political reforms, and has seen the unravelling of military rule and the release from house arrest of pro-democracy Aung San Suu Kyi. It is an exciting climate to work in.

"We were there on the same weekend that Aung San Suu Kyi led her new MPs into parliament following the momentous democratic elections a few weeks before.

"It felt amazing to be contributing something positive to a country emerging into the bright sunlight after decades of isolation, oppression, disempowerment, corruption and systemic failure.

"Myanmar is an emerging economy, surrounded by neighbouring countries which have powered ahead while Myanmar stood stuck for 50 years. The need is everywhere – from healthcare to roads, to logistics to mechanisation. There are skills gaps in every sector, including management.

"What we weren't expecting was the eagerness to learn and the appetite for coaching skills. Coaching offers a wonderful alternative approach to command and control, which may have severe and negative connotations for a smiling people suppressed by an authoritarian military regime, which regularly shut down businesses and closed universities," says Ellison.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

Ellison is increasingly known for her thought leadership, particularly around ethics and working across multiple cultures. "For me, it's about expressing myself and contributing." She contributed a chapter on self-coaching (*Ellison, 2015*) and presents at conferences.

In June, Ellison spoke at the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations in Spain on *'Learning from leaders in a conflict zone: A psychoanalytical inquiry into leadership within an international non governmental development aid context, embracing themes of: leading in times of crisis, political unrest, personal, tribal or national vulnerable.'*

This month (18 November), she's speaking on *'Learning from NGO leaders working in conflict zones and politically unstable environments, with the world's most vulnerable women and children'* at a conference run by charity Opus. And on 23 November, she's giving a talk for the EMCC on *'Stocking the World Foods aisle'*, sharing the story of how a global supermarket manager had to relearn how to lead effectively, in a multi-ethnic context.

In addition to skiing, practising yoga, gardening and playing tennis with her husband, Ellison has recently reconnected with her love of contemporary ballet which she did from when she was a teenager until she graduated.

"I'd kept my shoes from the eighties, and recently put them back on to dance again. Ballet is about self-expression through dance. I feel the same when I play the piano or, pre-kids, when I

played in an orchestra...you're working hard physically, mentally, and you're working with feeling. It's beyond words, or instead of words. As well as making me feel fitter, stretched and refreshed after having a complete brain break from work and home worries, it makes me feel more whole."

Ellison's children have helped her have a different perspective. "My children bring me great joy and have taught me about being in the 'now'. Cycling to and back to the greengrocer with a toddler can take two hours!"

She recalls how when he was six, one of her sons, Etan, came back from playing tennis, asking if she thought he deserved two stars for doing well, and what was her wish for what he might improve on. Two stars and a wish is a coaching-style classroom technique used in primary schools.

"Wouldn't it be amazing if every work conversation, family chat or learning environment could embrace the two stars and a wish principles?"



FIND OUT MORE

www.rachelellison.com

References

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