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## Working Women



Summer 2013

### From Talking To Walking – Putting Your One Big Goal into Action

by Nicola Burnell

If you're tired of spinning your wheels and circling the same old worn out issues, you're not alone. We all experience periods of feeling overwhelmed and losing focus on where we'd like to be in life.

In January 2012 I was feeling so stuck that I struggled to get off the couch. I was working like a crazy woman, juggling multiple roles as publisher, writing coach, events facilitator and business consultant, while also raising two teenage sons.

I couldn't think beyond the next few hours in front of me and my future felt like the black whirling wall of a tornado.

Imagine my surprise when my sister, Sue, who has been teaching leadership coaching for over a decade, suggested that I was in the perfect place to embark on a journey that would change my life. I was barely able to change a light bulb!

I scheduled weekly Skype coaching sessions with her and was initially disappointed to discover that she wasn't going to DO anything to "mend my life" (Mary Oliver) but that it was up to ME to learn how to DO for myself. "If I knew what I was doing wrong I wouldn't keep doing it!" I complained.

"Exactly!" she replied.

Sue introduced me to three techniques that she'd been successfully working with for years: *Action Learning*, creating a *Thinking Environment* and how to overcome *Immunity to Change*.

Developed by Professor Reginald Revans, a University of Cambridge physicist, *Action Learning* teaches people how to confront real issues in their lives and develop new approaches by reflecting on their actions. The focus is on DOING rather than TALKING.

My work with this process began with a list of questions I had to answer before our next session. The first ones were easy enough: "*Where are you, right now, and how do you feel?*" I'm on my couch, in my house, feeling stuck.

But when I had to identify my "One Big Thing," the *must-have-before-I-die* Big Thing, I was stumped. There were so many goals in my head that I couldn't possibly choose just one of them! And therein lay the problem; I was overwhelmed by the massive scope of my aspirations. They were all so fuzzy and "out there" that they felt unreachable.

The process Sue guided me through was challenging, but I quickly saw the benefits of trusting my own ability to move myself forward into the life I had always wanted to live. My coaching sessions with Sue not only helped me to transform my life, they inspired me to develop my own coaching program that incorporates the techniques she taught me, in addition to other coaching tools I have been using for years.

I began my pilot program **From Talking To Walking – Putting Your One Big Goal Into Action** in January 2013. Instead of working one-on-one, as I had with Sue, I worked with a group of women who were ready for change. This group is called an Action Learning Set for which I applied the guidelines set out in Mike Pedler's *Action Learning for Managers*.

I also created a "*Thinking Environment*" for my students based on Nancy Kline's "*More Time to Think*." Unlike a typical "class" setting, where the facilitator leads the conversation and instructs her students, a Thinking Environment nurtures deep, reflective thought and quality listening.

By remaining silent while a group member speaks, the other members create a sacred space for the speaker to work through their thoughts in a much deeper, creative way than if they were simply answering a question.

The absence of interruption and intrusion of other members' opinions and (albeit well-meaning) suggestions leads the speaker to locate their own answers from deep within themselves.



**Photograph by Nicola Burnell**

This was an important component to give the group the mental and emotional space they needed to identify their One Big Thing. As Diane explains:

*I was astonished to learn that the "One Big Thing" that I had at the beginning of this twelve week class turned out to be something I wasn't really interested in pursuing at all...The class helped me to clear the cobwebs from my assumptions (misconceptions), and helped me to grab onto my creative urgings and go with them.*

Working with a group was comforting to Debbie.

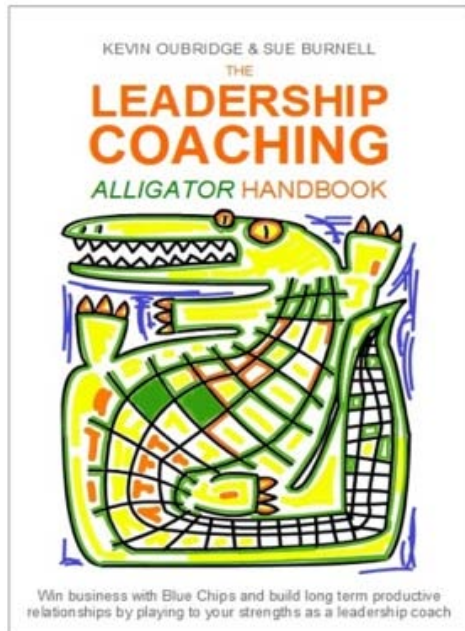
*The fact that I was not alone, and each one of us in class had some life hurdles to overcome helped me a great deal.*

Identifying your One Big Thing is Phase One of this program. Phase Two involves a series of worksheets from the *Immunity to Change Workbook* (Kegan, R. and Lahey, L. L. 2009) designed to lead you deep into your psyche to locate hidden drivers and commitments that may be keeping you locked within the confines of cultural, social and institutional beliefs about who you are and what you are capable of

becoming.

These are the internal blocks that steer your course. They can be so subtle that you don't even know they are there, dictating your every move and emotion. They can also be so obvious that you don't recognize them as blocks at all.

Time for more worksheets! Now you're ready to test the validity of your beliefs and question your 'Big Assumptions.' Here's where things get exciting and old beliefs start to crumble as the actions you take either prove or disprove your Big Assumptions. You are the one in driver's seat - you design your tests, you execute them, and then you record the results.



Phase Three is where you reflect on your actions and learn from them. The success of the Action Learning technique comes from talking about your tests with the group, walking into your action steps, large or small, then reflecting on what you've learned from your experience. Anne found this phase liberating:

*It showed us how to make a practice of questioning our assumptions and "big ideas", which can loom large as obstacles in our paths, although they are most often inaccurate. Our negative assumptions tended to fall apart when we questioned them.*

The energy in the group began to build as bold action steps were taken. Diane discovered she had a talent for something she'd never even tried before:

*I took a leap I would've rejected if it wasn't for this class, and signed up for a weaving workshop. I found out I LOVE to weave.*

Anne discovered clarity and direction:

*Determining and taking positive steps towards creative goals articulated in class placed each of us on our own road to completing these goals, without the self-sabotaging effects of our 'big assumptions'...This process of "action-learning" will guide my artistic output for years to come.*

This is why the changes you make during this process are changes that stick. YOU become the captain of your own ship by setting your own course.

It's good to question your reality and what drives your actions in life. The key is knowing what questions to ask, then trusting that you possess

exactly what you need to move forward. No matter how stuck or overwhelmed you may feel, there ARE solutions to your challenges, and new possibilities just waiting to be discovered.

Give yourself permission to uncover your hidden skills and lean on your desire for change. When you free up your imagination to steer your life outside the box of your conditioned beliefs, you really do begin to drive your own success.



Nicola Burnell is the Publisher, Editor and a contributing writer for this magazine. In addition to writing her own novels, she teaches a series of Writing, Creativity Development and Personal Growth **Classes**.

She also works as a freelance editor and a Booktrope Publishing Book Manager.

Nicola is a member in Letters of the **National League of American Pen Women** and is Historian of the Cape Cod Branch. She strives to support the Arts on Cape Cod and collaborates with several cultural organizations in her community.

Nicola facilitates a variety of fun and inspiring **CWO Events** and plans to launch the **Cranberry Creativity Conference** September 27-29, 2013. This conference will bring artists, writers and musicians together in a series of classes and workshops designed to culminate in a closing afternoon festival of the work produced in each class.

Nicola lives in Harwich with her two sons and several pets.

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**"Nic's Novel Project"**