

Setting up a business in a pandemic



In 2018, my road to recovery from stress caused by working in a toxic environment called for deep self-reflection. I struggled to find the happy, confident and focused person I had been.

I had spent most of my working life in an inter-governmental organisation that had spent the past few years in turbulent change. This culminated in a toxic and dysfunctional stewardship in parts of the organisation. Some people found unconventional ways to ensure their survival, spelling disaster for others.

My vision of completing my final contract peacefully and leaving a good legacy turned out to be very challenging. I became depressed and had a short period off work. I was in a dark place, where my inner critic had a field day: words like “useless” and “weak”, came to the fore. I wallowed in self-pity, while the little energy I had was spent trying to convince

loved ones I was fine. I was just sitting out the madness for a bit.

Finally, making a commitment to myself to overcome it, I began to plan and set goals for my life post-contract. My career had afforded me the opportunity to travel widely and meet people from all walks of life – from Queen Elizabeth and Nelson Mandela, to people working very hard in areas of democracy and development at all levels. So how could I leverage my qualifications and years of extensive international experience, gained in a diverse environment, to forge a new and more fulfilling career, one which I was passionate about that would not feel like work?

The things that leapt out constantly were my extensive HR and corporate affairs experience, commitment to continuous personal development for myself and others, good people-management skills and experience in diversity and inclusion. One day,

I had a light-bulb moment: I can use all these skills to help people through coaching! And so my recovery began. Returning to work, I rose above the noise to implement a new training and development programme, while I completed the Professional Certificate in Coaching at the renowned Henley Business School.

Fast forward to February 2020, when on my last day I walked out on a high, with plans of having an ‘adult gap year’. Gap years were unheard of in my culture as a teenager – I could just imagine my parents wanting to have words about the very idea! I was to return in 2021 to set up my practice. Cue COVID-19 and lockdown.

I made the most of the first lockdown by learning how ‘to do nothing’ guilt-free and reverting to hobbies of cooking and baking. Needless to say, that led to a battle of the scales – kitchen and bathroom scales, which was won by the latter. Having infor-

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Emerge Coachultancy was born, offering holistic and solution-focused coaching to women and teams. With that came a membership with the International Coaching Federation. The aim is to help clients find clarity of purpose in all areas of their lives, find their passion, overcome personal and professional challenges, build resilience and the necessary flexibility to thrive in times of change. Setting up my coaching business at the height of the pandemic provided both a challenge and an opportunity. Not having face-to-face contact with new clients to help build rapport and trust was a cause for concern. However, this fear proved unfounded as Zoom, Skype and the telephone are great alternatives.

Also, the shutdown period afforded me the time to identify and develop my niche

area and client grouping. I was able to design a programme for coaching, training and a coaching and training hybrid model that is easily tailored to the individual needs of my clients. It gave me time to redesign my coaching agreement and pricing to offer flexibility and choice to my clients, taking into consideration the possible impact on their health and financial resources during these tough times.

Coaching is not a magic bullet, as it requires work by the clients as the owner of their goals. They remain the driver of their transformation with my help to ensure that it has the hallmark of sustainability.

One senior female executive client said: “Coaching afforded me the permission, time and a safe space to think about issues I have wanted to resolve for some time.”

Coaching is an investment, and you are worth it. Consider working with one to empower and enable you to be the best version of yourself.



Marilyn Benjamin is the founding director of Emerge Coachultancy Ltd, a coaching and training company.

She has extensive corporate experience, an MA in human resource management and is a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development and the International Coaching Federation.

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