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## *Coaching as a Closely Held Enterprise: Interview with Christine McDougall*

Cherie Kellahan

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# Coaching as a Closely Held Enterprise: Interview with Christine McDougall

Cherie Kellahan

*This article is based on an interview that occurred early in 2005, between Christine McDougall and the interviewer, Cherie Kellahan. Cherie is one of Christine's clients and was the head of Marketing for McDonalds Australia for many years. Her career change includes talk back radio. Christine agreed to be interviewed for several reasons. She is a single parent, has been a small business owner herself for 20 years, and is one of the pioneers of coaching in Australia. She felt this interview may add some inspirational perspective to other coaches. Her business has evolved from basic life coaching, to specialist work with senior executives as they mature and emerge as powerful, integral leaders.*

*Interviewer:* How did you become a coach and is that something you have always wanted to do?

*Christine:* I had been looking for my vocation for 37 years. I was sort of dragged into coaching because my best friend who lives in San Antonio, Texas, told me that I was a coach four years before I got started and I really didn't understand what she was talking about, so did nothing about it, even though I trusted her. I guess you could say that the universe conspired for me to become a coach.

I was living in the US during my 37th year and there was an opportunity to take a scholarship with Coach University, at this stage still knowing nothing about coaching. Coach University suggested that if I wanted to be a great coach (and I don't like doing anything by half measures), that I get my own coach, so I hired Michele Henkle Ireland who is still my coach eight years later. It was during my first coaching session that I got it. This IS me, I have found my vocation. It's been onward and upward ever since.

*Interviewer:* Sounds like it has really been about your evolution as an individual and that fits in with what your business is all about (personal evolution). You really walked the talk before you believed you could go and help other people to evolve themselves?

*Christine:* It is also one of those critical pieces. We do need to walk our talk. As part of my training I was told

that my clients are going to be one step in front of me or one step behind me. Sometimes that drives me crazy, because it's so true, but it is imperative in my mind that coaches are highly committed to their own personal evolution because if you want to have long term relationships with clients which is what I do, then if you do not stay in front of them, if you can't keep current with your own emerging process, you are going to be left behind.

*Interviewer:* That is a great philosophy to live but it is not always easy. What were some of the obstacles, if any, that you had to personally overcome to get to where you are today?

*Christine:* I think probably one of the biggest obstacles was one I managed to get over in the first six months of my business. I know this obstacle gets in the way of a lot of other coaches and professionals. It is to get past the belief that you have to sell yourself to get business. One of the many big distinctions between coaching and consulting is you can package a consulting service, and have it be delivered successfully by many different consultants. It is very difficult to package a very personal experience, which is what coaching is.

However, it's not me they are buying. I might be the attracter, why people consider buying, but ultimately what I have to be able to do is to hear, identify and clarify what the client is looking for in a far better way than they can articulate it. If I can do that and they know

I can do that then I make the sale. What I had to learn to do was stop trying to sell myself and instead come from a place of service. The moment I got that, that it was not about me needing to sell myself but me really needing to identify and provide exactly the service that the client was looking for, then it was easy. Often they don't know what they are looking for themselves, until the coach identifies it for them.

*Interviewer:* So it's about witnessing and supporting somebody from an objective position?

*Christine:* Yes, it is, I still believe it's one of the most priceless relationships that exists because it is that complete clarity of support without the emotional attachments that get in the way of so many of our other relationships.

*Interviewer:* Why do you think all of a sudden that coaching has become so popular and so accessible?

*Christine:* It's a really great question and it's a question that a group of senior coaches and myself discussed at the ICF board level. Why coaching and why now? Why don't we go to other professionals? What need has arisen that coaching addresses now? I actually believe there are many answers to those questions. Our technology and our speed of living and our whole general lifestyle has on one level increased our connectivity but on another level it has increased our isolation.

Also coaching really only applies to people who have reached a particular level of their own development and have both the financial means and space/time means to start exploring some of life's big questions, and their own awareness. Why am I here? What am I doing? Where do I want to go? And so on. 20, 30, 40 years ago, I don't think that question existed so much because we weren't at that level of development to ask these questions. Coaching, as we know it, would not take off in the highland tribes of Papua New Guinea!

Having reached that level of development, coaching is one of the few places you can go to have a conversation that exists in multiple domains. We're dealing with the

exterior 'I' domain, 'I' as in personal component, which is the way we behave in the world, what we do, our activities. We are also dealing with the interior 'I' domain, our internal values, our interior conversations, our beliefs and emotions. We're dealing with the way we relate to other people and the world, our world views, our relationships, the culture that we are raised in, and we are also dealing with the systems and structures we have built around us, our form of government, our techno-economic base.

Coaching is one of the few conversations that allow you to exist in all four of these domains. For example, psychology will either live in the interior and the exterior, but not so much in the social structures and systems. Consulting often lives in the exterior structures and systems, or in the cultural change domain, but rarely in the interior world of values and beliefs. Coaching is really the only place that I know of where you can show up as a whole human being and the coach will explore/work with you in all domains. The same applies to business coaching.

Looking at the four domains of a business, including its interiors and intangible, unmeasurable domains, commonly known as the soft skills, is normal in the coaching conversation. People have been exploring and up-skilling in the exterior world of measurables for hundreds of years, and are beginning to realise that something fundamental is missing. Our interior world. Our soul.

*Interviewer:* Do you think that is perhaps why coaching is now becoming as or more popular than therapy, traditional therapy, because it's not focusing on restorative work but because it is all-inclusive, touching on every area of a persons life?

*Christine:* I think there is another component to that, which for some people is significant and for others not as significant. There can be a stigma attached to working with a therapist, that there is something wrong with me. Whereas the place coaching comes from is that there is nothing wrong with you, we are not needing to fix you. It is about enhancing and adding to what already exists.

*Interviewer:* Is that why a lot of coaches have their own coaches and is that why you mentioned that you have a eight year relationship with your coach, which is longer than some marriages? There must have been some really interesting developments within that relationship.

*Christine:* In what I call a masterful coaching relationship, which is what I always strive for with clients, every time I step into the coaching conversation, in fact, even when I am not in the coaching conversation, even now talking to you, I know that my coach sees me more clearly than I do, in my greatness. She also understands things that get in the way of me being my greatness. Every time I step into that conversation or that relationship, who I am goes up a couple of notches, I become a better person. I become more integrated. I reckon that is a pretty valuable relationship?

*Interviewer:* Absolutely. What are some of the wins you have had with clients? Obviously you cannot talk about specifics but generally speaking, what are some of the real achievements that you have seen happen with people that you have worked with?

*Christine:* In the area of coaching that I work with, personal emergence and personal evolution, it's unusual actually to get the really outstanding achievements and measurables. I generally do not work with people specifically around their performance. (Performance coaching lives predominantly in the exterior domains.) I am working with people around their emergence as a human being, their unfolding development, which is not always a pretty path. I don't measure success with clients in a typical way; I measure success by the value of the relationship, which is not a co-dependent relationship.

If the client stays with me long term and gets tremendous value from having a partner in their own personal emergence then I know I am doing my work. Needless to say I have coached people to higher salary packets and other great achievements but I don't consider that to be the only winning part of my coaching.

*Interviewer:* So it's really about the relationship? Is that what you enjoy most about your work?

*Christine:* The relationship? I think the human experience of unfolding is at times, painful, tricky and can be incredibly joyous. Having a partner in that unfolding who stays objective but at the same time, very loving, is incredibly valuable, and that is the type of coaching that I do. There are other coaches that specialise in others areas.

*Interviewer:* There certainly seems to be a lot of people wanting to move to the next level. How do you think people should or could identify what the right step is for them in terms of hiring a coach?

*Christine:* The very first question is clearly identifying why you would want to hire a coach? What is it that you want to get? What do you want to get from that relationship? What can the coach offer you that fits your needs? I still ask the question: what it is that is unique to my coaching that I offer? It's really about perspective or clarity; I give people sight, which may not sound logical.

*Interviewer:* It sounds perfectly logical to me.

*Christine:* I don't know whether that is the right answer, I think it is both sight and partnership, but the partnership is different than the partnership most people would have with their spouse or their best friend, it's a different relationship.

*Interviewer:* I notice that you quoted Martin Luther King Jr. on your website. We all know that one of his primary messages was certainly about rallying behind non-conformity. Would you describe yourself as a non-conformist?

*Christine:* There are some areas that I am happy to conform to and other parts that I would definitely describe myself as a non-conformist. To question everything, not from cynicism or suspicion, but because science and what we know changes everyday. We really need to question everything. What is real? I don't know. Personally I am not very good at taking orders unless I am enrolled on the team.

*Interviewer:* What have you gained from having that

perspective?

*Christine:* Good and bad. Sometimes it can be lonely out there on the edges of nonconformity. I know Einstein said something fairly similar ~that we won't get change by using the same thinking that created the problem in the first place.~ Certainly the people who are challenging the status quo, and looking at things with a different perspective, are the ones who will create the changes, but that path can be a lonely one and can be fraught with danger.

I have a picture of the original scout (in an army) who used to ride out and check out the situation ahead and would often come back with arrows in his hat. You can get the slings and arrows of people who don't agree with your particular view. However, unless we have those people we are not going to move through the problems and situations that we created. I love working with the non-conformists of the world because it's a lonely and courageous and bold thing to do, and can be very rewarding. The truth is that I, they, we, are not always right in our non-conformity, and we have to be able to bear that.

*Interviewer:* That can be a bit of a pill to swallow.

*Christine:* Don't stop giving it a go.

*Interviewer:* It sounds to me that one of the key areas for you is personally believing and identifying with the work that you do and then refining it. Within coaching there are obviously tiers and levels and ways of coaching people. I imagine it would keep you pretty busy?

*Christine:* Yes, I am constantly re-defining myself and I consider myself to be a fairly intense person in my work. I have wonderful clients. I am constantly re-inventing and I think that is one of the essentials and also the pleasures of the vocation. As I change who I am, the business evolves and my product line evolves.

*Interviewer:* Sounds like you are on the go all the time. What is a typical day or week for you?

*Christine:* Generally I do my one-on-one coaching and group work on a Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and I have Monday for strategic business development, Friday for leftovers, for clients and/or catch up.

*Interviewer:* How do you prioritise the things that are important to you?

*Christine:* I have learnt that if I don't do the things that are very important first thing in the morning I won't do them. I have a meditation and exercise program that I do before the day gets started and as long as that happens, I am in pretty good shape. Working for yourself can be fairly isolating, particularly if you are doing phone-based work, which I do. I love it, but some people struggle with the isolation. My healthcare and my spiritual practise is the number one priority and that comes first.

*Interviewer:* So it is finding the ways and means of support for you to be your personal best?

*Christine:* It's the story of the big rocks first. The evenings and the weekends are a time for my daughter and me.

*Interviewer:* I imagine that it would be quite taxing running a small business and raising a child as a solo parent? They say that there is nothing harder than raising a child and successfully running a small business or starting a small business. I am sure you are aware of the failure rates of starting a small business in Australia? You have single-handedly managed to do both, so, if there were one key element, what would you say would be the secret of your success?

*Christine:* In my early naiveté as a parent I thought children's characters were formed by their parents but quickly realised that children are born with their own characters. We parents can simply enhance the character of our child. I started off with great material. My daughter is extraordinarily wonderful to live with and work with and be around. That is something I got for free. In addition, I have always stayed in dialogue with her, including her in my work and decisions.

For example, I am in the process of compiling material for a book and I sat with my daughter a couple of weeks ago and said for a short period of time the only way I can see myself doing this is to give up weekends for maybe months and months. She didn't like the idea at all, but we are negotiating, working on pro's and con's, and rewards, like a white Christmas this year (a trip to the Northern Hemisphere). I have dialogued with her since she was very young, and have always been astounded by her insights and contributions to the process.

*Interviewer:* That is wise. So it's not so much about finding a technique or strategy to balance the time, or divide the time, but more about being open and communicating and determining together what the priorities are right now?

*Christine:* She is learning to take on more and more responsibility around the home. She had to be an independent child from an early age. The last time I made her lunch...I can't remember...or breakfast.

*Interviewer:* It sounds like the two of you have an evolving partnership as well.

*Christine:* Without question...yes...

*Interviewer:* Would you say you employ some of the coaching techniques that you have with your clients, with your daughter?

*Christine:* I wish I were a better coach with my daughter than I am. For some reason I find being a parent much easier than being a coach for my daughter. I must admit my coaching skills with my daughter are rarely used. She still doesn't understand what I do. Recently I have been using coaching more with her, particularly working with the harsh conversations teenage girls have with each other.

*Interviewer:* You were saying that the best coaching relationship is really that independent partnership and that is probably why when we are too close to somebody it is difficult to coach them.

*Christine:* I find that coaching my daughter is very tricky when it is about her. It is easier to coach her with her relationships to others.

*Interviewer:* Needless to say, even with the communication and the dialogue, I think that running a small business successfully and being a solo parent certainly puts some challenges in place and demands on your time and your resources. So for all the other coaches reading this and running their own small business, what do you typically do to keep your own business growing? What do you focus on? What is the most important aspect for you?

*Christine:* I have learnt from the school of hard knocks that you have to constantly be "marketing." For me that is to be constantly in dialogue and relationships with people, always looking for mutual opportunity. The moment you stop doing that, you can pretty much guarantee that the effects will be felt 3-4 months down the track. I am fairly introverted, therefore I have learnt to market in a way that really suits me. I am not going to go to a networking function; you won't find me there. You have to keep yourself in the conversation and at the level you want to play. You also have to build pipelines into your business. Big healthy ones!

*Interviewer:* And to be clear on what service you are offering?

*Christine:* And what I can deliver, what is the difference between my service offering and those of other coaches.

*Interviewer:* How would you say coaching most helps or can help a small business owner? What are the typical situations that you think small business owners can come to coaching to work on?

*Christine:* Simple business practices that they don't know of, can't see, aren't clear about. It can be systems that create efficiencies. Their marketing and what they are saying, the alignment between what they are saying and what they are doing. Very often there is a blind spot and misalignment. Are they leveraging relationships, are they thinking about building networks to really support themselves? How they are

showing up in the world? Is there a gap between what they say and what they do? It can be their interior, their own belief, self-talk, or their values or mismatched values. It can be the culture they have created, or want to create, and the view they have of the world. In other words, coaching a small business requires working in multiple domains.

*Interviewer:* Yes, and it sounds more holistic. The personal emergence focus can easily be applied to a small business owner, or to a corporate executive or to a stay at home Mum?

*Christine:* Yes, because ultimately the principles are the same. It is easier for us to see the relationship or disrelationship between our friends than it is to see dysfunction in our own life. The coach is the person who sees the relationships or disrelationship and the internal beliefs patterns that are pulling you down, sees the breakdowns in systems and structures. The coach can see that more clearly because they are external.

*Interviewer:* How would you take that and use it on yourself? Do you coach yourself?

*Christine:* No.

*Interviewer:* That is a client that you are not willing to take on?

*Christine:* I have my own coach because I need that external clear-sighted perspective. At times I've had multiple coaches in different domains because while Michelle is my Head/Lead Coach occasionally I need some specialist work.

*Interviewer:* She is your Lead Coach? Having worked with her for a long period of time, how do you think that your life has changed?

*Christine:* Every year I reach a place and go "Wow, look how far I have come this year" not believing that I could grow so much. And yet it happens every year. Oh, how blind, deaf and dumb I was back then 12 months ago, how come I didn't know this? My daughter has taught me, just by being around, to be more compassionate

then I ever was before being a parent and I am certainly learning more about humility, and still have a lot to learn about that. I just love the learning process.

*Interviewer:* Obviously anybody who is involved with coaching is compassionately and actively evolving and moving forward in his or her lives. If you were turning up to a 20-year class reunion next week, what do you think might be an obvious change, one that people would notice straight away?

*Christine:* I don't know. I would like to think that they would say I am grounded, connected, and open and have a very high personal presence.

*Interviewer:* I didn't go to school with you and I certainly can tell you what you were like back then, but I can tell you that that is my experience of you.

*Christine:* Thank you. Personal presence, if there is anything that I aspire to in my own life, that's what it is.

*Interviewer:* That is a great aspirational value. Where do you see the future for coaching?

*Christine:* That is a great question; it's one I have been asking myself recently. A group of senior coaches from around the world got together in Quebec City in Canada in November 04. At one point there was about 8-10 of us sitting around the table talking about what the future of coaching is, and we did go off the charts with some of our answers. I think that as our own self-awareness develops at an increasingly accelerated pace, it's probably going to be the technology in the physical form, the thinking and the structural form where most change will occur. We will have more models and frameworks to work from, giving people ever greater perspectives. I don't think that coaching is going to go away until we get a significant number of people to a particular level.

*Interviewer:* I wish you all the very best with this future. Thank you for your time.

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## **Christine McDougall**

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Christine McDougall founded her company Synergy in 1997. Synergy is an international coaching company specialising in the emerging leader. Her individual clients are based around the world.

Christine has been a Board member of the International Coach Federation for five years, her last year in the position of Vice President. She was the inaugural President of the International Coach Federation Australasia. Christine is on the editorial board of the *International Journal for Coaching in Organisations*. Christine is also a founding member of the International Consortium for Coaches in Organisations and has been a keynote speaker at many events around the world.

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### **The *IJCO* Logo: What Does It Represent**

The co-executive editors of *IJCO* have been asked about the logo that adorns all covers of the journal, as well as subscription forms, policy statements, etc. This logo comes from a much larger work of art--a statue called *Kabala*--that was created by Julian Harr. The logo represents two birds (vision) , two hands (support) or two flames (energy). We think that vision, support and energy are three of the key ingredients in effective organizational coaching practices.

- William Bergquist  
- John Lazar

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### **The International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations (ICCO)**

ICCO is concerned with the human service endeavor known as *coaching in an organizational context*, with executive coaching as its core application . ICCO members

gather together to promote, critically examine, and further the field of coaching in organizations. While ICCO is grounded in the practices of executive coaching, it also embraces other forms of coaching that occur in organizational settings.

The field of organizational coaching encompasses diverse coaching applications: executive coaching, business coaching, performance coaching, leadership coaching, and alignment coaching, among many other strategies. What these diverse coaching applications hold in common is a conviction that men and women in management and leadership positions can benefit significantly - and, consequently, so will their organization - from the thoughtful, neutral and compassionate assistance of an effective and experienced coach, who may either stand outside the formal authority structure of the organization, or be a part of the internal professional development system of their organization.

If you are interested in finding out more about ICCO or wish to become a member of this organization, further information regarding membership in ICCO is to be found by contacting Patti Erck at the Professional School of Psychology, 9912 Business Park Dr., Suite 170, Sacramento, California [Phone: 916.364.0252, Fax: 916.364.5511, Email: pattie@psp.edu.] An application form is also to be found in Issue One (2005) of *IJCO* on page 66.

## Resource Center for Professional Coaching in Organizations

The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations (IJCO) is the signature publication of Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). In addition to this internationally acclaimed journal, PCPI publishes books on topics of interest to those in the coaching community, whether practitioner, decision maker, or end user. You can count on PCPI, Inc. to provide content that pushes the envelope — bringing theory, research and application together in ways that inform, engage and provoke. Visit the PCPI website, [www.pcpionline.com](http://www.pcpionline.com), to view and purchase our growing line of products.

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