



**YOUNG LIVES  
vs CANCER  
CLIC SARGENT**

By Vicky Charles

## My iOpening experience: 3 years on

**I'll be honest. The thought of being coached made me want to head for the hills screaming.**

I am not a huge sharer. That's what I thought coaching would be: relentless sharing around a campfire maybe involving some kind of talking stick. When I told my friends they teased me because they knew how challenging the experience would be for me. The iOpening programme I went on started with a three-day retreat.

My friends even gave me a safe phrase to use on the phone if things got too much and I needed to be busted out ('the pillows here are fluffy'). I had made an art of curating the information I allowed people to know about me: enough to know who I was, but not enough to really know me. Over the course of my career, this strategy served me well. So, in 2017, when a new tier of associate directors was created in the organisation I worked for, **CLIC Sargent**, a charity which fights to stop cancer destroying young lives, I went for it and got the job.

I felt confident in my ability to perform at that level. My experience working with young people in various roles equipped me well. My role was Associate Director of Technology and I'm a passionate believer that technology can be used to improve people's lives. I am the kind of person who is genuinely excited by systems because I understand the value of data which underpins the successful use of technology. And of course, the cause continued to motivate me.

However, it was only after I was put in post that the competencies were shared and the management said they wanted all the associate directors to go on a development programme (which included coaching) to bring us all up to the same level.

### **A deeper level of awareness**

I like to think I think I'm a pretty self-aware kind of person and so with my line manager I went through the competencies. I thought I had a pretty good idea of my areas of strengths and weaknesses, but the experience was eye-opening.

Two key areas for development were identified. One was around communicating. The management team had noticed that when it was clear I had something valuable to add in meetings, I stayed silent. It was true. Part of the reason I did this was because I assumed people wouldn't be interested in data or technology like I was and would find it boring. Compounding that, I didn't feel I had the experience to input in other areas.

The other area of development was around emotional resilience. Until that point, I really felt emotional resilience was a strength of mine. When adversity came my way, I dealt with it, I kept going. What my line manager said was 'We know that you can deal with a lot on your own, but the strength comes in realising that you don't have to. You can ask for help.' Linked to this was the idea of vulnerability. Because I didn't feel comfortable showing vulnerability, people around me felt they couldn't either.

Now, I'm from a competitive family. So far from being discouraged or wounded, there was an element of pride in my response. It was 'I'm going to tackle this head on.' I'm also quite a logical and reflective person, so I thought if I get nothing else out of it, it'll be a good opportunity to reflect without distractions. So it was with these things in mind that I packed my bags and headed to the retreat. It's hard to explain, but coaching had a much bigger impact on my life than I ever anticipated.

## **A timeline of significant events**

I had a huge turning point during one of the sessions, in which we were asked to draw a timeline of significant events in our lives. I grew up on a council estate in South London but I went to a boarding school in Somerset. I was the only black person in the school. I was the only black person in town. People would stare and point.

They made assumptions of what 'being black' meant: that I was poor, not that bright, that I was from a disadvantaged background. I hated it. And it was while recounting these events, I had turned my back to the rest of the people in the room. I didn't want to see their expressions as I spoke because I didn't want to be judged like I had been as a child.

However, the act of revealing more of my life and turning around to see people not judging me was a huge turning point. What I had during coaching were big moments of realisation - not just that I had built up a lot of walls, but questioning whether the reasons for having them were still valid. At first the walls were there to protect me from being judged, but hadn't realised the impact this had on the relationships around me and my career progression - I just kept on building.

## **Coaching for life, not just for work**

Following coaching, a friend actually said to me 'I feel like I know you better.' Since then, I've received feedback saying that I was much more able to show vulnerability which resulted in better trust and connection with people. One of the great things about coaching was the practical support and encouragement I received. In my one-to-one session, I spoke to my coach Caroline about my problems with communication and influencing.

Caroline encouraged me to really observe myself and other people: how they sit and present themselves, how they 'get in' to the conversation without interrupting, how they make their case. I noticed that I was very casual, I sat back in my chair, I was so eager to say something that I'd interrupt because I was worried I would miss my opportunity to speak. That was a great outcome for me. Coaching helped me to look beyond myself and to learn from other people around me. It's an exercise I practice with my team now. Since receiving coaching, I'm much more aware of behaviours and triggers that send me back and I'm better able to manage that.

I've strengthened my voice and raised my profile. I feel much more able to do things that will challenge me - I took part in a podcast recently. It was on how coronavirus has impacted tech and digital. Before coaching I would've said 'Oh God, no!' and deleted the email. My response on opening the email was, 'I should do that' and I typed a reply to agree to do it. That's one of the differences coaching has made.

I've become more aware of myself. There are some things about me that won't change and that I don't want to change, but if I could go back and change one thing, it would be adding coaching to my timeline of significant life events.