

# COACHING AT WORK ANNUAL CONFERENCE

## New coach Ella Clark reviews the Coaching at Work annual conference, titled 'Adaptive leadership in extraordinary times: how coaching can contribute'

When we heard that coaching was 'psychological PPE' for the 'coronacoaster' of our global pandemic, it was clear that coaching was playing a vital role, as well as having an impact.

The first virtual Coaching at Work international annual conference, held 25-26 November 2020, brought together a diverse group of delegates and award-winning authors, scientists and TED speakers from around the world under its theme of 'adaptive leadership in extraordinary times'.

Day one set the standard, with a morning's masterclass from the renowned Dr Anthony Kasozi, who offered some reflections on being 'in recovery'. His goldfish bowl analogy illuminated the need for both coach and leader to be simultaneously in, and aware of, the many-faceted views of recovery – rather than the one-dimensional 'back to normal'. Simon Cavicchia took delegates on a gestalt-informed journey of existential anxiety in the afternoon's masterclass. Cavicchia brought delegates to an understanding of how leaders were showing up with neurotic anxiety – such as being over-controlling, resisting any personal change or growth – as a way of coping with the existential anxiety of trying to live up to their unflinching image. 'Befriending' this inevitable reality could help leaders accept they were simply ordinary people dealing with extraordinary times.

Day two revealed more about the impact of the novel coronavirus and how it has shone a spotlight on the underrepresented, the contentious, the hidden and the plain difficult conversations. There was a sense that coaches are in a unique position to contribute to the wider picture of humanity and humility through adaptive coaching.

It's difficult to single out a few of the many excellent presentations and workshops. But let's start with how a new coaching programme, 'Mastering Your Power', was bringing more underrepresented coaches into the British Transport Police under a golden thread of inclusion, belonging and diversity. Coaches shared their own personal stories to illustrate how 'no-one else looked like me' can have a different ending if we actively address this in our own industry.

Some of the team behind a pro-bono coaching initiative for healthcare key workers, Coaching through Covid, took us through the massive impact the programme has had on caring for people on the frontline of the pandemic. We first heard about coaching as psychological PPE from a consultant anaesthetist, and the panel shared their thoughts on how compassionate coaching has been helping to reveal and normalise the secret shame, fear, rage and impotence behind the masks of many NHS workers facing the reality of not actually being able to walk on water. 'Half the time we feel we are walking through fog, and we dare not tell anyone,' said Carole Osterweil.

As the conference progressed it was clear that these extraordinary times represent a huge opportunity for coaches to have an impact on the

agenda of leaders through adaptive transformational coaching. But how did this sit as an ethical dilemma? The team from Climate Coaching Alliance asked how our new awareness of the interdependence of Covid-19, recession, climate change and biodiversity collapse could be discussed. A useful starting conversation could be the joint statement on climate change initiated by the Association for Coaching, ICF, EMCC and APECS, now signed up to by a further five professional coaching bodies.

Interestingly, the virtual conference setting felt less stressful than a face-to-face one: no need to network madly or hope to bump into someone and miss a workshop by mistake! We could still network, with virtual breakout rooms, recorded talks, workshops and chat boxes, but it felt much more under our own control. There was a new mindfulness and quality of calm in the moment, which felt apt. Nevertheless, the workshop on burnout was highly relevant, as we learnt more about identifying and preventing burnout. A well-received tip was to notice that 'tiredness' was often the acceptable phrase cloaking burnout.

What struck many of us in our network chats was the willingness to adapt ourselves, and the coaching industry's flexibility and willingness to learn and grow as we recover together. Then maybe, just maybe, our collective humanity through adaptive leadership will allow the wider world and planet to be in recovery as well. This 2020 conference was able to reveal not just coaching approaches for our desperately difficult extraordinary times, but the silver linings as well.

The conference ended with the *Coaching at Work* editor's awards. Lifetime achievement awards for contributions to leadership coaching went to Richard Boyatzis and David Peterson. The full awards and more information can be found at [caw.nwsvirtualevents.com](http://caw.nwsvirtualevents.com).

### ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Ella Clark is a life coach and master NLP practitioner, and a member of the Association for Coaching.

