

## **Mentoring through major career transition – UK**

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We may not really have personal stories about the future, or at least if we do have them, they may be very fragmented. We may rely on a few ideals from our family, and from the media or our friends, but no one has given life to it. Our stories about the future tend to be materialistic, not about what will bring a real sense of fulfilment. We have not performed them or listened to them, so you could say that our stories about the future are repressed, which may be why people have an attraction to Creative Futures. It is filling a void that would not be there if we already talked about our futures in a different way. (Extract from a description of Creative Futures by a participant)

This case study looks at one participant in a process of career transition, written from my own point of view as her mentor. It raises some important issues about diversity, in both an international and a local context. The specific approach to career transition, called Career Futures is one which people cannot use without training. Yet the specific ways of working used here can be of value in any mentoring context.

Creative Futures is a process designed for use in mentoring, when people reach a transitional point in their life, or their career. It provides a context, within which the participant can stand outside the whole of their life, if they chose to do so – their working life and their personal life – to evaluate their direction and to find a new way forward. It is typically used in times of career crisis, when issues of work–life balance become overwhelming, or when people are facing issues that fundamentally challenge the way in which they are living their lives. Organizations use this approach to provide a positive context within which individuals can resolve issues, freeing them to make a greater contribution to the organization in the future.

### **The mentoring context**

Several years ago, I was asked, as an external consultant, to evaluate the potential of a group of senior executives in a UK-based business of a large multinational. The chief executive (CE) intended to retire in the next three to five years and wanted to ensure that there were potential successors, and that these successors were given appropriate opportunities to develop. There was one woman in the group of fifteen people that I was asked to see. All the candidates were white and British, and all except one had spent most of their working career within the organization.

Of this group, I identified four individuals who had the capability that the organization needed in the CE role. Jane, the only female candidate, was one of

these four. The issues raised by my work had caused Jane to think deeply about her own future. After we had completed the initial diagnostic work, she asked me to work through the Creative Futures process with her.

Jane had spent all her working life in the same organization, and had always been on the fast track. However, unlike the other three potential candidates for the CE role, she had not developed the business experience that would be required to fulfil the role successfully. Although she had been deputy to several senior positions, she had not run one of the smaller businesses, or played a high profile operational role in a larger business. These roles would have given her full exposure to a leadership role, full profit and loss accountability, and the opportunity to demonstrate that she could handle the complexities of a CE role in the future.

My contract with the organization was through the HR director, who was quite clear that he saw placing Jane in a business managing director (MD) role as a risk. When I asked about the nature of this risk, he found it hard to articulate. His reasons were given in terms of behaviours rather than concrete knowledge, skills and experience. His initial comments, ‘We could give her a business I suppose, and see whether she sinks or swims’, were more reflective of the culture of the organization, than of his own genuinely supportive stance. There was no culture of mentoring in the organization. Indeed to need a mentor, was often seen as a sign of weakness. However, the organization was committed to helping Jane come to the right career decision, and was prepared to finance the ongoing work involved.

## Working with Jane

In the initiation of the mentoring relationship, there was a commitment on my own part to work with a person who, I felt, had enormous unrecognized potential, at a pivotal point in her career. Jane’s objective for the mentoring relationship was clear – she wanted to make a decision about the ‘next step’ in her career, to catch up with her male colleagues who had not had career breaks to have children.

When we started working together Jane described herself as having a ‘complete lack of insight’ about her future at this point. The organization had changed so that ‘it’s values and direction are no longer clear’, and the part of the business in which she was working was ‘laddish, very sexist, rude and aggressive’. Part of her difficulty in thinking about her own future lay in not being able to see herself in this culture, and in her own view that the business decisions that the organization was making were fundamentally flawed. The first part of the Creative Futures process looks at the past, present and future, as the person concerned sees it at that moment in time. The focus here was very much on Jane’s current decision. When she began to talk about the future, this too was in terms of the decision – to stay where she was ‘doing a job that most people would die for’, or to move on, either within the organization or outside it. It was only as she broadened out her thinking about

her longer-term future, thinking about the wider context of her family, her personal life and her leisure interests, that she began to take a different perspective. We used creative ways to look at what was important for her, her values, the contribution that she wanted to make and her personal interests. Through taking this broader perspective, the issue that we were discussing changed.

At the beginning of our third meeting, Jane made this clear:

I am seeing the whole situation differently now. I started out by thinking about what job to take next, whether to move on and which role to aim for. I now see that this is really a matter of the rest of my career. Do I actually want to go for the top job in an organization like this, with all that that entails? Do I want to make the sacrifices that I would have to make to get there?

One of the issues for Jane was that of her own personal style, in relation to that which was predominant in her working environment. She was renowned for building effective relationships both within the organization and externally. She sat on boards and made a substantial contribution to the community outside her work. Yet, she was seen as 'somehow different', by her senior colleagues. This issue had come up in appraisal, but it had never been really clear what the issue was. As she talked, she came to the view that she had a very different style from that of her male colleagues. The organizational style was very formal. Meetings were often 'a farce' from her point of view. She went in prepared for an open discussion about issues that were vital to the future of the organization. 'These problems are not simple, they require all of us to work them through, to thrash out the issues, for the good of the organization', she said. Time after time though, the meeting was 'stitched up from the start'. The key decisions had been made behind the scenes. Jane was renowned for raising difficult issues.

Jane realized that she formed co-operative rather than competitive relationships, building networks of strong powerful allies because she was trusted. In some instances her honesty and openness were rejected by her colleagues – she was seen as 'naïve' at best, at worst foolish, particularly when she appeared to act against her personal interests, in the interests of the organization. Others, she felt, both envied and resented the style that she used so naturally and easily, on the whole to great effect.

It was these insights that were, for Jane pivotal in thinking about her own position. Having stepped back, through the mentoring relationship, to look at her situation from a future perspective, she saw the underlying issues, the relevant contexts, and the opportunities in a new way. She realized why she had felt uncomfortable about her own career progression. She could now think more clearly, about the strategies that she would adopt, if she wanted to go further. She also explored what she would look for if she did move on, and recognized her loyalty to the organization that she had worked with for so long.

This process gave me a broader perspective, not just about work but about the whole context of my life – and the tools to continue to address these issues in the future. It is as though we are living life without understanding what is pulling the strings. We make decisions based on a few surface issues or problems without seeing what the real issues are – what will make us happy in the longer term, and what contribution we can make.

Jane did not make any final decisions about her future career within the process itself. However she did take on a senior role several months later, heading up a major business, having negotiated the support that she would need from the company, including senior level mentoring, in order to do this successfully.

### My own learning in this relationship

Jane's own sensitive exploration of the issues deepened my understanding about what it means to operate as a person who is somehow seen as 'different' within a dominant culture – and what is needed, on a personal and an organizational level, to address those issues.

I was also involved in discussions about the development, career progression and promotion of the group of individuals concerned. During these conversations, my awareness of the subtle interpretations, the shades of meaning that can be given to behaviours, comments and, often trivial, events, that together constitute a person as suitable or not suitable for a senior role, substantially increased. These comments were often subtly gender related in some way, but gender was not the only issue. In the wider group that I worked with, there were men, who, in our model, had the potential to take on some of the most senior roles, but who had not been given development opportunities. Their style was different. They were seen as 'not political' or as acting against the party line. The organizational bias was not recognized, in part at least, because these individuals were very different from one another. The common thread was not clear. Once the bias was highlighted, people began to see the choices that they were making, and to make decisions about development and promotion on quite different grounds.

### The approach to mentoring

There are some ways of working within the Creative Futures process that were particularly helpful in this context, and which I have found to be invaluable in working with people from many different nationalities and backgrounds in many different countries.

First, there is the need for a clear contract about the purpose of the work, and the nature of the confidentiality involved. Setting this agreement creates the boundaries of trust, within which the relationship can develop. I am also

clear about the style that we adopt within this process, which is facilitative and non-directive. This transparency about the process enables the mentee to make an informed decision about whether this is the right approach for them or not.

Second, the process provides a very particular context within which to work. The role of the mentor or practitioner is to provide a listening for the individual which is completely non-judgemental, and which does not evaluate or comment on their interpretations. Rather, it seeks to draw those interpretations out further, using open questioning. In this way, the individual can open up their own thinking, and explore their own issues, in their own way. The views and opinions of the mentor are not relevant in this process. The role of the mentor is rather to provide a context, in a highly skilled way. This affirms the mentee's confidence in his or her own judgement. It is after all, their own solutions about their own lives that they are developing. No framework or model is used to interpret what they say, and it is this lack of framework that leaves them free to create new perceptions and new ways forward.

The neutrality of this approach makes it valuable in working with diversity, and the issues of marginalization, that people experience in many working contexts. The process fundamentally affirms people as they are. It is this fundamental acceptance, independent of a person's background or the issues that they are addressing, that creates its power.

To refer back to the quotation at the beginning of this study, we, as a culture, may not create coherent stories about our future. When people are marginalized, it is often the case, that their stories about their past, or their present, are denied validity. It is their very diversity that leaves these stories unshared and untold, or misunderstood. The organizational environment and culture, may limit what is acceptable, and play its own part in the fragmentation of people's experience. Mentoring has a great deal to offer, in listening to and validating people as they are, in accepting their diversity and working with them to find a way to bring their unique contribution into the world.

Once we have created these more coherent stories about the future – about the way in which we would like it to be, our stories about the past change too. We see ourselves in a different light, and as we can only process so much information at once, we start to filter in information that supports the story and makes it become possible. We find ways of making it work – even though at first it seemed impossible and from where we were when we started we could not have thought about it at all. (Continuation of the quotation at the commencement of this case study)

## **Notes**

9 Glynis Rankin is Director of Creative Futures, a consultancy that works in individual and organizational development. Glynis's recent work has involved advising a global charity on organizational structures, and individual development needs, to support its work in Central and Eastern Europe. She has also delivered a pilot project to evaluate succession management systems for an international organization that wishes to create equality of access for staff around the world to senior managerial roles. Prior to setting up Creative Futures, Glynis was Executive Director of the Institute for Financial Education and Training at the University of Wales, Bangor. She is a Certified Member of the Institute of Management Consultants, an Associate Member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and a Member of the Institute of Directors. She is also an Associate of the Brunel Institute for Organization and Social Studies.