

Coaching at Work

“Virgin territory”

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Coaching really did begin at home for Carol Wilson. Self-directed learning led her to run Richard Branson's newly formed Virgin Records, and help her spread the word about coaching. It's a passion, she tells [Liz Hall](#)

VIRGIN TERRITORY

When Carol Wilson first entered the UK's job market, she found it hard to fit in. It was the 70s and workplace culture was highly authoritarian.

Wilson wasn't impressed. She'd been raised in a family she later realised had a coaching culture. She'd been praised often and been brought up to be independent and to think for herself. It had been the same at her grammar school.

"I was terribly headstrong, but I had no fear because I had grown up in an atmosphere where I was encouraged to think," says Wilson.

Luckily, in those days there were plenty of jobs and she "stumbled" into Virgin Records, which had just

been co-founded by entrepreneur Richard Branson.

"Everyone was under 24 and none of us had had a proper job, including Richard. So we each had to take responsibility for ourselves."

Like Wilson, Branson had been brought up – by his mother – in an environment of praise and to think for himself. "So naturally at work he would think back to his mother and adopt a coaching style."

Unsurprisingly, when Branson asked her what she wanted to do, she said: "Anything but a secretary."

"Why not run our music company?", he offered.

This was in 1974 and neither Branson nor Wilson had a clue how to do this. Wilson was given a free rein, which, she says, made her more thorough. "I tell managers

now that the more you check up on people, the less they will bother, because what is the point if it's going to be checked anyway?"

Wilson would come up with plans, think through the risks then approach Branson for funding. "Brilliant idea", he would say.

"Having been told it was brilliant, we would do things we hadn't dreamt we could do. Very often things would go wrong and Richard was the first port of call. But he wouldn't tell you what to do, he would ask you for the solution and you would do it."

Anything goes

In the UK, the 60s and 70s were decades of challenging rules.

"Our generation was unbounded by anything and we trusted ourselves to make decisions. It was the start of self-directed learning, of the client having the answers."

Soon, Wilson and her colleagues were "pulling the rugs out from the likes of EMI and RCA", rival music companies. Wilson discovered Sting and ran her own

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label, Dindisc, signing up The Human League, The Buzzcocks and Tom Petty. Although she loved music and had attended the Royal College of Music, what she really liked was working with people.

Golden age

“It was the golden age of music and everyone wanted originality. You weren’t there to tell them what to do, you were there to support them emotionally, with money and the best team you could offer. I loved watching them blossom and play on *Top of the Pops* for the first time. Nothing beats it. And it’s the same with coaching clients. The coach has to do very little.

“It wasn’t just the praise and good feedback, it was being allowed to make mistakes and therefore learn from them”, says Wilson. “At Virgin, there was no blame. If people are doing things wrong, what is the point in telling them off? Look at what they are doing well and give them time to sort it out.”



“It’s the beauty of what happens when you let people think for themselves. It’s nothing new, but it’s magic”

A decade or so later, in 1986, Virgin “moved into the majors”. It was still a relatively small company and Wilson wanted to see what else she could achieve so she moved to A&R (Artists & Repertoire, the talent scouting and development arm of a music business) at Polydor with a £3.7 billion budget.

One day, she was called into her boss’s office, and told to spend more on expenses as she was “making everyone else look bad”. However, there were more limits on what she could do than at Virgin. It had a counter-culture to what she

had been used to. She wasn’t a big fan of what was going on outside the company either: “The 80s were very cruel, mean, hard times. Bullying was respected and people didn’t talk about workplace stress.”

She became intrigued about management culture, devouring books on it when she could. *The One Minute Manager* by Kenneth Blanchard remains a favourite.

She left the music industry in 1996, using the money from her golden handshake to set up a property development business. But still she missed the “interlocking of minds with people”.

It’s magic

When everyone started talking about coaching around 2000, Wilson realised this was pretty much what had been going on in her family and at Virgin.

“It’s the beauty of what happens when you let people think for themselves. It’s nothing new, but it’s magic. Now the ingredients have been identified and it has been bottled as coaching, which makes it easier to help people who haven’t grown up with it.”

She trained as a coach, including in NLP with John Grinder, Tim Gallwey of *The Inner Game* and more recently Nancy Kline of *The Thinking Environment*. Exposure to the latter prompted her to

review the content of the coach training she offers through an Open Certificate, recognised by the Institute of Leadership and Management and the Association for Coaching, and customised manager-coach training programmes for corporate clients. She now puts much more emphasis on thinking.

“So many coaches have shiny tools they want to use, but sometimes you just have to shut your mouth. I now teach people first to shut up and listen, then if that isn’t working, to get out their shiny tools.”

She is somewhat scathing about people who may have started with something original, but who don’t bother learning anything new.

“I believe in lifelong learning. Lots of people find a niche and then don’t bother going on anyone else’s training courses.”

In 2005, she met Sir John Whitmore, setting up a joint venture with him, Performance Coach Training, through which she runs coach training programmes. She discovered they both grew up in Orsett, Essex, where the baronet’s family’s estate had been based.

Wilson based her open programme’s content on material from Sir John’s book *Coaching for Performance*, which has been translated into 19 languages, as well as on her own experiences.

“It’s the whole thing of asking, not telling. Most managers want to be coaching managers. They take to it like ducks to water, but they then go back to the workplace and get terrified.”

She trains managers to coach all over the world and has courses delivered in local languages.

She is currently working in one private sector firm training 8,000 managers globally, but she also loves working in the public sector.

“I believe in lifelong learning. Lots of people find a niche and then don’t bother going on anyone else’s courses”

Wilson is in demand as a public speaker even though she used to hate it. She claims she was “cured” by Clean Language, which has become a passion and underpins all of her coaching and thinking.

“I used to be terrified and bad at it for all those years but I came away from a second session and I just knew I was going to do it.”

Lifeblood

The passion started when she had Jungian therapy in her 30s – the work with symbols helped Wilson resolve lots of issues. She later worked with a university student who suffered from extreme exam nerves. She invited him to imagine he was stepping through the door into the exam room and to describe what he felt and saw.

“He kept saying he didn’t see anything and that he was an engineer. Then suddenly his tone changed and my hair stood on end. He said, “I can see it on the wall, everywhere, inside me, green bile.”

The client passed his exam.

Wilson worked with the late David Grove for three years who

developed Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge for work with trauma and anxiety sufferers. The approaches use metaphors. “The brain uses symbols so it can examine things that are too damaging to remember.”

Wilson and others captured lots of Grove’s work and she is now writing a book on this as well as working on a doctorate on Clean Language through Middlesex University.

Along with helping people blossom and spreading coaching skills, writing is another passion of hers: “It is my lifeblood.”

She has written *Best Practice in Performance Coaching* (Kogan Page), due out in paperback soon. She also has four as yet unpublished novels under her belt and is working on a fifth.

She took a sabbatical at one point to team up with long-standing friend Annie Nightingale, Radio 1’s longest-serving DJ, to write a screenplay which was optioned by the BBC.

She does much of her writing in a beautiful summer house (pictured) in her garden by the river Thames. As well as walking and doing yoga – which she has done pretty much every day for 30 years – she loves taking her boat out on the river.

Her vision for coaching is to see it spread far and wide, into education, into families.

“We will end up with a generation of leaders who have been brought up by coaches. We will be listening to each other, not dropping bombs on one another.” ■

