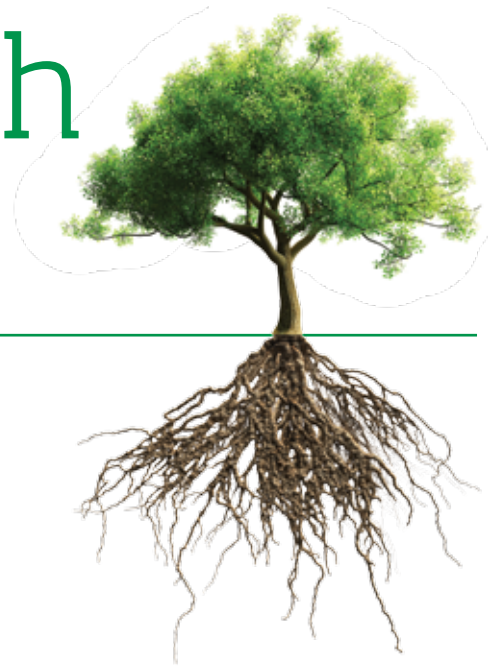


Why I became a coach

Depth and breadth



Executive coach and BACP Coaching Executive member **Michèle Down** describes her own journey into coaching.

What did you do before training as a coach?

Coaching is an integration of everything in my working life coalesced into one. At age 18 I spent three happy years at Goldsmiths College in London training to be a dance and English teacher. My introduction to the works of Piaget and Winnicott fuelled my interest in how early experiences shape lives, though I had no idea that one day I would become a therapist. Being schooled in how to create lesson plans and teach helped enormously when I first began writing corporate training; performance and dancing have added vitality and taught me about physical presence – how to be comfortable in my own body, how to stand in front of an audience and be seen. It's funny how such things shape us, though at the time we simply soak them up.

While I enjoyed teaching (we taught in schools as part of our training) and was good at it, it didn't fuel my passion quite as I had imagined, though I don't regret those three years for a moment. Luckily, as friends were applying for teaching posts, a chance encounter with an American businesswoman inspired me to start my own business. At 21, I embarked on a steep learning curve into which I threw myself with enthusiasm, energy and commitment. My first business was to sell my own range of food supplements to health food stores throughout the UK. Eventually, I became a chocolate manufacturer and we made chocolates under licence, including thousands of Easter eggs,

Christmas novelties and other such goodies, with familiar brand names like Postman Pat and Barbie... quite a change from vitamins!

Along the way to success, I made many mistakes, and I firmly believe that it's those, rather than my successes, that have informed me as a coach in the business world. I don't take my clients' struggles lightly as they manage their teams and even their organisations. I know what it's like from first-hand experience, so we share a common language and I am comfortable in their world. My training as a counsellor, 21 years ago, is the underpinning anchor to my work, providing therapeutic models I have integrated into my own. My approach is multilayered; I am happy whether providing practical solutions or working deeply and therapeutically, so coaching sessions are a blend of both. I integrate counselling and coaching into what I hope is a seamless experience for my clients. I passionately believe that the strength of the therapeutic relationship and trust between us is the magic that enables true change to take place.

What brought you to the profession?

Did I find coaching or did coaching find me? Over 18 years ago, while counselling at The Royal College for the Blind, running my private counselling practice and teaching a BTech in counselling skills, I began providing corporate training to a wide range of organisations, from entry-level admin assistants to directors. Gradually, I realised that senior managers and

directors needed more than training no matter how tailored the training was. They were often isolated in their seniority and struggling with complex jobs in an increasingly stressful environment. They had high self-expectations and huge targets to meet.

One day I took a trainee aside and suggested I could help him achieve his goals more effectively one to one, to which he replied, 'I didn't know you were an executive coach!' At the time, neither did I. I had never heard of executive coaching... I simply knew intuitively what my coachee-in-waiting needed, and offered it. As I began coaching, I realised how familiar a world it was and felt I could really make a difference. I had already resigned from The Royal College, and after much discussion in supervision, decided to close my counselling practice and focus on coaching and training. I spent six challenging months winding it down and working with my clients on an ending that I had chosen. It was a stressful time and I learned much from the process. I was grateful and relieved that, with my support, all my clients had successfully moved to other counsellors by the time I closed my practice.

I was now ready to build my new business, Michèle Down Dynamics Ltd, and to focus exclusively on coaching and training. I also realised that my absolute passion is to watch people and their organisations grow. So I abandoned my original idea of providing ad hoc training for organisations and focused on deeper work with fewer clients. I've maintained that

modus operandus for the past 18 years and have never looked back.

How would you say you are currently integrating coaching with the rest of your work/life? What does a 'typical day' look like for you?

Outside of family life, coaching is easily the most nourishing and fulfilling thing I do. I'm bringing on all the clichés here, but when my clients thank me, I genuinely feel grateful to them.

A typical week always involves travel. My husband and I live in Hereford; my work is primarily in London and the Home Counties. I'm away three or four nights each week, so thank goodness for mobile phones, so we can stay in touch. When I work in London, I always build in time to see my two sons, their families and other family members, which is wonderful. If I'm not in London, I stay in hotels. I'm so used to packing that I do it without thinking. I'm never far away from a case to pack or unpack! But I'm organised and tidy by nature, so it's a stress-free process.

My face-to-face work is divided into one-to-one coaching, groupwork and running workshops. Generally, each coaching session lasts three hours, the same for groupwork; a workshop lasts one or two days. So a typical day would see me running one coaching/group session in the morning, one in the afternoon. My office is at home, and when there, I catch up on emails and all the administration associated with running a small business. I also coach by phone and Skype from my office if clients are geographically far away in the UK and abroad. Office days have a different rhythm to them and are more fluid. I'm an early riser so it's not unusual for me to be at my desk at around 7.30am, which allows me time off with my husband mid morning. I'll return to my desk in the afternoon and if I'm working with anyone in a different time zone, I'll Skype or phone coach then. One of the things I love about being self employed is the ability to choose my own timing, and the lack of imposed routine. There is freedom and creativity in this for me, though at the same time I'm very committed to my work, so am quite driven.

What have been your biggest challenges in your journey into coaching?

When I started Michèle Down Dynamics, I worked as a trainer more than I coached. But... once a therapist, always a therapist. I just loved coaching most. So my biggest challenge was to move the emphasis from training to coaching and this was tricky because coaching was then a relatively new profession in which organisations were reluctant to invest. My other challenge – more of an internal one – was to turn down work if I didn't feel it was right for me or I wasn't



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a good fit for the organisation commissioning it. Walking away from work when you are self employed is scary. I haven't had to do it often but on the few occasions when I have, it's been a leap of faith in myself and a trust in my intuitive sense of what was right for me.

What is the most important thing you have learned on your journey so far?

That's a big question. I am fulfilled in my work and in my life. But there have been times in my life where I have struggled to find meaning; where my self-belief – and my belief in life itself – were challenged. I know that only when you have plumbed the depths yourself, can you truly empathise with and truly help others in their bleakest times. Working lives are so stressful now, burnout isn't uncommon. Knowing how life can turn on a sixpence and understanding the strength, courage and effort it takes to turn it around, enables me to be there therapeutically for my clients when they find themselves in a similar place. I also know the power of laughter, and of lightness, and my clients often describe that at the end of a session, they feel as if a weight has lifted. As I type, I realise I have learned that coaching is symbiotically enriching: I gain as much as I give.

What is your vision for the future - for yourself and for the profession of integrated coach-therapy practice? How would you like your life and career to look in five years' time?

I see our profession as growing marvellously over the coming years. I'm lucky enough to be on the Executive Committee of the BACP Coaching division, and this means I can be part of an amazing group of people who are helping our profession to develop and grow. 'Therapists-who-coach' is still a new phenomenon. We have the opportunity to enrich a profession with our knowledge, our therapeutic skill base, and our understanding of the importance of supervision and of the complex ethics of our profession. We are finding our voice and providing a form of coaching which is informed, deep, nourishing and meaningful. Coach-therapy is multifaceted and offers so much. All the 'therapists-who-coach' I have met bring creativity, high energy and proactivity, and are incredibly positive people. They have depth and breadth and yet manage not to take themselves too seriously. It's intense work but we are a bunch of highly motivated and dynamic professionals. When we get together, along with the seriousness of the issues we discuss, we laugh a lot. I'm delighted to be part of this profession.

For myself over the next five years – well, I'm not sure. I love what I do too much to retire (I'm moving towards that age). But actually, I feel in my prime. I'm working closely with some organisations to help them manage large changes and find that work incredibly fulfilling. Making a difference to others matters to me, and if I'm still doing that in five years' time, that will suit me fine. There's no doubt that I want to spend more time with my family, especially now we have precious grandchildren, so maybe the balance will alter over time. Life is still an adventure, so who knows what it will be five years from now. ■

Michèle Down is an executive coach and facilitator, coaching senior executives and their teams. She is passionate about her work and an ardent advocate of therapists-who-coach.



If you would like to share your journey into coaching in a future issue of *Coaching Today*, please contact the editor at editorial@bacpcoaching.co.uk