

Ego and soul: aligning identities for working mothers

Pregnancy and motherhood can have a powerful impact on how working mothers see themselves, often causing them to experience conflict between their pre- and post-baby identities. **Jane Moffett** looks at the role coaching can play in helping women reintegrate these new identities as they return to work.

Becoming a mother

Becoming a mother is a major life transition that can affect a woman's self-identity and wellbeing. In *The Birth of a Mother*, Stern and Bruschiweiler-Stern describe the psychological change that happens for women at this time as the development of the 'motherhood mindset', and discuss the 'psychological turbulence' that occurs.¹ In the case of working women, they identify three phases that make up the birth of a mother - pregnancy, early motherhood and returning to work.

During the first phase, many women experience a change in emphasis towards their non-work identity, in preparation for the seismic shift that comes with impending motherhood.² At the same time, they may be seen to focus on maintaining a 'viable employee identity'³ in order to guarantee the validity of their work identity just before they have an extended period of time away from work.

While on maternity leave, so much changes for women. As well as the practical aspects of caring for an infant, lack of structure to their days and being out of the workforce and in a different social environment, the psychological shift they experience often leads to a re-assessment of personal worldviews, priorities, values and attitudes. Cognitive dissonance often occurs, with clashes of pre- and post-baby attitudes and behaviours.⁴ A new identity develops that helps the woman to navigate her way through this intense time of change and feeling of responsibility for the wellbeing of her baby.

Once back at work, women may need to be helped to psychologically reintegrate into the workplace. This third phase of the birth of a mother is a time when the woman balances and merges her various identities, re-establishing her 'viable employee identity', which is often linked to being seen to be committed to work, and re-validating herself as both an employee and as a mother.

The role of coaching

Many would argue that one of the main aims of coaching is to facilitate behavioural change in the person being coached. Through opening up an arena whereby the client can increase her self-awareness, discover alternative perspectives and gain personal insight, solutions to dilemmas can be found and behaviour can be understood and, when appropriate, changed.⁵ Maternity coaching is coaching that takes place around the time of maternity leave - typically, before the exit from work, during maternity leave itself and once the woman has returned to work. It is well established in certain sectors - namely, law and professional services - with documented results of increasing employee engagement and retention. For example, following the introduction of a maternity coaching programme at professional services firm Ernst and Young, the company's retention rates increased by 90 per cent.⁶

Research indicates that there are a variety of reasons why engagement and retention rates have been seen to increase if a maternity coaching programme is introduced in an organisation. First, one of the fundamental outcomes of coaching is that the coachee makes links between her values and beliefs and is enabled to keep her core values consistent. If a woman is able to consistently maintain these core values once back at work, then her motivation to stay is increased.⁷ Second, if the woman's internal perception about the support she will receive around this time is positive, her approach to returning to work and her commitment to her job are also likely to be positive.⁸ Third, maternity coaching can help the woman to manage negotiations, both before she goes on maternity leave and on her return. Finally, coaching can help with career re-engagement because it provides an opportunity to plan for her future, articulating career visions.⁹ →



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Neurological levels and their application to maternity coaching

I recently conducted a piece of qualitative research that examined the relationship between maternity coaching and women's transition back to work after maternity leave. One approach I took in analysing the data was through Dilts' neurological levels.¹⁰ This way of viewing the world maintains that there is a hierarchy of levels of thinking which are (from bottom to top):

- 1 environment (where/when?);
- 2 behaviour (what?);
- 3 skills and abilities (how?);
- 4 values and beliefs (why?);
- 5 identity (who am I?).

Dilts maintains that any change at a higher level is more likely to affect change at the lower levels. To illustrate this, I will give an example from my practice as a coach, working with Andy*, who brought his fear of giving an important presentation to one of our sessions. Andy was worried that he would stumble over his words and appear unconvincing, and therefore fail to persuade the relevant stakeholders to invest in a facility that he believed to be vital to the service users of the organisation he worked for. Once we had tapped into his commitment to the cause he was giving a presentation on (his values and beliefs), he was able to use this as a focus, enabling him to give a presentation that he was proud of. This change in his skills and abilities at public speaking also resulted in a change in his attitude towards delivering future presentations - thereby impacting his behaviour.

Dilts believes that level 5, the identity level, of the model, can be divided into two areas: *ego*, which is related to survival, recognition and ambition; and *soul*, which is related to purpose, contribution and mission. With this definition, *ego* could be seen to apply to a woman's identity at work (as a professional) and *soul* with her identity at home (as a mother). As becoming a mother is a time of identity change, I was interested in exploring how coaching had helped women to align their values, beliefs and behaviour at work, with their new identity as a mother. In a long-hours culture, where women in positions of power remain in the minority, these two areas of identity can often come into conflict. Is it possible that maternity coaching can help at this time by bringing things into alignment and enabling women to determine the right course of action for themselves? As Dilts writes:

'It is our perception of our identity that organizes our beliefs, capabilities and behaviors into a single system. Our sense of identity also relates to our perception of ourselves in relation to the larger systems of which we are a part, determining our sense of "role," "purpose" and "mission".'¹⁰



At this time of change for women at their most fundamental level of identity, coaching can be key in helping women to acclimatise, emerge and grow into a new version of themselves



All of the women I interviewed (11 in total) had returned from maternity leave within the previous two years and all had a very strong work identity ('ego identity'). For all the women, it was important that this strong work identity was maintained when they returned to work and that they were taken seriously as the highly trained professionals that they were. This strong work identity was inextricably linked with their self-esteem. For many women, the coach had helped them to think of ways to raise their profile, to ensure that they were connecting with the right people, to negotiate their desired role when they returned to work and to find the work/life blend that was right for them. All the women had equally strong identities as mothers and desired to combine motherhood and working, aspiring to achieve a balance between their 'ego identity' and their 'soul identity'.

My analysis also showed that the outcomes of the coaching were often broader and deeper than the issues that the women initially brought to coaching. Many of them wanted practical, logistical input from the coach, which they received, but they discovered that a lot more often emerged during the coaching sessions, and they reported being surprised to discover that the original presenting issue was not the 'real' issue, but something else entirely. Several interviewees mentioned the benefit of having time and space to focus on themselves and likened the coach to an 'objective sounding board'. This focused time enabled the women to achieve greater clarity about what they wanted, helped them to view their situations from other perspectives and increased their self-awareness. In many instances, the coaching had quite clearly encouraged self-kindness and given them 'permission' to negotiate the length of their maternity leave, for instance. The coaching also enabled some of the women to develop a more positive mindset about their job, which impacted on how they were perceived at work.

Case study 1: Rachel*

Rachel described how having a baby had been 'life-changing' and that it had taken some time for her to adjust to motherhood. Adapting from being someone who had regularly presented at conferences to becoming someone who couldn't get dressed before 2pm was difficult for her. When she was on maternity leave, she felt like her 'brain was dying'. Because Rachel's professional identity was so strong, some of the work that she did with her coach centred around preparing herself to negotiate the right role for her when she returned to work - which included rehearsing conversations with her managers. Once back at work, Rachel's identities ('ego' and 'soul') were in conflict and she struggled to find the right balance and compromise. She described this as 'adjusting to that new norm', inquiring, 'how do I balance both things well...?'. Rachel's coach helped her to think about what she needed in her home life in order for her to be able to sustain her professional life, and encouraged self-kindness. This resulted in Rachel feeling that she had found the way forward for herself as a professional, and a woman who was also a mother.

Case study 2: Maureen*

One of the features of the coaching Maureen received was a focus on helping her to consider, define and articulate her aspirations, priorities and values - in terms of Dilts' neurological levels, this is the level directly beneath the identity level. This work enabled her to decide what was important to her as a mother - be it spending a couple of hours with her children in the morning or being home for dinner and bedtime - and ensuring that she included this in her day. She had decided on her priorities and values, adapted her behaviour, found her 'new norm' and managed to successfully merge her two identities.

At this time of change for women at their most fundamental level of identity, coaching can be key in helping them to acclimatise, emerge and grow into a new version of themselves. Going through this transition in the environment of the workplace can create a conflict between the woman's 'ego identity' and her 'soul identity', particularly if her new priorities and aspirations are not recognised or acknowledged by the woman herself.

The time and space that coaching offers - at a period in life when women typically have less time to dedicate to themselves - encourage an understanding and articulation of these values. Once these have come to the surface, women are in a position where they can make behavioural changes that can allow their two identities to converge, and find a way to become the version of a working mother that is right for them.

*All case vignettes featured here are composites of various client experiences, disguised and anonymised so as to protect the identity of my original clients. ■

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