

One vital element of Lancaster's LEAD programme is solutions-focused coaching. Janine Waldman, a coach on the programme, reflects on conversations she's had with delegates and highlights some remarkable results.

The world of the entrepreneur can be as lonely and exhausting as it can be rich and exciting.

I coached ten of the 40 delegates on the first two cohorts of the LEAD programme and was privileged to gain insights into the networks and support that are essential for the overall health of an SME.

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Coaching Support in a Learning Network

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During our time working together, I had noticed a number of common themes emerging from my clients. As owner-managers of SMEs, all faced the challenge of balancing their time between being 'in' the business and working 'on' the business. Often finding themselves sucked into the day-to-day operations, they tended to lose sight of the bigger picture and even why they started doing it in the first place.

Some felt overwhelmed and were losing sight of their personal lives. Others were frustrated – wanting to step back and be more strategic, yet not knowing how to do so. Several of my clients shared the longer-term goal of being able to sell their businesses – though this seemed elusive in the present.

Working with these people for nine hours each over a four-month period, I've seen some remarkable results. The solutions approach focuses on people's strengths. Giving these amplified attention facilitated these clients' problem-solving strategies, as they identified for themselves the actions they were going to take. Each one-hour session of powerful questioning – along with a precise selection of feedback – encouraged them to decide their own solutions. This proved important as it gave them the tools to continue this approach after the coaching had finished.

Strategy and focus

Lesley is the owner-manager of a rapidly-expanding estate agent, which she has built with her husband. As the coaching began, she was struggling to step back from the day-to-day operations so she could spend more time on the strategic focus. She also wanted more time for herself and to spend with her family.

During our sessions together, Lesley developed and implemented her business plan and established herself as a strategic partner in the business. When asked what was different as a result of coaching, she said, "I have been able to acknowledge the issues that have been affecting me on a personal and business level, have regained confidence and self esteem and I am more focused as to how I can make a difference."

Aside from these direct business benefits, she found the coaching a pleasant experience. "The fact is that this has been quality time for me! It has given me the opportunity

to consider my needs after focusing so much on those around me – staff and family. I've had the opportunity to reflect on where I was and why I felt 'stuck' with my self motivation, but also to recognise my achievements, my needs and my focus for the future."

Alison Park, who runs a farm shop at Low Sizergh Barn near Kendal, focused on preparation for her parents' retirement, which will see her taking full control of the business.

"Running a small business is very isolating," she says. "It was invaluable being able to talk to people in other family businesses about similar challenges, especially the issues around employing staff."

She told *The Telegraph* newspaper*, one of the most valuable elements of the programme is the one-to-one coaching sessions every three weeks. "It provides solid thinking time," she reported. "I use my coach to bounce ideas around and get feedback. It inspired me with confidence to go ahead with a scheme to double the size of our existing commercial premises so that we can expand and build on our success."

Latif works with his two brothers, running their successful web design and solutions business. While excited about a new enterprise, he was also frustrated as he couldn't see how he could find time to focus on the new business without the original one suffering. By working on elements of time and staff management over a four-month period, he got himself ready to move over to the new business and was confident that the original one could run in his absence. "The real benefit from coaching was that it made me think about things from a different angle and gave me the confidence to let go."

Coaching has supported these and the other delegates on the LEAD programme by providing the time, space and support to put matters into perspective and consolidate their learning. Each of them has pulled together key threads and is weaving them into their work and lives, enabling them to create more of the futures they want. ■

*Learn how to become a Leader by Widget Finn 20/6/2005