

“Swiss watcher”

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**Switzerland
is culturally
highly diverse.
Coaching
must adapt
if it is to be
understood
and accepted**

SWISS WATCHER

MAREN DONATA URSCHEL

After 12 years of living and working in London, I moved to Lugano (canton Ticino) in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland last year. It's been a wonderful time, full of learning, discovery, meeting new people and immersing myself into a new culture and language.

I noticed quickly that I had moved into a country of countries. There are four official languages – German, French, Italian, Romansh – and each of the 26 cantons and language areas has its own culture and system.

While coaching is relatively well-known in the Geneva, Zurich and Basel areas of Switzerland, mentioning that I was a coach in Ticino caused puzzlement. When I explained that it had something to do with change, challenge and helping people see things differently, I sensed reserve, scepticism, even fear. I was intrigued.

In the UK, coaching is now considered a general term. But is it good to have an audience with a preconception of coaching, or was I into something really wonderful here in Ticino? Was it an open playing field in which I could explain and trial coaching without baggage? I started to feel responsible for how I would explain coaching. For many, this would be their first impression of it.

I realised that to get people interested, I had to throw my UK elevator pitch away and start listening to people's stories, ideas and perceptions in order to understand the cultural context I found myself in.

And this is what I found – in the canton Ticino, hierarchical, patriarchal cultures are still common. It is not customary to criticise the boss; challenging conversations, at times, have more emotional than factual content, and terms such as challenge, change and feedback, spark



scepticism at best, because saving face is extremely important. People love their families, sport is a passion and personal relationships are the key to business relationships.

I understood now why explaining coaching as something to do with change, challenge and seeing things differently – which had served me well in the UK – did not work here. I had shaken up people's value systems, self-worth and confidence. I had made them wonder why anyone would invest in something like that.

When asked to talk about my work, I now introduce Maren, the person, first – her passions, her journey and her challenges. Then I explain my fundamental belief in people's capacity to learn and how I help people discover their strengths so that they can use them to their and their organisation's best advantage.

Tim Gallwey's idea that "performance equals potential minus interference" has been wonderfully helpful, as has asking people why someone as talented and successful as Swiss tennis player Roger Federer would want to work with a coach. I now get interest and enthusiasm – and even smiles – when I talk about my belief in learning.

So what is different? I stopped assuming that coaching means something to people, that change is perceived as attractive and forward-moving, that credibility is established by describing my career, experience and qualifications, rather than me as a person. I started fine-tuning and adapting my approach to my audience, their culture and their uniqueness based on listening, questioning and experimenting.

I am immensely grateful to the Ticinese people for making me go back to basics. ■

Maren Donata Urschel has lived in three countries and is an experienced coach and supervisor whose work is deeply rooted in learning and ethical practice
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