

## via™ coaching: an introduction for business leaders

by Sara Boas

This article presents and illustrates the via™ coaching model developed by Sara Boas. The via™ tool for transformation is used by professional executive coaches in diverse organisations worldwide, ranging from the British Council to British Petroleum, including Baxter Healthcare, BMW, Cisco Systems, Citigroup, Deutsche Bank, Euroclear, the European Commission, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Glaxo Smithkline, the UK Cabinet Office, the United Nations, the Walt Disney Company, the World Bank and many more. The author discusses the critical question you face as a leader today, introduces executive coaching as a way to respond to this question, explains how via™ coaching guides you through the stages of your response, and suggests that the current crisis offers you an opportunity to grow as a leader.

### *The question*

What happened? You worked your way up from your first job to a level of seniority that once seemed remote. You put in the long days and short nights. You learned how to master your emotions, to discipline yourself, to do what needed doing – even at the expense of enjoying family life or solitude. You attained a level of personal authority and influence that makes people describe you as ‘leader’ more often than ‘manager’. And then, just when you were starting to feel deeply confident in your leadership, the world changed and the ground beneath you began rocking with seismic shifts.

You’re not alone. It’s not only the ground beneath *your* feet that’s shifting; it’s the whole world. The rules of the political and economic environment are being re-written in ways that are beyond the control – or even the understanding – of any individual or group. The evolutionary landscape has changed its shape: yesterday’s fittest survivor is tomorrow’s dinosaur.

Like many others around the world, you probably find yourself having a double response to this crisis. On the one hand, you’re almost submerged by the complexity, the uncertainty and the fast, turbulent change. On the other, you find yourself reconnecting to your own core values, asking yourself what you’re doing it all for anyway. Maybe you were one of the many who had a hunch that some of the practices of the financial institutions were unsustainable, and yet you said nothing. Perhaps your gut

was telling you to go to the children's sport event, or take the time to read a book, or get out for a walk on that perfect spring morning, but you over-rode your inner signals and logged on to check your inbox.

So you're asking yourself, "How can I survive and thrive in the midst of this global meltdown with its strange new rules? As a business leader, how can I meet the needs of the shareholders *and* the other stakeholders: my community, my family, myself?" Put simply, your question is: "How can I add more value *and* stay true to my values?"

### **The response**

While there are no easy answers to your questions, you don't have to figure it all out on your own. An executive coach can be your trusted companion as you journey through this ever-changing landscape. Unlike a traditional consultant, who advises you on the basis of what has worked in the past, your coach travels with you as you chart new territory, asking you powerful questions, challenging your thinking, supporting you to develop emotional resilience, working with you to figure out what today's new problem is, and which fresh solution will take you safely into tomorrow.

The right coach gives you the insight to see beyond your old thinking habits, the challenge to take difficult decisions and face the consequences, and enough tough love to ensure you do what needs to be done and still feel good about yourself at the end of the day. A great leadership coach combines knowledge of the economic environment, the workings of the business, team dynamics and human psychology, with expert skills to facilitate your effective action, learning and growth. Your coach is your confidant and your fierce critic; your staunch supporter and your robust challenger; the jester who helps you laugh at the hidden power games of the boardroom; the straight-talker who invites you to face the mirror and look yourself straight in the eye.

I can almost hear you thinking: "Sounds great, but I don't have time for this. I can hardly come up for air to catch my breath – and that's on a good day!" So, here's the first part of what you must do, if you are to get through this crisis and not only survive, but thrive. You're going to need to do some things that feel counter-intuitive. In an enduring, complex crisis – as opposed to a plain emergency – you need to do *more* of the things you think you've got less time for. That means more early nights when you're tempted to stay awake into the wee hours catching up on emails; more listening to your staff's concerns when you want to tell them to get out and get on with it; more information-gathering when you're already having trouble making sense of the information you have; more communication about the evolving challenges, when you want to shut the door, switch off the phone and hunker down; more delegation when you think you're the only one who can get the job done in time. In sum, it means *conscious responsiveness* in the place of merely *reacting* without thinking things through.

A good coaching dialogue protects you from your own knee-jerk reactions and helps you figure out how to respond, day to day. Here's how it works. At boas, we offer *via*™ coaching, a tool for transforming the way you lead change, the way you lead people, and the way you lead your own life.

This self-leadership – the way you lead your life – is at the heart of what makes the difference between those who survive and thrive in a crisis, and those who go under. So, via™ works from the inside out: from who you are and what matters most to you, through your many different roles and relationships, into the contribution you make to your business, your community and the wider world.

The word 'via' in Latin means path or way. The metaphor of a pathway reminds us that your coach accompanies you on a lifelong journey of learning and development, through an ever-changing landscape filled with obstacles, challenges and opportunities for discovery. The name via™ is also acronym for **v**ocation, **i**ntegration and **a**lignment. These are the three dimensions of the coaching journey:

- **vocation** is who you are, what gives your life meaning and purpose, your deepest values
- **integration** is the balance you achieve among your diverse roles, priorities and points of view
- **alignment** is the efficient action you achieve as a member of a team, organisation or community

### *via™ coaching in action*

Let's look at these three dimensions of the via™ dialogue, through the unfolding of three sessions with Juno, a fictional coachee based on real-life coaching dialogues with thousands of leaders from over 60 countries around the world. You'll find snapshots from Juno's coaching in italics (*like this*).

#### VOCATION

*Juno has arrived for his first coaching session. A successful executive in a multinational corporation, he greets me with a warm smile and firm handshake. As we walk into the meeting room, I notice his confident stride and slightly puffed-out chest. I introduce myself, say a few words about coaching emphasising the confidentiality of the process; then ask Juno to tell me about his work. He launches into a detailed description of his organisation, his team and his own senior role. I focus my attention on Juno, listening for key words, finding empathic connection and feeling my way into his world. After 20 minutes, I feed back to Juno the information I have gathered, not on the details of his business, nor on his experience, but about his core values. When I use the phrase "your sense of purpose", Juno suddenly sighs. His chest deflates and his chin drops. "That's the trouble, Sara", he says, "I've got everything I wanted, but I've forgotten what I'm doing it for".*

Victor Frankl reminds us that mankind can bear everything except the loss of meaning. Whether asked directly or explored in more implicit terms, via™ coaching always begins with the question "What are you here for?". Through conversation about your daily business challenges – the intractable performance issue, the boss who puts you down in front of your peers, the direct report who doesn't want to face that they're not meeting their targets – we explore your personal sense of meaning, purpose, or calling. This calling is your Vocation, your reference point, the measure to return to whenever you're struggling with a tough decision. Your Vocation contains the core values that can guide all your analysis, your problem solving, your planning and your actions.

Many leaders have lost touch with their Vocation. Taken over by endless demands, or early success, by harsh necessity or the urge to reach bigger and bigger material goals, they feel hollow. As a coach, I discover this loss of a sense of Vocation in many leaders. I hear it in their language, in statements like: "I'm going through the motions... I'm only in it for the money... I'm bored... I'm tired... I'm not having fun any more". And I see it in the body: the chest caving in or artificially puffed-out, or a slouching, "spineless" way of sitting.

*I come straight to the point "What **are** you doing it for, Juno? Let's take some time to clarify this... When you were a little kid, what did you want to be?" Juno: "Not poor". "Not poor?" Juno, looking dejected, answers: "We were poor; everyone in the neighbourhood was poor. I saw my mother suffer. I wanted to change all that".*

*We're half an hour into our first session and Juno's opening up some big topics! Maybe he needs to talk about how it was growing up poor, or to pour out his story of what a hard ride it's been, and how he's still pushing himself to do more, earn more, achieve more. But as his coach, my first clear aim is to help Juno clarify his core values. I resist getting drawn into his story and stay on the track of Juno's Vocation.*

*"So you wanted to change all that... what kind of change did you imagine?" Through a series of questions and responses, shifting our focus between past, present and future, we articulate Juno's evolving sense of purpose. I ask which work activities currently give him most energy and fulfilment, what makes him really angry, and a whole series of "what for" questions. At the same time, I pay attention to Juno's sunken posture, seeing and feeling subtle changes as he starts to reconnect to himself and sit more upright. His chest becomes relaxed and his breathing softer. I can sense how he feels the return of vitality in the middle of his body, giving renewed strength to his spine. Although he doesn't notice this consciously, his body language is talking loud and clear. I suggest we get out of our office chairs and stand up, as Juno finds words for his life work: "I want to help to create a fairer society; this means taking a stand on abuses of power and finding balance and justice within myself". When he says this, Juno stands tall, looking relaxed, grounded and centred for the first time since we met.*

Your Vocation is this 'knowing what you stand for'. When you reconnect to your Vocation, you naturally stand tall, with your feet firmly on the ground and your head held high. This strong stance is the beginning of your via™ journey: the journey of transforming your leadership and finding the opportunity for learning, growth and fulfilment, in the midst of this global crisis.

## INTEGRATION

*A few sessions into the coaching, Juno still feels connected to his sense of purpose and is finding ways to make his employment the arena for his own life work. His sense of Vocation shows in his energy and posture and is expressed in new focus and motivation. He has resolved a conflict with a team*

*member, refined some key business processes so they take less time, and set up a Corporate Social Responsibility forum for internal and external stakeholders. He decided to launch the CSR forum in spite of peer pressure to put it off for a year. This called for assertiveness, as some colleagues ridiculed his interest in CSR, in the context of increasingly tough targets and not enough headcount. Juno realised that leading the forum would fulfil his own core values and had an intuitive sense that it might help the business achieve its objectives. The forum has given him greater visibility in other parts of the organisation and he is increasingly called upon to speak at round-table meetings or sponsor new projects. Juno finds these new activities meaningful and fulfilling. He's fired up and loving it, but he is spending more time in meetings and catching up with emails in the evenings and at weekends. Renewed motivation for his work has produced more stress in the family.*

All the business leaders I have met know what it's like to feel pulled or even torn between different roles, relationships and responsibilities. You've probably faced, time and again, the painful choice between following your head or your heart, your duty or your desire. Many leaders see this as an 'either/or' choice and give something up – reading, music, physical exercise – in order to succeed at work. The Integration phase of via™ coaching involves a paradigm shift from *either/or* to *both/and*. To understand the photon, scientists had to embrace two seemingly incommensurable truths: light is *both* particle *and* wave. Similarly, you may be both ruthless businessman and caring steward of social justice; friend and rival; outspoken public figure and gentle family member. In your many roles and relationships, with endless demands on your time and attention, you may feel pulled from one urgent task to another, from the latest emotional drama to the ever-tougher business targets, in a confusing and relentless series of conflicting priorities.

In the midst of all this, your via™ coach enables you to stop, take stock, and make that fundamental shift from the struggle of *either/or* to the fulfilment of *both/and*. This is Integration: the basis of your personal integrity, allowing you to be true to your multi-faceted nature. Think of Integration as a your very own diverse, high-performance team – inside yourself! The quality of your internal dialogue, in which all your 'inner team' members have a voice, ends the strain of being pulled in different directions and reinstates you as the true leader of your own life.

*As Juno talks, I notice that he is leaning slightly to one side. His right hand makes relaxed, generous gestures while his left hand hangs limp. One foot taps nervously under the table. "It's getting stressful", he says, "My wife is giving me a hard time about the emails at home. She keeps on about it; I find myself disconnecting emotionally and coming home later and later".*

*This is executive coaching, not marriage counselling, and rather than delve more into Juno's relationship with his wife, we need to find out what neglected part of Juno his wife is giving voice to.*

Integration issues may present themselves in the form of a loved one who makes demands, team members whose needs seem to be irreconcilable, difficulties managing time, or feelings of obligation and resentment. You may find yourself secretly thinking, "I feel pulled in different directions... I don't know what I should do... I start things and don't finish them...I'm not sticking to my decisions". As the

stress increases, this becomes, "I switch off... I disconnect... Those urgent issues don't seem to matter any more". The body language also tells the story. Integration issues manifest as foot tapping, pen fiddling, hair twiddling, and unconscious rocking and swaying.

Your inner Integration eases prioritisation and decision-making, and prepares the ground for better life balance. When you accomplish Integration with the help of your via™ coach, you find yourself naturally feeling and appearing calm, stable and secure in the midst of uncertainty. Instead of being stretched to breaking point, you find that you can take your time and space to think, take balanced decisions, and embrace life's many demands. What seemed like conflict now appears to you as complementarity.

*I suggest to Juno that different parts of himself might embody different duties and desires. He maps this out with coloured markers on a large piece of paper, playfully exaggerating the conflicts and differences. We consider his caricature together. He names and writes core values alongside the different parts: efficiency, creativity, justice, intimacy, achievement. I inquire about the internal relationships between different values or 'selves'. "How do these two compete for your time, energy and attention? How could they support or nourish one another?" When he comes to 'intimacy' and 'achievement' I invite Juno to stand and imagine holding these two, one in each hand. I stand by him as he intuitively weighs them up, re-balancing his body. He draws his hands closer together. He laughs suddenly, "Without intimacy, my achievement isn't sustainable – I'll get worn down. And then the real work will never get done!" We sit and talk some more. Juno appears more centred. The gestures of both hands are lively and relaxed. His foot has stopped tapping.*

## ALIGNMENT

*Juno and I have been working together for some months. A stream of business challenges have arisen and been addressed; creative solutions have been found and fresh problems revealed. He has let go of a low-performing team member and negotiated a promotion for a brilliant young woman whose business acumen was being overlooked by some senior key players. His team has exceeded their targets in two markets and faced the blunt truth that they needed to review their expectations in a third. One of his most cynical peers has told him the coaching 'must be doing some good' because he's having more impact with the board. Juno approaches his everyday leadership challenges with insight and equanimity, but he is becoming frustrated with the wider business context. Juno speaks of the corporate culture. His arms are folded and his torso seems narrow and dense, as if he were 'holding himself in'. This self-protective, stuck posture intensifies as he says, "The CSR stuff is great, but our internal workings are still based on personal power bases and unilateral decision-making. The others applaud my lead but most of my peers don't follow. I'm the odd one out. I can't go along with their way of doing things any more. I know I'm lucky to have a job in today's climate, but I find myself waking up in the morning thinking it could be time to move on".*

Aligned energy is power. To achieve Alignment, via™ coaching helps you explore the congruence between your own aspirations and those of your team, your organisation and the wider community. Many brilliant and successful people dream of leaving work or home because their environment no

longer fits them. Behind this dream there is a feeling of impotence – with no hope of changing the system, the only solution is to leave it. But there is another way, which involves a mutual tuning of self and system so that your inner and outer worlds are 'on the same wavelength'. Occasionally, this cannot be accomplished. If you don't share a minimum of fundamental values with your colleagues, you're going to need to consider radical change sooner or later. Most who embark on their via™ coaching journey come to love the life they lead. A few decide to leave their organisation and change direction, in order to lead a life they love.

Alignment, then, is about empowerment, as we channel energy into action. When there's an Alignment problem, leaders confide in their coach, speaking of isolation at work: "I wonder if I am the right person for the job... I don't think they value me... I feel so different from the others...My heart's not in it...". The body language tells a similar story, in jerky movements, hand gestures going in all directions, or a stuck, blocked, self-protective stance.

*I suggest to Juno that we work outdoors. Walking and talking, Juno seems to 'unblock' and gain perspective. He becomes intrigued by the idea of being a change agent for the culture of his organisation. His despondent mood lifts as he develops a vision of the whole team becoming more effective, efficient and fulfilled as they start to work more democratically. Juno strides along, his arms and legs swinging more freely as our conversation unfolds.*

When you're in Alignment with your team, your organisation and your wider business context, this naturally shows itself in physical grace, clarity of thought and efficiency of action. Your energy is channelled and your clear, directed actions reach their goals like an arrow hitting its target.

*Back at the meeting space, we explore the corporate culture. Juno draws an iceberg. Above the waterline, he sketches and notes the actions and behaviours of daily life in his work place. Below the waterline, we fill in the unspoken assumptions and unwritten rules that may support them. I ask him to identify areas of incompatibility and we explore which are really value differences and which are simply different expressions of shared values. As we explore the few core values that Juno shares with his colleagues, he gets excited about building on this narrow base to create something new. At the same time, Juno realises he can't do this alone. We decide to hold a management retreat, taking the whole team off-site and out of town, into an environment where they can connect to their own resources and reflect on their shared culture. During the retreat, Juno comes into his power, listening, supporting, challenging and inspiring his teammates as they explore, articulate and re-align their common purpose. The man I see before me has transformed his leadership – and in doing so, he has transformed. Juno has become more fully himself.*

Individual coaching can be the forum for transformational learning. As a coachee once said, "I've got a whole new way of looking at the world. It makes everything easier". However, piecemeal coaching has its dangers. If you change while everyone around you goes on thinking and acting in the same old ways, you'll find yourself dealing with new tensions as you outgrow your colleagues' way of looking at the world. Leadership coaching, then, is most effective when the coachee's learning journey is not a

solitary one. You can change yourself, inspire others and influence organisational change across the business. However, the most effective coaching is not a piecemeal offering for a few chosen leaders, but an integrated process that engages key individuals, teams and larger work groups.

### *The opportunity*

I've referred to via™ coaching as a journey. On your path of lifelong learning, you are constantly exploring and discovering, mapping new territory... and starting over as the landscape changes yet again. Sometimes you may feel like you've sailed off the edge of the map and you are at sea in a storm, on your way to *Terra Incognita*. Your coach travels with you as you explore, knowing that every decision makes a difference. One small step to left or right can alter the direction of the journey of a thousand miles. Every via™ coaching journey is unique. Your business is unique; your team is unique; you are unique. These tumultuous times are a crisis for leaders the world over. And in the heart of this crisis, like the peace at the eye of a storm, you can find the inner calm to make the most of this opportunity. For just as the world is re-writing itself in ways that future historians will reveal, this is your chance to re-write the unwritten rules of your own life: to lead change, lead people and lead yourself in ways you have not yet even dreamed of; to awaken to your own possibilities; to find your work both financially rewarding and profoundly fulfilling; to add value and be true to your deepest values; to be the inspirational leader you naturally are.

As you walk your path of leadership, *your via*, what's your next step going to be?