

# VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

## MARTIN DOWN



Coming face to face with fear helps us to experience the reality of confronting drastic personal change

**N**ineteen days, a 67-foot transatlantic yacht, 12 strangers, a journey across the Atlantic... my experience of a transatlantic yacht race was transformational – an emotional learning curve.

Exhausting physical work for 18 nights in a row, working in shifts around the clock to sail 2,900 miles across unfamiliar seas, is not normally part of an executive coach's duties. But such was my experience a year ago as I set off on a personal journey of change, which was to raise over £30,000 for Guildford YMCA's Life Change Fund, providing opportunities for vulnerable young people.

As an executive coach in organisational change, the tables had been turned on me. Now I had to confront the reality of sudden and drastic personal change in a challenging and unfamiliar situation – precisely the sort of context in which I am usually called on to help others out.

A yacht race is an excellent metaphor for life. There is a widely acknowledged emotional cycle that people go through in times of personal and organisational change, and I can safely say my journey on the high seas took me through its various stages:

- Initial anxiety about what the journey would bring; especially as it came in the wake of one of the biggest Caribbean hurricanes for 100 years.



- Ups and downs of the actual journey: the exhaustion and low times that came with physical discomfort and sleep deprivation; the exhilaration of riding out storms; and the confidence, satisfaction and reward that comes with mastering new skills.
- Sense of fulfilment: the sight of land at the end of the journey; the realisation that came with it of what we had achieved together; and the opportunity to celebrate our success.

What did I learn? Fear, be it personal or collective, can be the greatest barrier preventing us from pushing ourselves to embark on a journey of positive change. Confronting the reality of personal upheaval in a challenging and unfamiliar situation teaches us many valuable lessons.

Yachting, indeed sporting activity of any kind, may be said to accurately reflect life as a whole, and from a personal point of view, the lessons learnt during the yacht race have

significant implications for executive leadership and coaching.

1. A compelling purpose, in this case fundraising, can help us overcome our fears, inspire our efforts and unite them with those of others.
2. Time spent building relationships at the start of a project builds trust and confidence in each other as a new team, which will serve you well for the rest of the journey together.
3. Openness, honesty and self-disclosure help sustain good relationships, team support and a collaborative spirit in difficult times.
4. Recognising our own feelings and those of others is essential to managing our own emotions well and motivating a team.
5. Working to build the skills of everybody in a team creates the confidence and flexibility required to tackle new challenges together.
6. Sharing involvement in the team builds motivation and commitment.
7. Careful preparation and contingency planning enables people to deal effectively with the unexpected.
8. Celebrating successes together makes the team feel that it was all worthwhile, enhancing the sense of reward, and motivating them for new challenges ahead.

Leadership has a key role to play in preparing others for the “blue water” challenge of organisational change. Great leadership can halt the fall in performance that organisations experience during times of evolution.

For me, this race was a reminder that in every kind of coaching scenario there is always an emotional as well as an intellectual journey. A key element of coaching is to help coachees walk in the shoes of the people they interact with. This extreme experience of change has helped me connect with coachees and their rational and emotional response to change.

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