Coaching in a Distinctive Government Agency: Interview of Susana Isaacson

Conducted by Bill Bergquist

This article first appeared in the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 2008, 6(1), 18-27. It can only be reprinted and distributed with prior written permission from Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). Email John Lazar at john@ijco.info for such permission.

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Coaching in a Distinctive Government Agency:
Interview of Susana Isaacson
By Bill Bergquist

Those who have the joy and privilege of knowing and working with Susana Isaacson will often describe her as a “force of nature.” Her level of commitment to the welfare of the men and women she coaches is truly remarkable—and the field in which she has chosen to coach for many years is also remarkable: the clandestine operations of the Central Intelligence Agency in the United States. In this richly-textured interview, Susana Isaacson identifies and explores unique challenges associated with coaching men and women who must build trust, while also betraying established trust, who must work in the grays (rather than the black and whites) of the international intelligence community. We welcome you, the reader, to an exploration of coaching in a world that most of us only know through newspaper accounts or spy novels. The interview is conducted by William Bergquist, Co-Executive Editor of IJCO.

Bill: How did coaching get established in the CIA? What was the context in which coaching first operated in the CIA?

Susana: The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is like all government bureaucracies in many ways. However, any clandestine organization, like the CIA, is different from other governmental organizations in that those working there lead very complex lives. Anything that helps them integrate these various parts of their lives is welcomed.

Their lives are complex because they make their living enticing other people to divulge secrets; yet, they are motivated by their own deep-seated patriotism and their love of country. Integrity is central to their work, but the process in which they engage is not always aligned with integrity. Their integrity is pummeled by their work—this poses lots of dilemmas for them. And they can’t share these dilemmas very widely. Real conversations about real things that solve real issues in intimate, confidential settings—this is what coaching offers. This is a fertile group for these kinds of conversations. In fact, as one of my clients put it, we watch other people all the time. Coaching is the only place where we get to watch ourselves.

Bill: What about confidentiality? This must be a very important issue when coaching inside the CIA.
Susana: Yes, confidentiality is critical. Coaches have the same clearance as everyone else—top secret clearance. Having the same clearances contributes to the possibility of having a trusting conversation.

Bill: How did you get into the CIA and into coaching at the CIA?

Susana: There was an ad in the paper indicating that the CIA was looking for Spanish translators. I applied for the job and got it. I also speak a number of other languages and they were pleased that I spoke so many languages and had teaching experiences. So I started as a translator and moved over to the teaching of languages, then on to being a manager of language instructors. This was a fascinating world and I thought I was going to work in the field of languages for many years.

Bill: Tell me about your own personal dilemmas in working for the CIA.

Susana: I was born in an Eastern European Communist country (where I grew up) and left with a travel document that, in essence, said “don’t ever come back here again,” so being accepted into a country which was welcoming—where I belong—was, and is, very important to me. So I am very fond of this country. It has served me very well. How many countries do you know that accept people, en masse, as the U.S. does? I was an illegal immigrant for two years without papers. Even though I was a college student, I was one of the people whom we like to dislike today—an undocumented alien—from the age of 18 to 20. And then I got a green card. I am very grateful to belong to this country.

Bill: Any problem with CIA clearance?

Susana: No. Because by then I had been a U.S. citizen for 15 years and I had no connections with Eastern Europe. Everyone I knew had left and settled in the West. I was married to an American citizen and had American children.

Bill: Were there dilemmas for you personally in working inside the CIA?

Susana: No, not really. I saw—and I still see—important reasons for the existence of this agency. And because I got to know and love the people who do this work, I came to believe that the vast majority of people who do the work do it out of a love of country and, truly, a love of freedom. So, there is a genuineness and an idealism about this population that works at the CIA—and this is what has really helped me in creating the coaching program in this organization.
Bill: So you have been free of some of the dilemmas that face other people in the CIA?

Susana: Actually, the issue is not with the dilemmas themselves. What is required is the ability to navigate through these dilemmas, this is the challenge. It is not about wavering, about not wanting to do this work anymore. It is about which path do I take and how do I manage to stay true to myself, while remaining true to my country and to my work at the same time? It’s about staying true to the path, true to the work and true to who I am. And that I find to be very compelling.

Bill: This must be a unique challenge for those working in the CIA?

Susana: I can say after 25 years of service that I was never bored. Not one minute. There was always something of interest, something to captivate the imagination, and to puzzle on. I love puzzles!

Bill: There is a famous case study concerning the introduction of organization development (OD) into the U.S. Federal government (Administrative Division) during the Kennedy years. This OD work was done by some of the most famous OD practitioners of the time (early 1960s). However, it was soon thrown out by Robert Kennedy (then Attorney General). How were you able to introduce a comparable intervention strategy (coaching) into a U.S. Federal government agency?

Susana: Of course there was a lot of resistance to coaching. In fact, I got a leave-of-absence for one year to obtain a Masters Degree in Organization Development at Johns Hopkins University during the early 1990s. However, even in the early 1990s, after Robert Kennedy was long dead, they didn’t want to call it “organization development.” The organization claimed that I was getting a Masters Degree in “training,” even though this wasn’t true. When I moved from organization development to coaching, it took awhile use the name of “coaching program.” But I was very fortunate on two counts. First, my immediate boss was very quick to appreciate the power of the work of coaching. Second, I got into coaching purely by accident. Somebody said, “There is this manager who is behaving inappropriately with his employees—what can you provide for him?” So I went to see him and quickly realized that telling him to stop doing this wasn’t going to work. I didn’t know what tools I needed. Coincidentally, one of my friends said that they were enrolling in a year-long coaching program. I said, “I’m in! Let’s do this.” As I went through the year-long program with New Ventures West, I came back enthusiastic about the possibilities of this work and shared this enthusiasm with my boss. She said, “Let’s start up a coaching program for our employees.” There was money available almost
from the moment I finished the coach training program in 1997. That’s when I started the program at the CIA and it has been growing and flourishing ever since.

Bill: But the original precipitating event was more like traditional coaching: here is someone in trouble as a manager.

Susana: Right. The early coaching was not at all about the dilemmas and challenges I mentioned earlier. It was “We have a problem. Let’s fix it.” You asked earlier what was compelling for me as a coach. It is the dilemmas and challenges that my clients face. But it would be a different answer for the organization. If you asked someone who works there “Is this what created the success of coaching?” I don’t think they would be able to articulate the role of coaching in addressing dilemmas and challenges. What they would say is that coaching is a mechanism for helping clients see a bigger picture than their own. And to help them move forward with the work they are already doing individually and collectively. And to succeed in the organization. That’s what they would say.

Bill: Sounds like there are three perspectives on coaching in the CIA: (1) Managers dealing with basic performance issues (traditional coaching model); (2) Managers/leaders creating a bigger vision (the classic model of coaching as “playing the bigger game”); and (3) Helping clients address complex dilemmas, challenges and multiple pathways (a perspective that is compelling for Susana). Sounds like three different versions of coaching.

Susana: Yes. This is the exciting point about coaching in the CIA. And the other reason I loved coaching in the CIA is that the people working there are intellectually brilliant people. They are very well educated, very smart, interested, curious, fun-to-be-with folks. Who wouldn’t want to work with folks like that!

Bill: Interesting! Because the typical image is of the bungling Washington bureaucrat.

Susana: Have you seen the movie “Charlie Wilson’s War”? That’s what the people at the CIA are like: smart, intelligent, cut-through-the-crap and solve problems, do what it takes, do the right thing.

Bill: But the movie ends with the dilemma of Afghanistan being handed over to the Taliban. It’s a double-edged sword.

Susana: Yes. It’s always a double-edged sword. Sometimes good things happen. Sometimes bad things happen... Whatever brings good things about also brings about bad things. And we can’t escape it, because there is always the shadow side to everything.
brings about bad things. And we can’t escape it, because there is always the shadow side to everything.

**Bill:** Has your own upbringing in Europe – and particularly Eastern Europe – helped to frame this richer, deeper perspective?

**Susana:** Having grown up as the daughter of Holocaust survivors in deepest, darkest Eastern Europe and in deepest, darkest times, certainly enables me to see that there is a way out of these dark places, and that these dark places also serve their purposes. And that life consists of moving in and out of dark places, managing that transition of getting out of the dark places. Managing our joy and happiness and being present to both - this is what I believe to be one of the tenets of coaching.

**Bill:** I would like to shift the focus of our conversation a bit. If the coaching program at the CIA is truly successful, what do you see as the elements that are most effective? At its very best, what has this program accomplished? What is distinctive about the purposes and goals of your program, given that it is operating inside government and is a clandestine operation?

**Susana:** One of the reasons for its success is that this program keeps us alive and fresh and conscious. This is what coaching does. It keeps us in conversation about abstract things in addition to helping us with strategies to do the concrete. To me, coaching means that we can talk about things, and name things, and do things—to both think and do. Sometimes you have to engage both thinking and doing at the same time—especially in an organization and world in which action is viewed as the only necessary thing. Being able to have conversation about the action; being able to plan for the action; being able to affect the action; second-guessing action. This is what sets coaching apart from training, and at the same time looking at yourself as an instrument of everything that happens around you. That kind of conversation is critical for leadership development.

In order to keep the notion of leading an organization and leading a country alive, I think that people need to both act and be accountable for their acting. They also must be able to articulate what they are doing and their motivation for doing it. That’s what keeps us “alive” and that’s where coaching has an impact: the conversation about leadership. The program I created had aspects of personal coaching; it also had aspects of gaining contract with people in leadership positions. During our programs we are able to sit in conversation with people in leadership. We have weeklong sessions with people at the top of the organization in conversation with people in the middle. Seniors tell stories about what they learned, how they learned, and paint pictures of what can be in the future, if we work
together. That’s where coaching and dreaming about possibility come in.

**Bill:** The stories must be extraordinarily rich.

**Susana:** That’s what we love doing best: telling stories. In the CIA we can’t tell our stories outside, so the opportunity to tell our stories internally is a critical part of the CIA culture.

**Bill:** Do the stories provide the continuity of culture in the CIA?

**Susana:** There is considerable continuity in the CIA culture—beyond just the stories. While there are some political appointees at the top of the organization in the CIA, there are few political appointees elsewhere in the CIA. People move up through the ranks. There are relatively few political shifts at the top; rather, there are shifts because people are moving on, retiring, or choosing something else to do. But there are few shifts because of changes in the political environment.

**Bill:** It must be very hard to determine if someone is successful in the CIA and deserving of advancement, given that the criteria of achievement are so subtle or ambiguous? So how was the success of your coaching program measured?

**Susana:** One of the ways that I measured the success of the coaching program was how many people got promoted from among those who had been coached – to positions of greater responsibility. That has increased over the years exponentially. So much so that at any given rank of the organization, a third of those who are promoted have gone through the leadership program and coaching. I don’t know if it has to do with the self-selection of people into these programs. Or they have gotten to places in the organization that they would not have otherwise attained as a result of the coaching program. I think it is a combination of both. A large percentage of people who have engaged in a coaching relationship have moved on to bigger and better things. In fact, several of the people who were seriously engaged in teaching the leadership courses have gone on to set up consulting practices where they have used these skills for their own purposes. So the coaching is something that has served the people well both inside the organization and outside.

**Bill:** Return on investment (ROI) in coaching is a popular way in which to measure the success of coaching; yet, this approach doesn’t seem to fit very well with the CIA.

**Susana:** You’re right. There isn’t a financial return for the CIA. This has posed a problem for me, now that I’m retired and have to think about the financial return on the investment in coaching.
As an internal coach at the CIA, money was never an issue. And offering coaching for twelve years to anyone in the CIA was a quite different thing. In fact, one of the reasons this program succeeded was that there was so much freedom of offering coaching to any body. So, money was never a problem.

It is a ‘which-came-first, the-chicken-or-the-egg?’ sort of a thing. If people who are performing well are promoted, they are likely to be ambitious and become fast-trackers. These people are likely to be attracted to these kinds of programs. So it is both-and. This is one of my buttons – I understand the reason for return on investment measurements. I also understand the danger that comes with getting caught in return on investment and losing track of what coaching can do for us individually, socially and organizationally. I would like not to lose that balance. And I am biased: I come from an environment in which return on investment has not been a major issue. Though I think it is going to become more important in the future as budgets become tighter.

I think it was the goodwill of the organization that allowed coaching to be in a fertile place. It wasn’t because there was unlimited money; it was because they saw the potential of coaching and its benefits. Because coaching is a very seductive way of having two people talk to each other eyeball to eyeball and learn together. This is wonderfully seductive, not so much for people who are ”broken”, but for those who want to learn.

The CIA has produced a culture of innovation. In this line of work you have to think on your feet. You have to figure out which path to take—there is a discipline to the work, the way there is a discipline in everything else. There is also a creativity to it. The people who are hired are creative folks.

Bill: This would also suggest that people inside the CIA have to view the world through multiple lenses – a cultural relativism.

Susana: Yes, this makes for wonderful arguments. The issue of authority is very big in the CIA. Everyone knows better than everyone else. It’s alright to be prettier than someone else, but you can’t be smarter. It makes for wonderful give-and-take, for great innovation. You argue and you learn. You discuss. There is a culture of argument and discussion—founded on a basic commitment to patriotism. The stronger the boundaries are – you can’t go outside the boundaries—the greater the opportunity for creativity inside the boundaries. I think this is one of the reasons why coaching is so successful in the CIA.

What I find in other government agencies is that there isn’t that strong sense of belonging that is to be found in the CIA. There is
a strong, internal kinship in the CIA. It doesn't go outside. When we find ourselves on the front page of the New York Times or the Washington Post we cringe. That's not where we want to go. Our success is not measured by publicity; quite the contrary. Even having retired, I am still part of the community. There is no such thing as an ex-marine!! We all mourn the death of someone in the CIA and we mourn them from the deepest places that we are capable of mourning. We talk about the bombing of embassies as a personal tragedy.

**Bill:** Is there also a sense of community among operatives in other countries? Is there a sense of appreciation for their world?

**Susana:** There is always a deep appreciation. This is part of a difficult dilemma. We are to create friendships with people in other countries. We do want all the good things: peace on earth. It is a very fine double-edged path that we walk on. We want to gain other people's trust and we don't always give trust. I believe that even if you are outside the CIA, we are taught to be trustworthy; however, we are never taught to be trusting—on the contrary. So that is a dilemma itself. But I don't think that is peculiar to the CIA. I think it is peculiar to the times in which we live.

**Bill:** That is an extraordinary distinction that you have made. As a coach, how do you help someone to be trusting?

**Susana:** By identifying places where we can be trusting. By creating those safe places where we can say “Ah, I know what a trusting environment is and I know I can be trusting.” That has to do with leadership. You can’t be a leader of people and of organizations until you learn that there are pockets of trust. This is not the case of “I like this person” or “I don’t like this person.” There must be an understanding regarding commonness of purpose, an agreement about goals. That is what develops authentic trust.

**Bill:** When you are speaking about the identification or creation of settings which are trustworthy, you seem to be talking about the creation of a sanctuary. Is this the case?

**Susana:** Yes. However, sanctuary is not about a place so much as it is about the creation of events. Sanctuary in my own work was produced in several ways. One way was through coaching conversations where we both came to a place of shared understanding—that becomes sacred. That happened much more often than you would think. Then, with a group of people—I’m talking about the week-long courses—someone would speak about their own experience, their work, their existence, the complex issues they face. It is about articulating the holding of two truths at
the same time, with the same weight. Not saying *this* is more
than *that*. The acknowledgement of these multiple truths creates
sacredness. And this acknowledgement creates community like
nothing else. I can be *this* and I can be *that* at the same time. Even
though these seem to be opposite things. That is sacredness.

There is a wall at the CIA that has stars on it. There are no
names. There are stars representing the people who have died
while on duty. Every year we have a ceremony before the families
of people who have died in the line of duty. This is a sacred
place. And we are able to celebrate these events in the CIA and
this creates community.

Sacred things happen in sanctuary. And, as I have said, sanctuary
is not a place; it is an event that allows people to feel that they are
in a sanctified place. It is not like a chapel with bricks and mortar.
It is a communion of goals, minds and hearts.

**Bill:** Sanctuary is sometimes thought of as a place or time for
forgiveness. What about forgiveness in the CIA? You have been
talking about the complexity being faced by people in the CIA.
They inevitably make mistakes...

**Susana:** Yes, they do.

I think that forgiveness is just one step below honor. I can not honor you unless I
am able to forgive you. And that comes on an ascending ladder or spiral that starts
with “I hate you and don’t you come near me”, then ascending to “I tolerate you”
and then “I am willing to live in the same neighborhood with you, but don’t you
touch me” to “I accept you, but you stay in your own yard” to “I collaborate with
you, but we don’t have to collaborate on everything; don’t move into the same bed
with me” to “I am willing to forgive you and to forgive myself.” Once I can do that,
I can honor you and honor myself. So, when addressing human development we
need to pass through all the stages: from hate to tolerance to acceptance to collabo-
rating to forgiveness and finally to honor.

I have done some work on this in terms of my Holocaust survivor
self. Forgiveness is a hard place to reach, particularly because this
means that I must move beyond considering myself more hurt
than you are. Who is to determine this? This is a struggle in our
human development. It is humanness.

**Bill:** How do you help people move through these multiple
spaces? Especially since I suspect that your colleagues at the CIA
are constantly having to interact with their enemies.
Susana: With my clients, I try to touch a high note where there is the possibility that they can move to a higher level. This work appeals to our fervent desire to be in a better place—we all want to be in a better place. This is a kind of a magnet for the people I coach. Isn’t this something to which we aspire? It is about goals and aspirations. And the willingness to take the risk of trusting, and working with, and getting past the differences and managing conflict. (We never resolve conflicts, but we can manage them.) Of developing real relationships—even though they’re not across the board, surprisingly and miraculously, real openings happen and we repair the world a little at a time.

Bill: Susana, this has been a remarkable interview. Thank you for sharing your insights with us about coaching in a unique governmental organization – the CIA.

Susana: You are entirely welcome. Thank you for giving me this opportunity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Susana Isaacson is an executive coach and organization development consultant. Since her retirement from the CIA in 2007, she has established a coaching and organization development practice; she is also co-president of COPIA, dedicated to the professional growth of second world women in reaching positions of impact for their organizations and countries, and to assisting baby boomer couples develop lifelong relationships in retirement. A native of Transylvania, Romania, Susana also lived in Colombia, South America. Having started professional life as a linguist, she speaks Hungarian, Romanian, Spanish and French. She is a member of the ICCO Advisory Board, Her name graces the “National Clandestine Service Susana Isaacson Award for Leadership Development” granted annually to the National Clandestine Service officer most dedicated to educating and developing future leaders in the organization.
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