

Coaching for Success

*She took her mother's surname - L'Epée - to keep her memory alive. She believes women are starting to move forward but still have a long way to go. **Karin Genton-L'Epée** is French, was born in New Caledonia and spent eight years of her professional life in the United States. In 1998, she set up her coaching and consulting business in Prague two years after having moved here. She is charming, warm, talkative, open-minded and interested in people and their communication styles. When describing her profession you see why she is successful - the dedication and never-ending fascination with people is mirrored in her eyes. Please meet her, you won't regret it.*

What is your work - coaching - about?

When I say that I am a business coach, I usually explain the context of the word straight away. It is a kind of puzzle word and people sometimes use it while not knowing the meaning behind it. You can actually coach almost anybody on any issue. The trick is what you understand under coaching as such: coaching is helping people access their own resources in order to succeed and achieve their own goals. It sounds very easy but most people do not know what their goal is. Sometimes, they barely know what their personal goals are. If you don't have the basics, then the coaching is very hard. Coaching is, in simple terms, an ongoing interactive process. The coach is there to help you focus on the specific issue. There are more women than men involved in this area - we are good at listening to others and their problems.

Can you compare it to any other kind of work?

It is very close to sports. It is far easier to coach someone who has some sports experience and understands coaching - these people know it is about performance and improvement. For a long time, war has been used as a reference and a good metaphor. Since business is about competition and success, you need to work with a reference covering mainly men and a man's world. In business, just like in any kind of competition, you need someone to help you to improve your skills in various areas and develop a support system. Only then can you see

if they feel right. Now, more people work because of the meaning of the work, not because they have to. This "new" perception of work, and working conditions, is only recently present in the Czech Republic. In order to have a successful company, you need to pay attention to your staff. Coaching is a booming field which enables you to find out who you are and where you are heading. A great product is one thing and a good market is another one; nevertheless, if you do not have people who make things happen, you will soon lose. People want to be more valued and better recognized.

What expectations should the candidate have before approaching you?

Coaching means working, even hard work sometimes. It doesn't mean sitting for two or three days at some training program and then going home; it can be a long process. The person has to be motivated: you cannot coach someone who is being coached against their will. The puzzling thing is that some people expect managers to replace management skills with coaching skills. It can be contradictory, as a manager is responsible for getting results from people, and a coach is there to lead people to achieve their own results. The coach should be neutral in the process of getting results. There shouldn't be any power relation between the coach and the candidate. There should be mutual trust, respect and understanding; you must be able to get along with your client.

The candidate should not feel he/she is forced to do anything. It is supposed to be of a pure benefit to the person who is being coached.

What areas are coaches usually trained in?

They usually come from two intertwined areas: psychology - coaches usually have some background in psychology or psychoanalysis; and business - if you are to coach business people, you need to understand the real side of business. Psychology gives you the method but you must make that method work in business.

I was a manager for fifteen years, myself. Afterwards, I studied various communication techniques and combined the two fields to become a coach.

When did you have the idea of becoming a coach?

I used to live in New York City for eight years. I worked in retail and then in wholesale; finally, I combined the two. I worked on Madison Avenue, which gave me access to some very demanding clients. I also worked in one of the main offices in California. The change provided me with insights into different approaches of relating to customers and clients. The differences between the East and the West of the States especially equipped me with varied perspectives. Along the way, I was always interested in many areas, not just classic management. That is why I attended many courses such as Neuro Linguistic Programming and many others. The main idea was to incorporate information



Karin Genton-L'Epée, photograph by Věroslav Sixt

and basically apply it. My management style was not just giving orders but showing directions. Unconsciously, I got into coaching via my own management experience.

Where did you move after the eight years you spent in the US?

After the Gulf War, I moved to Paris in 1991. I didn't get along with the French; I didn't fit into French society. It took me all those years abroad to realize that I had lost touch with French culture. In 1995, I came to Prague because my brother was working here in the construction business. I came to visit and I stayed. Again, I worked in retail as it was my background. I saw a completely different face of retail here: retail in the Czech Republic in 1995 was far different from what I knew from New York. As well as getting used to the culture shock, I had to develop a different system of communication with the staff who did not speak English or French. A positive point was finding that if I applied the tools I had learnt in various courses,

I could communicate without using much language. We didn't need to talk too much to understand each other: Czechs feel what kind of person you are in a short space of time. I combined all my previous knowledge with my new cultural experiences and I guess I was heading for the coaching field a long time before I realized it. I once visited a career advisor who suggested I get into coaching. I did a lot of research to see what it meant and realized that I had done most of the work it involved without being aware of it. I had actually learnt most of it along the way.

What does your work consist of?

I started by holding Power Breakfasts - the first one took place in 1999, and Women in Business dinners. I apply basic marketing rules: I keep a mailing list and I regularly advertise my activities on the web and in the media, such as company coaching, public lectures and business luncheons. I have always tried to team up with people who have different skills. I coach

people who face a variety of major issues, issues that may be seen by an outsider as of minor importance. However, these details create the company culture and influence the working environment a lot.

Your background was in France?

Yes, I studied mainly in France - economy, business and languages. My real experience comes from the States. The French education system is far more academic than practical - or it was 25 years ago. It is comparable with the Czech education system, I guess. You get a fairly good education but you have no idea of what life is about. You are taught to work because it is intellectually challenging and because you like it; but in the reality of business you primarily have to sell and be productive for the company. You only learn this after you leave school. In the US, I learnt the positive and rewarding side of business. I took different practical courses in marketing etc. that complemented my academic background. Only there did I really become myself.

Are you happy staying in Prague?

It was very difficult at the beginning because the Czechs were not happy. Even if I am not in a good mood, I decide to be in a good mood since my problem is not supposed to be your problem. For the first six months, I couldn't reach out. I didn't get any response or build relationships with Czechs and wondered how to grab them. Then I started to work with my team and really enjoyed it, I have stayed close to some of them. After a certain period, I found out that Czechs need to be liked. They are more reserved and not that openly affectionate as French, Italians or Spanish but they need the same affection. If you want to manage Czechs, forget about books and simply learn to like them. Today, I try to re-apply everything Czech people have given me and taught me. I have also learnt how to connect with my emotions, have started to listen better and relax. The older I get, the easier I deal with things around me.

You seem to be on the move at every second...how do you balance your professional life with leisure time?

I have the advantage of being on my own so I can live the way I like. I do lots of sports: my luxury is having a personal kickboxing coach. I usually have my classes in the morning once or twice a week. Although I swim, I used to run marathons and play squash - depending who is around. I realized I needed someone to focus on me. And that is the kickboxing time. My trainer follows my mood, my rhythm and my physical condition. It is a real pleasure and certainly a passion. Apart from sports, I like to meet with friends, listen to jazz and read. Lately, I have been getting into writing...