



INTERVIEW OF THE MONTH >

HAVE FAITH IN YOURSELF

TEXT: PETRA ŽALLMANNOVÁ, VINCENT BELEJ FOTO: TOMÁŠ HLIVA

It's time to stop believing the illusion of work-life balance, says a woman who has coached or worked with hundreds of managers all across the world. Karin Genton L'Épée discusses confrontation-fearing Czechs, the way women raise their sons, and the influence of hormones on the work environment.

The burly Karin talks about the fallacy of work-life balance, cut-throat men and appeasing women, touchy Czechs, and her own journey towards becoming a highly successful professional business coach.

You are a citizen of the world. Are you happy with where you stand now?

Yes, I am very happy. I was born in New Caledonia almost 55 years ago, and when I think of it, it seems like a big number. But I enjoy being fifty-five; and I think it is more fortunate to live in Prague at 55 than in Paris or New York City, because those cities require lots of energy to keep up with their intense pace.

Today, when I think about who I can look up to, Jane Fonda comes to my mind. She describes life in three different acts: Act One when you are born to 30 years old; Act Two from 30 to 60; and Act Three 60 until you die.

Act Three is about growing further, about self-reflection. One of the greatest discoveries in neuroscience lately is that a person's brain doesn't stop growing with age. With training and practice it can keep expanding and learning. Researchers of well-being have established a fairly clear pattern, across different cultures and countries, in which happiness dips in the 30s and 40s before recovering in

the 50s. Instead of thinking your life is over at 50, we need to think about it as an opportunity to find a new level of happiness. While I enjoyed my first Life Act, my life has become a lot more fun and meaningful in my Second Act.

Coming first from Paris and then New York, how did you end up in the Czech Republic?

I owe my first trip to the Czech Republic to my brother, who was working on the Těšnov Hotel (today the Hilton Hotel) in Prague, in 1989. At that time, I was living and working in New York City. I arrived a few days before New Year's Eve, and had a bit of a culture shock. A couple of months after the Velvet Revolution, Prague didn't have many shops or restaurants available like we see today. But I fell in love with this magic city anyway.

Six years later, when I did move to Prague, I looked for a job and found, believe it or not, a managerial position in restaurant/catering business. Without any knowledge of the language or the culture, I didn't expect to work in the same upscale retail business as I did in NYC or Paris. I was prepared to do anything as long as it didn't involve taking care of kids or dishwashing. This must have been my American approach. I wanted to understand the people first and I had no idea what this country needed in

terms of professional expertise. So I went from Madison Avenue in NYC to Prague selling T-shirts and leggings for 50 CZK managing a team of hard working teenagers who were earning CZK 3,000 per month.

What brought you to the decision to switch from business to coaching?

After 16 years in managerial positions in New York City, Paris and Prague, I felt it was time to leverage my knowledge and experience and combine them with my interest in interpersonal skills. When I was in the USA, I took many different courses: Neuro-Linguistic Programming with Anthony Robbins, Public Speaking, you name it. I learned a lot of techniques but never had a chance to really use them.

When I moved to Prague in 1995, I finally had a chance to implement these techniques with my Czech team and it worked. Mind you, when I first arrived and asked around what the best way to motivate the Czechs was, you know what the answer was? You can't! Obviously, people had no idea how to do it.

So you directed your career towards coaching?

Yes, having achieved significant results with my Czech team, I thought it would be interesting to implement my ideas and methods on a larger scale. While I started to explore different ideas, coaching came to my attention, and here I am, 14 years and more than 2,000 hours of coaching sessions later.

There was one more reason: As a manager, I was told that if I cared for my team members and helped them develop and grow, I'd also have the opportunity to grow and be promo-

ted. Unfortunately, it took me many years to learn that if I wanted to get promoted – if I wanted to succeed in the corporate world – I should take care of the boss's needs and expectations before taking care of my team's needs. But I always took care of my team first. So I had fantastic teams but never really got the promotions I wanted. But this time, thanks to my clients, I have been fortunate to learn and grow with my profession from the start.

Do you think it helped that it was Prague? Capitals are always different from the rest of the country.

Yes, of course it helped. Although coaching as management support was not a new concept, not too many people in the Czech Republic were very familiar with it. And to be honest, I didn't have as much experience and knowledge as I have today. Looking back at those 14 years, I was lucky to have found clients from the start. One of my first clients was an American manager with whom I worked for two years. Within those two years, we both learned a lot from one another.

Do you think that it is easier to be in Prague and get what one wants professionally than being, for example, in Brno or Ostrava?

There are two questions I always ask when I first meet people, and unless they can answer them, it's impossible to tell if they are better off in Prague than in Brno or Ostrava. The first question is: Who are you? And the second question is: What do you want? There are many great companies all over the country and many competent people all over the Czech Republic. Some prefer to live and work in Prague and some in Ostrava



KARIN GENTON L'ÉPÉE, PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS COACH

With 16 years of international management experience in the United States, France and the Czech Republic, and 14 years as a successful business coach her coaching and training programs are developed and aimed primarily at mid- and top-level managers and focus on leadership development, cross-cultural understanding and effective communication in a global business environment.

She is trained and certified in Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) and Neuro Associating Conditioning (NAC) techniques in the United States. Her work combines NLP and NAC techniques, in-depth management experience, and practical knowledge of international companies doing business in the Czech Republic and Europe.

- 1957** – was born in Noumea, New Caledonia
- 1981-1983** – working for Lasserre Couture, Paris
- 1982** – graduated in languages and economy at Paris Dauphine University
- 1983-1985** – managed Lasserre Couture store at Madison Avenue, NY
- 1985-1991** – US national sales manager in Descamps Bed Linens
- 1988** – founded L'Épée Consulting in the United States
- 1989** – graduated of the Anthony Robbins Certification Program
- 1995** – moved to Prague
- 1998** – founded L'Épée Coaching & Consulting in the Czech Republic

or in Plzen. Sometimes it is easier to do business in other places than the capital as there is less competition. While Prague might have more job opportunities, it also has more competition. Yet there are niches everywhere. I think that's the benefit of today's world. The old rules of centralised power do not apply anymore. Unless we understand that, we won't be able to adapt to the economic changes.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

How would you say the concept of what women want in this country differs from New York or Paris?

I believe many women in the western world would like the opportunity to have a career and a family at the same time. And while many women have an amazing ability to juggle their family and career responsibilities, very

few can have a successful career and devote as much time as they want to their family.

A successful career requires lots of energy and a strong time commitment and so does a family. From that perspective, I think that the idea of work-life balance is a fallacy. It is the same fallacy as the idea that women can have it all. I don't know who can do that, and for those who think they can, there are always some personal consequences they don't want to think about.

My experience with professional Czech women is that they want to find the perfect husband, the possibility to stay at home for three years to take care of their children, and still be financially independent. Unfortunately I don't think that it is possible. But the Czech system is not helping change that belief.

What do you mean by the Czech system?

In the Czech Republic, women are allowed to stay at home for 3 years on average after having their first child and another 3 years after their second child. And when a woman would like to go back to work earlier, on a personal level she usually has to face the disapproval of her family/friends/co-workers. On a practical level, there are no day-care centres available for her to take care of her child when she starts working again. I come from a country that definitely encourages women to return to work as soon as they can. French women don't think they should stay at home with their children all the time - they do so for maybe 3 months, then take kids to crèche and go back to work. In the US, the parental leave is only six weeks long.

Having a career must affect the mother's approach to her children's upbringing. Are Czech men being raised to appreciate career mothers or wives? Do you think this is different in the Czech Republic and elsewhere?

Since I do not have any children, I am not sure I am the right person to answer that question. What I can say is what I have seen and observed in the past 30 years. Most parents do the best they can to raise their children. However, I also noticed that parents, in this case mothers, often project their own dreams and expectations onto their children. And while mothers expect their sons to behave like mature and responsible men, they also send some mixed signals, anticipating most of their needs.

Regarding your question about the differences between raising children

in the Czech Republic versus elsewhere, I think there is a greater difference in how each generation raises their children rather than where it is. I belong to the Boomers generation, people born between 1946 and 1966. My parents were a lot stricter with me than my friends are with their children. I think that one of the mistakes parents make when they raise their kids is not giving them a chance to try and to fail. Character is created by encountering and overcoming failure. Many parents don't want their kids to fail, and to help them avoid failure, they become overprotective.

How is the gender issue affecting professional relationships between men and women?

One of the major differences between men and women is the lack of understanding of the other gender's needs and expectations. Men love to compete. Women love to relate and connect. Men like to outsmart others. We women look for what we have in common, and when there's nothing, we make something up. One of my challenges with men who need to compete and win all the time is to communicate with them. When I try to find what we have in common (a typical female communication tactic) I feel that they always try to outsmart me and "win" the discussion. Women have a different way to relate. But when women try to match the men's competing style and we start to compete, men hate it. They don't mind being outsmarted by other men but most of them hate being outsmarted by a woman.

What is the solution?

My feeling is that we first need to teach men and women about how

men communicate, how women communicate and how we can communicate with each other. And women also need to pay attention to their own needs before taking care of others' needs. Men have no problem focusing on themselves.

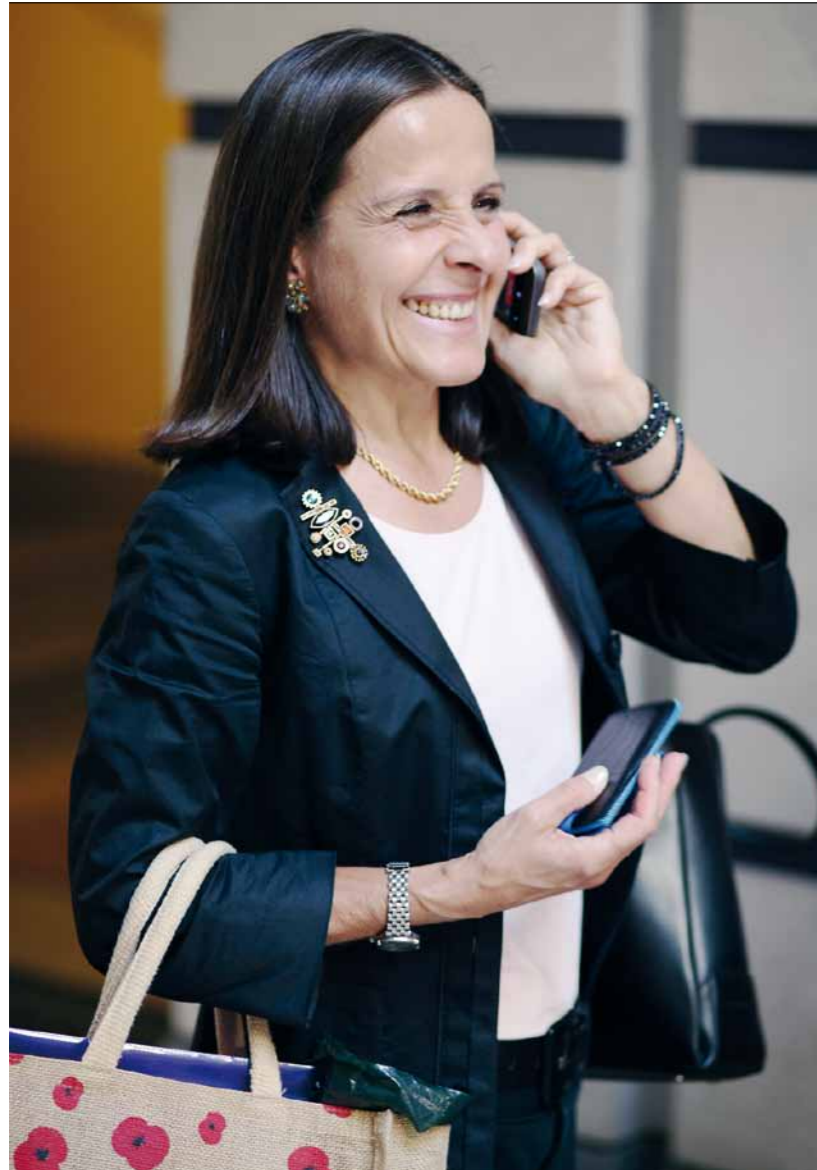
WOMEN AND MEN

Are most of your clients women or men?

It varies. At the moment, I have more men clients. However, the women I work with are more grounded and efficient. In general, I have noticed that women work harder. Women will try harder to work out the problem. And here's a typical women's issue: women work hard, expecting men to notice because women don't blow their own horns. So my job also involves making sure that women acknowledge their own worth and communicate how good they are. But that's not how we were raised. I'm lucky because I get along with both sexes but I also admit that my style shifts with each gender. I'm tougher with men. Were I not tough, some of them wouldn't take me seriously. Communication is very much related to the person's style and energy. If you have a typical macho man, who values challenges and confrontation, you have to in some ways confront him so that he respects you. However, not all men are like this, and with some a softer approach needs to be utilised. Sometimes it is difficult to tell when a person is going to get offended even when I am not addressing them but someone sitting next to them. Czech people tend to be feisty, taking things too personally.

What tools do you use to communicate with men and women?





I use a mix of tools but I like the Neurolinguistics techniques because they are quite easy to apply. Neurolinguistics is about synchronising our style to the other person's style – it is about getting on the same wavelength as the other person. As much as possible, you match the other person's style: you adapt the same body posture, the same tone of voice, and the same vocabulary. However, for some people, adapting to the other person's style is quite difficult, especially when the other person's style is the opposite of our own style. It is one reason many women have a hard time to do this in business. It would mean that they have to get out of their nice and polite comfort zone. Ultimately it's also a culture issue. I will behave in a nicer way with the Czechs than for example

with the French. Czechs like 'pohoda' (comfort). This is what they understand and are used to. The French favour a more confident attitude, one that would say "don't underestimate me". With some men you have to act the same way. When women complain that men don't take them seriously and don't respect them I tell them they need to put on a 'Don't mess with me' face. I am aware that women are often harassed, and without saying they're asking for it, I believe that when we put on a 'Don't mess with me' face, people in general will treat us with more consideration than when we are just nice. And I believe that it is valid in many parts of the world. Women have not learned yet to assert themselves. Be nice when you can, and if

being nice doesn't get you what you want, change your attitude.

You coach cross-cultural understanding. What is specific about us, the Czechs?

The confrontation issue is a good example of how the Czech behaviour differs from other cultures. Czechs dislike confrontation. It's cultural. In my coaching and training activities, a lot of what I do is based on people's values. The Czechs value comfort (pohoda). So if I confront you, I'll make you uncomfortable.

The whole idea of making someone uncomfortable goes against the Czech values system – it is rude and inconsiderate to make someone feel uncomfortable.

When I work with people, I always try to help them find out who they are, starting by identifying their values and their needs. The second part is to understand how those values affect their behaviour. And that is how I've learned about the Czech culture. I observe how the Czechs behave and I try to understand why they do what they do. It is easier for me to accept people's behaviour once I have understood the values behind it.

Any other examples?

Well, look at the labour market today. Although the unemployment rate is not as bad as in France, the employment opportunities are not as good as they were 5 years ago. There are jobs available in the Czech Republic but Czechs, like the French, are spoiled about jobs. For some reason, be it cultural or historical, Czechs don't exactly value hard work – they value intellectual jobs. Is it the communist experience? I am not sure. But from my experience, Czechs do not have a problem believ-

ing in their intellectual self-worth, they often believe themselves to be smarter than the rest of the world. And I have to admit that it is partly true, I have met a lot of smart and educated Czechs in the past 17 years.

DRESS CODE

You yourself started in fashion business: how would you rate Czech women and Czech managers in this context?

When I came here, Czechs were definitely not dressed the way I was used to, but I knew that people lacked the experience and budget. Now the situation is different, and at work, most Czechs dress like their European colleagues. But what surprises me more is not the way people dress, but

the number of people chewing gum in public. I find that the most tacky, rude, uneducated behaviour. However, I am also aware that my aversion to chewing gum has a lot to do with my generation. As far as clothes are concerned, for me the way people dress is more about nice and clean than looking fashionable. And also how much you enjoy wearing your clothes, that's what I care about. For me, what matters the most is that people are aware of what they wear and are prepared to live with the consequences. Each place has its own dress code; while shorts and T-shirts are appropriated at home, it is often not the best in the office. And if someone favours comfort over dress code, then they shouldn't be surprised if others do not take them seriously.

Do Czech women fully comply with the current dress code or are they still a little too revealing, as was the case after the Revolution?

While this was definitely true 15 years ago, today, I think that in the Western world, many women dress in a way my parents would have been appalled to see me dress in – what they would have called a provocative manner. One study claims that we behave according to our hormones. For many years, no one spoke about women's cycles because heaven forbid you should mention something so unclean. But, studies have proven that when we ovulate, the whole body is trying to express it and we dress accordingly. And we need to be aware of these times. We may open our shirt a bit more than usual but we shouldn't show everything.

MY FAVOURITE QUOTES

"Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it."

Goethe

"Everyone gets the experience; some get the lesson."

T.S. Eliot

"We are what we repeatedly do, excellence then is not an act, but a habit."

Aristotle

"A good leader inspires people to have confidence in the leader, a great leader inspires people to have confidence in themselves."

Eleanor Roosevelt





BOOKS INSPIRING ME

Unlimited Power

by Anthony Robbins

Insecure at Last:

A Political Memoir

by Eve Ensler

The Checklist Manifesto:

How to Get Things Right

by Atul Gawande

**How to Talk to Anyone,
Anytime, Anywhere**

by Larry King

**The Silent language
of Leaders**

by Carol Kinsey Goman

I sometimes spot a deep cleavage and wonder: gee, if I get distracted, what about men? If this is what the woman wants, fair enough. But then she shouldn't complain that men make comments when we wear clothes they perceive as seductive.

In the context of the managerial world of the Czech Republic, do you believe the understanding of what is appropriate and not appropriate for the situation has improved?

Yes, as I mentioned earlier, most Czechs dress like their European colleagues. It all depends on the company's culture. For example, even in the IT culture, where everyone is in jeans and T-shirts, you can be very nicely put together, because it is you. My personal recommendation is: regardless of the industry, I suggest you always dress one step better than the others. That way, people will take you seriously. It is important to fit within the group you belong to or want to belong to, but do it one step higher.

Comparisons are always interesting and we've discussed the comparison of the Czech manager versus the international manager a little, but is there a general message you would like to send to them?

One of the biggest challenges I've observed concerns self confidence. It crosses borders. When managers are confident, it doesn't matter whether they are Czech, French or American. The Czechs nevertheless often feel less secure and the reason may be that they take things too personally. The greatest difference between an expat manager and a Czech manager is about taking things literally.

If I make a comment about your shirt, please don't take it person-

ally, it's just about your shirt, not about you as a person. But then you'll think she doesn't like me because she doesn't like my shirt. The Americans have an expression which says "it is only business" and the Czechs find it hard to keep it to the business level. They need to realize that, often, it is not about them as people, it's about the job.

The flip side of this habit, which makes living in the Czech Republic very nice, is the need for personal relationships, good atmosphere at work, and expecting a true, meaningful and sincere exchange with whom-ever they work with.

Would you have any advice on how to cope with the crisis?

My recommendation would be to have faith in yourself and focus on what you want to achieve. I started my business from scratch. My first office used to be the kitchen of my apartment. Then I moved to a bigger place and it was the dining room. And 3 years ago I finally managed to have a separate room for my office.

But you know what? I am proud and happy that I had to go step by step. I believe in working hard to succeed. I also believe in discipline and consistency. To give you an example: for the past 13 years, I've been sending a monthly newsletter. Every year, I send out 10 issues to 2,000 people. For the past 9 years, I have been organising a monthly business lunch and for the past 4 years, I have been organising a monthly evening training. I identify what people want and then I do my best to meet their needs and expectations in a way that connects to their emotions. But ultimately, what works the best is that I have faith in myself and focus on what I want. /BW

BOOKS