

The Magic in the Space Between

How a unique mentoring programme
is transforming women's leadership

Ian Wigston
with Hilary Wigston

Introduction

'We are not what we know but what we are willing to learn'

Mary Catherine Bateson

The beginning

Headington School in Oxford was founded in 1915 by a group of evangelical Christians, to provide "a sound education for girls to fit them for the demands and opportunities likely to arise after the war". Approaching the school on 10 May 2016, there was a wonderful aroma of freshly cut grass. Members of the premises team were busy making an already imposing entrance all the more attractive.

I (Ian) was there as a result of conversations with Charlotte Avery, headmistress of St Mary's School in Cambridge, who was the Girls' Schools Association president-elect for 2017. Charlotte had asked Bright Field, the consultancy founded by Hilary and me, to support her during her presidential year. She thought it would be helpful for us to understand the GSA's work by attending that autumn's conference, which was to be led by Caroline Jordan, headmistress of Headington and the GSA's 2016 president. So, ahead of the conference, I had travelled to Headington to meet Caroline. There was nothing to suggest that the meeting would be out of the ordinary.

The greater part of the conversation focused on the work of the GSA, with Caroline outlining her plans for the conference and me explaining the purpose of Bright Field and summarising some of our recent projects. Then, just as the meeting was drawing to a close, Caroline remarked that one of the challenges facing GSA schools was the lack of women putting themselves forward for the most senior positions. "Men will see a job and reckon they will be good enough if they have six of the 10 key qualities needed for the post," Caroline said. "A woman having those same qualities will see herself as inadequate for the role and won't apply. I'm seeing it as one of the issues I want to try to explore during my presidential year."

I promised to reflect on this before the next meeting. Already an idea for a mentoring programme was taking shape in my head.

The following week, I had arranged to meet Dr Frances Ramsey, who was then headmistress of Queen's College, London. As well as leading one of London's most successful schools, Frances was chair of the GSA's professional development committee, responsible for the curriculum of workshops and conferences arranged for GSA members. When I explained what Caroline and I had discussed the previous week, Frances' reaction was very positive. The idea of a mentoring programme to support future women leaders of GSA schools aligned beautifully with the work of the PD committee and its goals. Could the programme potentially accommodate 50 mentees?

Some years earlier, I had been part of a team working with the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, where I had helped to design and deliver a highly successful programme focused on community leadership. More than 350 senior leaders had taken part in the programme. Two particular features of that course had stuck with me.

The first was that it ran over 18 months – a necessary feature given the scope of what was covered in the programme. Courses contained within an academic year can come under pressure if illness or other work demands cause colleagues to miss sessions, but that risk is mitigated with longer programmes.

Second, colleagues on that course were required to undertake a project with their local community, aimed at improving community cohesion or furthering their school's relationship with a key local group. Building an outward-facing mentality in the minds of

participants had been crucial to the success of the project. What if something similar could be achieved in our mentoring programme?

After the meeting with Frances, I got in touch with a number of my contacts in industry and the public sector to explore whether they would be willing to volunteer as mentors. Virtually everyone who was asked agreed to be involved. The list included Lt Col Lucy Giles, the first female college commander at Sandhurst, and John Cridland, former director-general of the Confederation of British Industry. It looked as if as many as 30 mentors would be available.

The next step was to get the GSA council to approve the plan. I met with Jane Carroll, the GSA's membership director, on 11 August. Council duly convened at the end of that month and endorsed the programme, with a proposed implementation date of September 2017. A few weeks later, I had a meeting with Sharon Cromie, headteacher of Wycombe High School and the then co-president of the Association of State Girls' Schools. I mentioned my conversation with Caroline Jordan and asked whether state girls' schools faced a similar challenge. Sharon described an almost identical situation and expressed a keen interest in the fledgling mentoring scheme that I outlined.

The GSA's autumn conference was now two weeks away. Bright Field was due to sponsor one of the keynote sessions on women's leadership and Hilary and I discussed how we might be able to enrich the programme further, with the aim of delivering a soft launch at conference.

Little did we envisage that, three years on, nearly 100 women would have been mentored over three cohorts of the programme. From the first cohort alone, nearly 50% have achieved promotion. The success has drawn positive responses from headteachers, participants and the media, and led to our being invited to run a similar programme in the US and Canada. The four-term programme now includes a variety of community projects, undertaken where possible by colleagues from each sector. These range from explorations of mental health and perfectionism to consideration of reading as an alternative to social media, and the development of podcasts for students at different levels of transition. The programme also includes conferences held at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and Godolphin and Latymer School.

Why are we writing this book?

The seed for this book was planted in a conversation between me and Angelo Sommariva from the System Partnerships Unit at the Department for Education. Angelo's team is responsible for encouraging and developing partnerships between state and independent schools. He was so impressed by the model we had created in the programme that he encouraged us to document it.

As with the best coaching, the picture of what we wanted to write evolved. By the time we got to seriously putting pen to paper, Hilary and I been made aware that, worthy though this intention was, focusing only on the 60 women and their mentors from the first cohort would not really justify the effort others would have to make on our behalf to help the book see the light of day.

At this point, it occurred to us that the mentees in this programme were but the latest group of women Hilary and I had coached over more than 25 years. We've been fortunate enough to coach women from a variety of contexts: school leaders, an MP, early breakers of the glass ceiling who reached FTSE board level, and some of the most senior women in the Church of England.

The women we have coached all had differing views and levels of self-belief. Many (if not most) significantly underestimated their ability to gain promotion or appointments to posts at senior level in their chosen profession. In this book, we hope to offer something that may benefit women's aspirations and goals. By exploring how coaching and mentoring has

supported women to overcome barriers and strengthen their self-belief, perhaps we can map out a helpful pathway for those following in their footsteps.

Many of our clients have engaged us to help them consider the challenges of moving from one organisation to another. This is something we have both experienced. For me, the decision to leave banking for independent consulting was made easier by the coaching I had received some years earlier. Hilary's decision to leave teaching after more than 30 years, to join me as a consultant and subsequently establish Bright Field, was triggered in part by a year of commuting between Suffolk and Bedfordshire to a job that was the most challenging of her career.

This broader perspective, then, seemed a richer seam to mine in terms of creating a book relevant to women and their varied leadership pathways. In these pages we will not only discuss the mentoring programme, but also the wider picture: the differences between mentoring and coaching; the use of psychometric instruments; and the benefits of having non-educationists as mentors. add a few more key things to this list.

The writer and anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson, daughter of the anthropologist Margaret Mead, explored the challenges faced by women in her 1991 book *Composing a Life*. Bateson examined the stop-start nature of women's lives, their multiple roles and adaptive responses, describing what she referred to as a creative process, an "improvisatory art". She wrote:

"In a stable society, composing a life is somewhat like throwing a pot or building a house in a traditional form: the materials are known, the hands move skilfully in tasks familiar from thousands of performances, the fit of the completed whole in the common life is understood. ... Today, the materials and skills from which a life is composed are no longer clear. It is no longer possible to follow the paths of previous generations. This is true for both men and women, but it is especially true for women, whose whole lives no longer need be dominated by the rhythms of procreation and the dependencies that these created, but who must live with the discontinuities of female biology and still must balance conflicting demands. ... Just as the design of a building or of a vase must be rethought when the scale is changed, so must the design of lives."

Finding our title and cover image

In choosing our title and cover image, we were supported by some dear friends and colleagues with world-class experience.

David and Susan Whitaker were coaches of the Great Britain men's and women's hockey teams that won gold and fourth place, respectively, at the 1988 and 1996 Olympics. David has been my coach in one form or another for almost 30 years, since he helped me to develop and implement a coaching model at Barclays.

The title phrase – "the magic in the space between" – originally came to David as a result of his interest in how players can best manipulate the space between them and their opponents, in order to give a particular move or tactic the maximum chance of success. It requires great understanding and awareness to make things happen "between" players. In thinking about David and Sue's subsequent work as coaches in business and education, the meaning of "the magic in the space between" evolved. It came to describe what happens between a coach and coachee when genuine transformational change leads to a breakthrough in performance. This was illustrated most powerfully for me in one of my early coaching sessions with David all those years ago.

We had met at a hotel in Windsor. I was preparing to go to my boss with the idea of setting up what was to become one of the first innovation units in Europe. David's questions were giving me real clarity on what I needed to say and do, and by the end of our time together my plan was well formulated in my head. To my surprise, David then said, "I'm delighted you have such clarity, as I haven't understood what you've been saying for the last 20 minutes." I was dumbfounded on two levels: "First, how have you been able to ask such

wonderful questions and give me such insight if that is the case? Second, what do I need to do to become more coherent?"

The answer to the first question lies in one of coaching's fundamental tenets, namely that the coach follows the coachee's energy, using their language and thinking to prompt each successive question. The coach draws out, rather than pushing in. The coach, paradoxically, does not need to be an expert on the subject. As for the second question, that became my next challenge.

The inspiration for our cover design also had its roots in sport. Dana Nunnelly and I were classmates in the 1960s when I lived just outside Seattle. She was on the school gymnastics team and also competed at state level. Since then, Dana's career path has included international marketing and branding, web user experience, graphic design, fine arts, and consulting. Here she describes her creative process and how she helped us to find the ideal cover image for this book.

"When I begin a project, I always ask the people I'm working with a lot of questions to help flesh out any visual imagery that they might have in their heads. They always have them, whether they are able to articulate them or not! I just help them get through that process. You [Ian] happened to be very good about developing visual imagery in our conversation and your sports [hockey] example was helpful. I first went to nature for the visuals, because sometimes something more abstract lends itself better to what you're trying to convey – it lets the audience step into the concept with their own interpretations.

"But there was something about suspension in air that I seemed to keep going back to. I've always been enamoured with silk aerial performances; it harkens me back to when I was a gymnast. There's a fabulous experience on the uneven parallel bars when you're flying from one bar to the next and you're completely suspended in air. The same thing happens in floor exercise and tumbling routines when you're doing aials or flips, where nothing is touching the ground. There's something magical about the suspension that you feel physically where there's space all around you and time slows down for a split second. It's about what happens to you in between when you leave the ground and when you land – it's a magic space.

"I was searching: what was it about that feeling when you're completely unhinged from everything? As I searched through different imagery, I found these two female aerial artists who were suspended in mid-air and then reaching for each other: bingo!"

Some months later, Dana told me she had discovered that the organisation behind the image was based in England. I got in touch with Rachel Furlong, founder and director of Tumbellina. She revealed the story behind the picture.

"You have to interest potential clients in different ways, just looking at the visual aesthetics of what the body can do. Obviously you have the silk coming from the top, holding the silk out. You're always thinking about the body in silhouette and what shape it can form. You want to try and get that angle exactly right so it makes a good image. Of course, you want very strong, very good energy. It's one thing to create the image, that's not enough – this person has to be giving out that energy, as if there's an audience watching. The energy is coming from all round the body. What's being conveyed is strength, agility, capability, what the body can do, precision, finesse. There's nothing left unplanned.

"Relating to the title of the book, you've got two very capable women who are reaching towards each other, working in a joint capacity; you're concentrating on that motivation of future leaders, and you've got the gap in between the two silks. You've got these amazing ambitious characters, and you're looking here at the space in between."

Thank you, Hilary

Hilary's influence in this book and all Bright Field's achievements is all-pervading. When we originally debated the wisdom of embarking on the first iteration of the mentoring programme, which we did pro bono, she brought thoughtful and considered scepticism

tempered with support for what she could see was a highly important project. As a coach and mentor to current and future school leaders, Hilary has distilled the wisdom of more than 30 years as a classroom practitioner and school leader. She has allied this with an innate care for people and an ability to hear the music and create the magic behind the client's words.

Both directly and indirectly, Hilary has contributed massively to the writing of this book. It couldn't have been achieved without her knowledge, passion and judgement.