

Case Presentation

Background

Nigel started his career as an IT consultant specialising in Web-optimisation working for a new venture business. He became a share-holder and significant player, contributing to the SME's success on both sides of the Atlantic such that it was bought by a large US based company. Nigel secured a 2-year contract to support the transition of the business after the sale. This had involved embedding the web-optimisation offering in the new organisation, easing the transition for the existing customers who valued the personal service from the SME Company and were nervous of the move and, importantly, aggressively marketing this new offering to the parent company's significant and high-profile client base worldwide. Nigel had wanted not only the financial rewards this would bring should he reach his target percentage of sales but also looked to the future as his ambition lay in achieving a Board appointment by the time he was 40. I met Nigel when he was 41, 6 months after his promotion to a Board-level post achieved on the back of his spectacularly successful 2-year contract.

However, since his appointment it was noticed that Nigel was struggling to adapt to the more subtle and political requirements of the post. Julie, his line manager, was supportive of him but had recently been critical of his management style, drawing to his attention that she felt he needed to 'loosen up' a bit away from an intense and rather overbearing manner he was exhibiting. This had come to a head when the CEO had been surprised by uncharacteristic behaviour at a recent strategic meeting.

Coaching Brief

Nigel was offered coaching and the following written brief was presented as part of the matching process:

- VP Operations, with significant technical and business understanding who now wishes to develop a his skills at a group strategic level
- Development in rising to the new challenges of operating at Board level, particularly in relation to communication style and people management
- Required to develop further the balance between technical input and developing his team to operate independently

Chemistry meeting

This consisted of a telephone conversation where introductions were made and we confirmed what each of us felt was the purpose of our meeting. As Nigel had not been in coaching before, it was agreed that I would kick off with some questions and then I would explain how I worked before answering Nigel's questions and address any concerns. This allowed us both to judge whether what I could offer Nigel as a coach was enough of a fit and to review whether the organisation's brief could be fulfilled.

Nigel confirmed in his own words that he felt he lacked political astuteness and realised that this was getting him noticed in a way that could become 'career limiting'. Also, he found it difficult to stand back after agreeing objectives with his directors, particularly George who always pushed deadlines to the limit. Nigel realised that he was inches away from having a real blow out with George, who was laid back and didn't seem to take anything seriously.

After listening to Nigel's concerns about his situation, he had not really talk much about his peers on the Board. I wondered if these relationships might be an area that was causing difficulty and drew attention to this area of the brief. Nigel said that some of the Board-level meetings were terribly

long, were not chaired well with some people who 'liked the sound of their own voices' being allowed to go over ground that had already been decided. Indeed, Nigel shared that it was these experiences that were leading him to question whether the Boardroom was the place for him.

Nigel was obviously one technically able and likeable man. However, he seemed like a fish out of water and this was knocking his confidence. And, after an hour's call we found that there was enough of a common language and understanding of Nigel's situation and requirements to proceed.

Coaching

At our first meeting what emerged in addition to the official brief was Nigel's uncertainty about this new role that and the company; he wondered whether he was cut out for the VP role and was actively considering his options. His general unhappiness and concern was that in his previous role he had flexibility and felt he was trusted implicitly and he felt that this was not the case now. Until his recent promotion, Nigel never saw it as an issue when he needed to work around family responsibilities; now there was pressure to be seen in the office early and meetings often arranged around a US time zone; this was leading to unbearable pressure at home and arguments with his wife about his lack of tolerance with the children and her.

Nigel and I went forward to do some good work together deconstructing the various elements that were causing him difficulty, for example: his belief that acting politically betrayed his sense of integrity; his belief that others were judging his absences as him shirking responsibility, which had led to a level of distortion and feeling he had no control over his schedule; working through the relationship with George who, he began to see, reminded him of how he used to be before all of life's commitments 'descended'; the loss of the original company and his place within it – it had felt like working with a supportive family where everyone was valued for the abilities and this culture fitted in with his personal values – but and now he was expected to be one of the 'grown ups'.

Nigel had a natural, easy management style that could adapt to the different characters both side of the Atlantic but he had needed to work through his resistance to his new status and the demands this placed upon him; demands, he discovered, that he was perfectly able to meet in his own way without the need to 'sacrifice' his quality of family life or the enjoyment of his professional self. He also needed to understand a little bit more about 'group think' and his responses to what went on so that he could increase his resilience in the face of the uncertain decision-making that is an inevitable part of a strategic role – a challenge for many technically-trained people.

Postscript

Nigel is a composite of a number of cases to preserve anonymity.