

Securing the Future: An Interview with Tarquin Bennett-Coles *Principal Consultant, Coulter Partners*

What prompted you to come on the course?

After I did the Governing Change programme, and saw the positive impact of utilising the things that were taught on that course for me and the team, I recognised I needed something else to challenge me and Securing the Future seemed to fit.

I wanted to understand what I needed to do to move ahead personally and professionally. I was feeling a bit stuck because in terms of implementation and

delivery I was doing my job well, but I was also aware that it was my responsibility to generate new ideas, and I wasn't coming up with enough fresh thinking. I went to the first day of the course hoping it would help in that area, and the programme's focus on time, decision-making and creativity was certainly useful.

How has the programme contributed to your thinking about time?

"I realised I was getting caught up in the day-to-day email traffic"

I have done lots of time management stuff in the past, but this changed my perspective on the subject. I already knew that time is a limited resource and that if you devote your time to the wrong things, you are taking it away from the things that really are important, but I needed the discussions on the programme to change my mindset about time. Instead of thinking "*it's only ten minutes*", I began to think "*this is ten valuable minutes*", and this changed the way I made decisions both inside and outside work.

I realised I was getting caught up in the day-to-day email traffic, going from meeting to meeting, thinking I was doing the right things, rather than stepping back, evaluating where I could make the greatest contribution to the business, and then actively deciding to do that. The impact on my home-life was the same. Before I would have said, "*let's see how the day pans out, and if I have some time I'll spend it with the kids.*" Now I think "*I'm going to spend time with the family today*" and decide what I'm going to do throughout the day to create the time I need. It's very powerful when you start taking that amount of control.



You decided to devote your time to activities that would make the greatest contribution to the business. What did you do differently?

I realised I wasn't delegating some of the things I should have been delegating and I wasn't focused enough on some of the things I should have been working on. When I evaluated how I had been delegating, I saw that I hadn't confirmed staff had the autonomy to make decisions which needed to be made, so they would always come to me to ok what they were doing. I had to say, "it's ok – go ahead, I trust you on this. If things don't work out I'm right next to you and I'll help you."

"My team had the best December on record"

Once I had created some time by doing this, I could devote more time to relationship management. A key area was identifying clients where we had had a strong relationship in the past, but now the relationship would benefit from some attention. I went in and managed that, identified ways to improve the quality of the relationship, then helped the team to strengthen how we worked with that client.

Along with time and decision-making, the third major strand of the programme is creativity and its role in business. How did you use the material on creativity in your role?

At the moment I am working in a brand new market in a new country, and the first task is to identify who we are going to work with. Previously I would have rushed into the project - making a call here, doing a search there - and gradually my time would have been stripped away. With our work on creativity in mind, I thought there must be a more effective way of doing this: I will need to invest some time to find it. I spent an hour mapping how I was going to do the work, and identified three goals:

- Deliver what my CEO required
- Identify the right people in the market
- Learn the new systems I am now using

To fulfil all three goals, I had to conduct the search in a particular way. When I did this, the hour invested initially was more than repaid in effective execution.

What were the major results of your attendance on the programme?

At the end of the programme my team had the best December on record, in a market where the analysis was showing conditions were very difficult. As I have said, part of that was because I was focusing on the things that would take the team and the business forward, and not getting caught up in day-to-day email management and concerns about this meeting and that meeting.

I also allowed the work we had done on mantras to influence how I was operating. We discussed developing a mantra – isolating a key idea or principle which can inform how we are working, either in general or on a particular project. I asked the course leader what his mantra was, and he said, *“love the delegate.”* We were very sceptical at first. The psychological barriers came up right around the group – everyone said, *“yes, that works for you but it will never work for us.”* It was fine for us to say that – he wasn’t suggesting that we adopt his mantra, just that we find our own.

But when I went back to work I thought, what do most recruiters spend their time doing? Complaining about what the candidates and the clients are doing. I asked myself, how would I behave if rather than complaining, my attitude at all times was *“love the candidate and the client”*? That altered the way I did business – from when and how I communicated with candidates and clients, to how I worked with the team to resolve client-centred issues. When I combined this thinking with another aspect of the programme – the idea that in every client interaction we should work towards creating a positive reference – it focused me on doing everything I could to foster stronger working relationships in the future.

What’s the value of the programme to senior executives who are making rapid progress with their careers?

It’s an opportunity to get out of the surroundings they’re in, assess where they are as an individual, and see how they fit into their organisation. They can make a judgement about the blockages which are stopping the organisation moving forward - are they one of the blockages themselves, or are those obstacles elsewhere? It’s quite likely to be a combination of both. Then the course helps them formulate a concrete plan about how they are going to overcome those obstacles.

“This is an opportunity to stop managing the day-to-day and test your assumptions”

The programme puts you in an environment where you are challenged by people who are outside of your sector about subjects like decision-making and how you allocate your time - subjects you often don’t have the opportunity to address in this day

and age when we’re surrounded by Blackberrys, iPhones and emails. This is a chance to stop managing the day to day and question your assumptions. The other people in the group and the course leader will support you, and they’ll also challenge you too.

If you’re a senior manager you are likely to be sustaining success, but you will know there are competitors out there snapping at your heels, and unless you raise your game they are going to overtake you. Maybe your practices are good, but they’re a little out of date. What this course does is make it all fresh again. It drives you to think: we got here for a reason, if we apply the same logic to what we are doing now, that will help us move to the next level.

Tarquin Bennett-Coles is Principal Consultant at Coulter Partners

E: t.bennett-coles@coulterpartners.com

W: www.coulterpartners.com