

Interview with Dr Sally Denham-Vaughan

By Tracey Skoyles

Dr Sally Denham-Vaughan is the Co-Founder of Relational Change, an Accredited Coaching Psychologist/Coach Supervisor and an Organisational Change Practitioner. She specialises in design and delivery of Coach Training Programmes in the UK and Internationally. She is a member of the Leadership Academy at the University of Suffolk and Visiting Fellow in the School of Business, Leadership and Enterprise. She has extensive experience of delivering coaching within the NHS and other public, private and third sector organisations. Sally has a background in Clinical & Counselling Psychology. She is a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the British Gestalt Journal, International Faculty Associate at the Pacific Gestalt Institute in California and Board Advisor at The Relational Centre in Los Angeles. She has a range of publications relating to coaching available and can be contacted at sdv@relationalchange.org.

1) You have a fascinating career which has taken many turns over the years. Can you tell me a bit about your career journey and what you think have been the key ‘turning points’ that have led you to your current status?

Thinking back, I guess there were 4 main ‘turning points’; deciding to study psychology, choosing clinical psychology, discovering Gestalt Psychotherapy, and, more recently, resigning from being based mainly ‘inside’ organisations to instead work full time as an independent coach and consultant. I think all of those choices probably have their roots in my early history and core values.

I grew up in Salisbury, an inquisitive and friendly only child who was often out of the house looking to make new friends, (some might say I haven’t



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changed at all!). But it struck me forcibly at an early age that although everyone in the street lived in very similar houses, behind the front door each house looked, felt and indeed was, highly different: no ‘front room’ was the same. A vast array of different lives, families, relationships, people, roles and opportunities were being lived and created.

I became fascinated by these differences in people and environments, the reasons there might be for them and from an early age enjoyed making up and writing stories about people. I developed an interest in character and behaviour and particularly, different choices that people made, or might make, with opportunities that came their way.

I applied for University initially to study English and Drama, with Philosophy subsidiary, as I wanted to pursue what by then were three combined passions: narrative, embodied character and the reasons ‘behind’ the former two. Pretty much as soon as I arrived at University however there was a key ‘Turning Point’; I transferred to single honours Psychology, having decided that rather than ‘enact’ or study fictional characters, I was more interested in real people.

Sadly, studying psychology proved a disappointment to me. At that time, 1977-80, behaviourism was still at its height and almost all of the knowledge bases came from laboratory research on animals.

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I determined to ‘really’ study people and their motivations by applying for a job in advertising following my degree. Accordingly, I got a job with Boase Massimi Pollitt with my first ‘assignment’ being in the middle of East Anglia. I remember being hugely overwhelmed by the thought of moving to a part of the country I didn’t know and where I had no friends. So, a second key turning point followed when, almost on a whim, I got a job locally as a Psychology Assistant and then took off to America for three months; the former leading me into my first career in Clinical Psychology and the latter into a love affair with California which I am still enjoying.

I was hopeful that in Clinical Psychology I would find the ‘holy grail’ of what motivated and moved people to live their lives the way they do. Instead, I found myself increasingly concerned about the power that psychiatry/psychology had in setting norms for what was considered appropriate and inappropriate behaviour across a range of social, cultural and emotional domains: a power that I thought of as deciding how all ‘front rooms’ should be decorated. My ethical and political sensibilities were also offended by ‘therapy’ that I instead viewed as ‘training’ people by protocols to fit in to these existing power structures.

I still dislike any variant of what I term ‘coaching for compliance’ and always want people to be able to be open and trusting enough in coaching, (or psychotherapy), to honestly weigh up their options and choose them with awareness. Sadly, I didn’t find that my training in Clinical Psychology enabled me to be confident in providing such a space for clients. A particularly affecting example came near the end of my clinical training, when completing a case study of a woman in her thirties with depression. I was following a CBT protocol and had reached session six of twelve, when she arrived one day reporting that her mother had died. I still recall my responses with a deal of shame; first, I was annoyed by the disruption in my application of the protocol and second, and more worryingly, I had no idea how to respond to her distress. This was an epiphanic moment and I decided that I

needed another form of training. Specifically, one that enabled me to work with people in a way that did not suggest that if they just tried a little bit harder, they would be able to overcome whatever had befallen them so neither they, nor I, need be upset about it! To this day, working against the individualistic notion of the ‘lone hero’ who is adaptable to anything, is still a touchstone of my coaching, and consulting, practice.

Another key turning point therefore came as I looked to find the learning/training experience that would deliver an epistemology and ontology that I could resonate with at a personal and political level. Accordingly, in the early years of my clinical psychology career, I created for myself a running buffet of “taster/introductory” level courses in different psychotherapies: psychodynamic, (too expert/objective), psychodrama, (too cathartic/too like acting), person-centred, (too ‘flabby’/lacked a diagnostic model), Transactional Analysis, (still privileging conscious awareness and reason), all the while seeking a theory that could help explicate my three passions. Eventually I found my way to Gestalt approaches, which I experienced then, and now, as a holistic, complex, relational and embodied integrative theory, which directly spoke to me about personal experience and subjectivity. It explained both how and why the people in my street all adapted differently to what seemed the ‘same’ environment, and how, as they did, they constructed different personal environments for others to adapt to. Diversity, individual difference and changing ways of being were therefore included in the core theory of self. Indeed, this is the notion of ‘health’ in Gestalt; creative adaptation to a changing environment with a ‘self’ that is flexibly formed at the contact boundary rather than, as is frequently privileged in Western society, stable across time, place and person.

The fourth turning point occurred in the last couple of years, where I found myself increasingly wanting to create an organisational context and culture that embodied these lifelong passions, as well as offering services and ‘products’ that delivered them to clients. Accordingly, I left my NHS and Academic posts and together with my colleague, Dr Marie-Anne Chidiac,

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created ‘Relational Change’ just over six months ago. We aspire to develop a community of relationally orientated practitioners, (coaches, consultants, psychotherapists and community builders), who collaborate together to develop relationally focussed services.

2) You have extensive experience in Psychology, Psychotherapy, Organisational Change and Coaching - how do you knit them all together into a holistic package?

That’s an interesting question. I know that colleagues who have worked alongside me in the NHS, Academia, Psychotherapy Training, or as an independent coach/coaching supervisor often aren’t aware, or simply not interested in, the other aspects of my career. They might see me as operating in any one of those roles, say being a coach, and not be aware that my psychologist, psychotherapist and organisational change agent are all also operating in the background. For example, if I am coaching, the ‘psychologist self’ might be thinking how do we structure, evidence and measure/demonstrate these outcomes, the ‘psychotherapist self’ wondering how something ‘feels’ and is experienced by the coachee, and the ‘organisational practitioner self’ wondering how the culture/context are acting on the individual and what restructuring of the environment might be needed to support positive change.

To me, mostly the skills and experiences have interwoven very smoothly, each informing the other. At times, I think my preference to look wider than the individual coachee for aspects of change to leverage can be experienced as ‘difficult’ by organisations who might prefer to have an ‘under-performing individual’ rather than an ‘underperforming culture’. So that is an example of a time when my coaching self is being informed by my organisational practitioner, and the organisation might prefer to have a very individually focussed coach. One of the benefits of my recent move to create an organisation therefore, has been to develop a space where all these roles can be

operative simultaneously without a sense of needing to be ‘just the psychologist’ or ‘just the trainer/facilitator’ and keep the other elements in the background.

3) You are well known for your relational approach and the benefits of attending to relationships. What is your key advice to our readers?

Yes, I am very committed to the ‘relational turn’, and the move from an epistemology and ontology of rampant individualism, (where we are ‘outside’ a problem that is viewed as belonging to/inside an individual), to one of shared responsibility and awareness that our relational context is often of paramount importance in determining actions. This shift has both ethical and political considerations as it moves the focus of development from one of upskilling/educating/coaching individuals to one of analysing and supporting relational fields/context. Another way of thinking about this is to shift focus from skills/abilities that are lacking in an individual, to a focus on how and where those skills might be found in the context.

I believe that the quality of our relationships directly affects and creates the quality of us as individuals, (be that individual people, teams, organisations or communities). Recent neurobiological research seems to support this, revealing that our developing brains, although genetically informed, are very heavily influenced by our relationships with others throughout our lives.

My key piece of advice to readers concerns the need to attend to the fact that we are all ultimately interconnected and interdependent. As such, collaboration, co-operation and supportive environments are foundational pre-requisites for thriving and flourishing individuals, teams, organisations and communities. With this in mind, I would advise coaches to seek to expand and include in their analysis all the diverse elements of any presenting issue. I believe that attending to this complexity brings the most stable, sustainable and nourishing solutions.

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4) Who/what have been the key influences in your development as a coach?

I've been very fortunate to work with some incredibly talented and inspiring individuals all of whom have influenced me. A few who come to mind in this moment are Peter Hawkins, who I first had the pleasure of working with many years ago when he was still primarily identified as a supervisor of clinical practice. I was struck by Peter's ability to present very complex issues simply and practically, and to use humour as a way of engaging with large groups. Maria Gilbert, (Professor Maria Gilbert, joint programme leader of MA/MSc in Coaching Psychology at Metanoia Institute), has been my consulting/coaching supervisor for many years now. I am always struck by Maria's political and ethical awareness and her steadiness and attention to detail. Recently, I have twice had the pleasure of participating in John Leary-Joyce's outstanding workshop 'Coaching as Tango', both at the Annual NHS UK Coaching Conference and at a much smaller event for Gestalt practitioners in the wilds of Sweden. The way that John has crafted an experiential demonstration of the dominance of the embodied and relational over the rational and conceptual is brilliant: we can all dance when we are well partnered! Finally, my business partner, Marie-Anne Chidiac, (Dr M-A Chidiac, Coach, Consultant and Co-Founder of Relational Change), who integrates outstanding conceptual ability, organisational experience and psychotherapy skills. I frequently get to see Marie-Anne work as we co-run coach training workshops and supervision sessions and I am always impressed by the way she can seamlessly bring details of theory alive in practice and create incredible learning experiences. Apologies to colleagues I haven't mentioned here...but the list would be endless!

5) You worked in the NHS for many years. What was your experience of implementing, supervising and offering coaching in that context?

The NHS is a fascinating system to work in: the clinical staff tend to be dedicated to delivering patient

care and often feel 'interrupted' by management. The leadership are aware of the ever-increasing/insatiable demand for care and often feel undermined by clinicians who seem to respond in 'unregulated' ways to patients. The core values of professional staff groups can be strikingly different while the political vagaries of different governments profoundly change the culture on a fairly regular basis. Taken together, this makes for a highly complex environment with potential for high levels of disagreement, stress and burnout.

I found offering and implementing coaching interventions aimed at increasing individual performance relatively easy. Individual staff are often very keen to have the support of coaching, be they leaders, managers or clinicians. I am however, particularly pleased to see the erosion of the notion of coaching as an 'individual executive perk' as it increasingly becomes available to more staff.

Team Coaching is an activity that I think is particularly suitable for the NHS environment, particularly clinicians, as so much care is delivered in teams. I think a team where one or two of the senior staff are getting coaching, and other staff are not, is probably less helpful as an intervention: often serving to widen power differentials rather than optimise everyone's performance.

As an 'insider' working in the NHS, I found huge resistance to contextual or relational formulations aimed at creating a coaching culture. Sadly, there seemed to be a strong preference to stay with the 'Bad Apple' theory, (of under-performing individuals/teams or groups), rather than to attempt to look at cultural/systemic failures that might genuinely leverage change. Fortunately, I do see this shifting with the increased emphasis on large scale change and awareness that a coaching culture supports this.

6) You have written extensively for a range of publications. What piece of writing are you proudest of and why?

My favourite piece is probably 'Will and Grace: The

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Integrative Dialectic in Gestalt Psychotherapy Theory and Practice”. It was published in 2005, but I had worked on it for at least 18 months. I am proud of the fact that I didn’t shy away from trying to describe difficult philosophical concepts such as ‘Intentionality’, but particularly because it marked the culmination of a long process of trying to balance my intellectual, structured, more ‘psychological’ self, with my more fluid, expressive, spiritual ‘psychotherapy’ side. Undertaking a long piece of writing moved me along both as a theoretician, but also as a practitioner. In particular, I was aware that while I spent much of my time as a practitioner planning, structuring, goal setting and problem solving, (both as a coach and in other roles), what actually happened was often not what we had planned. Instead, life seemed to intervene in mysterious ways, offering that puzzling range of both positive and challenging opportunities that I had observed confronting people as I was growing up. I termed this latter phenomenon ‘Grace’, and think of it as the moving, mysterious, unknowable, and yet experienced force, that is often more powerful in shaping our lives than any ‘plans’ or intentions. That is not to say we shouldn’t plan, quite the opposite, rather that our planning needs to include resourcing for the unexpected that is most likely to occur.

7) What is next for you Sally?

Well, as you can tell, I am delighted about the developments with Relational Change. We now have our foundational structure in place with an International group of Advisors, Associates and Affiliated Centres. We are starting to look at what it means to work collaboratively and to support each other in spreading a relational model. To this end, myself and colleagues have been busy writing articles about our particular

version of ‘Relational’ and establishing our first training/accrediting programmes in Relational Change work. With particular reference to coaching, we are involved in running and delivering coaching and leadership programmes in a number of public and third sector organisations and are also offering training for counsellors and psychotherapists who want to add some of the best elements of coaching into their therapy practice. For coaches, we are offering training/supervision in embodied coaching and also a coaching series incorporating both Will and Grace, where we will study coaching models/methods and also practices more aligned to working in the Liminal Space and developing Presence. Overall, it is a particularly exciting, expansive and educative time in my career so I am enjoying stepping forward into all the opportunities.

Tracey is an HR Consultant specialising in leadership and career development and is currently employed by Santander UK Bank to implement a Leadership curriculum. Her portfolio of skills range from coaching senior executives to the design and delivery of training programmes and the development of on-line solutions. She has an innate perception into individual motivators and is known for her ability to balance individual and organisational needs.

