

Article: Walking with Duncan

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Synopsis

Duncan Stoddart brings a new slant to the coaching process by walking with his clients through Snowdonia National Park.

This article highlights the approach he takes, and explores its potential for creativity and truly creative leadership. It does so by talking with him and with Jackie Smith, one of his clients who spent two days walking with him.

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Walking with Duncan

“When I was on top of a mountain, or sitting before a great, sweeping panorama, I often gained a sense of perspective on my life which I struggled to achieve in other situations. Things became clearer. Being outdoors gave me the freedom and energy to think about where I was in my life, who I was, and where I was going. It was a great way to reach important insights and decisions.”

These words, spoken by a senior manager taking part in an outdoor development programme several years ago, struck a chord with the programme's facilitator Duncan Stoddart. So much so that nowadays, when coaching business leaders, he often dispenses with the conventional meeting room and instead walks with his clients in a natural environment.

When walking with his clients, Stoddart notices that seeing far horizons, being in a vast, open space or watching a river run through as forest affects the person's mood, feelings and thoughts. The physical situation, far removed from their daily routine, puts their mind in a different position from which to view their work, life or issues. Hence the ability to see the familiar in a different perspective – a fundamental of both coaching and creativity - is enhanced.

Stoddart's approach to coaching is drawn not only from his experience as a leadership consultant but also from his passion of painting landscapes. His view is that the concepts of creativity and leadership are so interwoven that it is only those leaders who truly understand and experience the creative process who are able to foster a creative environment for their people to express themselves fully to enhance business.

Walking with Duncan usually takes place in Snowdonia National Park (Stoddart has boots & will travel), and can last for two or three days. Unlike traditional outdoor events with the usual raft-building and abseiling to foster team spirit, this is bespoke: the walking pace, terrain and length are chosen by the client. And while the outdoors is traditionally viewed as an antidote to the office and therefore ideal for escaping the 'office mindset', it also holds up a few mirrors. There is both ambiguity and uncertainty. The ambiguity that the walking is simultaneously relaxing and energizing and the uncertainty that the client is never quite sure what's round the next corner. But where there is a sparkling waterfall or a far horizon, the effect for many people is the same: it can help free up the mind, allowing thoughts, ideas and feelings to flow naturally.

So how can a coaching-session-in-cagoules help leaders discover their creativity? Stoddart starts by looking at one of the fundamentals in organisational life: goals that are often budgets in the private sector and targets in the public arena. “To what extent,” he wonders, “does the focus on the goal or outcome limit the creative process?”

His observation is that we as individuals defer automatically and unconsciously to others, thereby limiting our ability to create. We defer to the organisation, as we once did to our parents as children. If the organisation inhibits creativity, then its impact is to stifle freedom of expression, with the outcome that its people merely act out roles, rather than stay in touch with their creativity. Hence the value they can add to the organisation is limited.

Two questions that Stoddart believes senior managers should ask themselves are these: Are you creating a culture for people to express their ideas and creativity? What is the environment that allows this creativity to happen?

For Stoddart, the key that will unlock this is for the executive to understand and experience the creativity process personally. And that means simultaneously appreciating the qualities of leadership:

“Great leaders have presence,” says Stoddart. “By that I mean they are far more in the here and now than most people – they are able to live and be in the present moment.”

Stoddart believes the implications of this are immense. He finds that great leaders are extremely open to what is around them. They are naturally curious and hungry for information. This suggests to him that they use current information to act upon, rather than old models to filter what they see. Great leaders, he believes, ask more questions than give answers and opinions. This quality of awareness ‘in the moment’ allows greater focus on process, as opposed to being locked into goals and results.

Creativity parallels this view of leadership: of living in the present. By being less reliant on outworn ideas and old ways of seeing things, we are free in the mind to create unique responses, solutions and products. Hence the business opportunity.

For one of Stoddart’s clients, organisational development consultant Jackie Smith, this was certainly the case. She walked into Snowdonia with Stoddart by her side holding a conventional view of creativity inside her head, and emerged two days later with a different perspective. Smith runs her own business and her interest in creativity stems both from a personal level and from working with organisations during change processes. Stoddart encouraged Smith to focus upon her own creativity:

“Prior to the coaching I would say I was reasonably creative: I would describe myself as a ‘competent pianist’ and I ‘had written a book’. But talking about myself in this way meant my focus was on the outcome. During the coaching I became aware that I was doing nothing to further my creativity and I was focusing purely on the behaviours required to achieve those outcomes.”

As the miles added up and the scenery changed, Smith was encouraged to learn to tap into her inner resources and listen to her intuition. In the months since the coaching, Smith has switched her focus from the outcome to the creative process itself, and has discovered that it’s helping her move forward in all areas of her life. “I’ve found that I am more able to engage other people and gain buy-in to my ideas. What I’m now doing is not just engaging them in the head, but I’m using language that appeals to others on an emotional level too.”

Smith is convinced that emotions are not only critical to creativity, but are often overlooked during the change process that many organisations find themselves embroiled in. While the focus is upon new structures, strategies and processes, experience tells her that scant attention is paid to the impact on people in the organisation who have to implement the changes. These people will, if not treated appropriately, and not acknowledged for their contribution to the change process, respond negatively – and negative responses are all about emotions.

When he’s not coaching or working with organisations, Stoddart paints landscapes. His personal journey has seen him shift his personal thinking – from thinking of himself as “being an artist” (outcome) to painting because he finds the act of painting fulfilling (behaviour). Smith’s experience confirms his belief that the shift in thinking is essential if we are to understand the creative process. Stoddart also believes that the desire to express ourselves creatively is a fundamental need, which provides great opportunities for organisations that enable this to happen. For the leader there is inevitably there is both risk and reward. The risk is taking yourself, your team or your organisation into the unknown. The reward is seen in outcomes:

fresh organisational strategies or new product lines that are beyond the imagination of your competitors.

"It's having the guts to take the untried path," says Stoddart. "The pay-off is that you can look at your market in a way that it hasn't been looked at before."

Stoddart is convinced that people feel deeply at home in a natural environment, and that it's more conducive to his work of raising the awareness levels of his clients.

"Your thoughts can be expansive as your landscape is expansive," says Stoddart.

For Smith, the process of walking and changing scenery maintained her energy to talk about her issues from mid-morning until six in the evening, which she feels she would never have achieved in an office or meeting room.

"At the end of the day I had a much broader definition of what creativity means to me and how I can use it. I came out feeling refreshed, excited, and completely energized."

Both Smith and Stoddart agree this approach would suit a manager looking to take stock, or the opportunity to enhance the way they lead and manage others. It offers, through problem solving, the chance to tackle major obstacles standing in their way. In addition to creativity, the approach can apply to people who need to take out to do a stock-take. It might encompass such areas as work-life balance, or career perspectives and direction.

So, looking back on it, what difference has it made for Smith?

"I felt – and feel – I've done something very special for me. It helped me expand my choices and develop different ideas. I've learned to focus on the process, be more patient and learn to trust my intuition – and that applies to my whole life. And because it was focused purely on me, I found it much more useful than building another raft on another outdoors course."

Duncan can be contacted via The Performance Solution.