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Interview With David Gray

What's a typical day like for you?

A typical week-day starts around 7:30 am with a breakfast of home-made muesli. I very seldom miss breakfast. While I eat, I respond to emails. Then it's off to meet my clients. When possible, I grab a quick lunch. Then in the afternoon the consultation process continues with my clients. In addition to my own practice www.davidgraycoach.com I work on large firms' Career and Coaching delivery contracts, so there is seldom a dull moment. By 7 PM I am usually home and enjoy spending a couple of hours with my wife, Anne, sharing a laugh while we cook and eat dinner and then settle in for a couple hours of reading or TV. By 11 pm I am back at the computer responding to emails. By 1 pm I am generally in bed.

Saturdays and Sundays are catch-up days. I might see one or two clients on a Saturday, but for the most part I enjoy doing domestic chores (yes, I am that rare male who actually enjoys doing cooking, laundry etc., as I find it very relaxing.) For exercise I swim at the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre at Spadina & Bloor where I am a member. I try to fit some yoga in at the Yoga Sanctuary at College and Yonge, and I do a stretching and Pilates routine at home that Dr Darlene at Balance Fitness at Yonge & St Clair designed for me.

How do you motivate yourself and stay motivated?

About David Gray

David has advised executive clients based in Canada, the UK, Europe and Asia. In addition to his own consulting practice, David serves as President of the Board, Toronto Chapter of the Association of Career Professionals International (ACP International), and is a member of the Strategic Leadership Forum (GTA).

Prior to working as a career and strategic leadership consultant, David held management positions in Canada and the UK in business & technology consulting, and started up and managed two Divisions in Canada for a blue chip, global financial services organization.

David's quiet, incisive, highly personalized approach has inspired many executives and entrepreneurs who are in process of redefining strategic paradigms to realize growth opportunities on both a business and personal level.

Motivation is easy as my philosophy is simple: We are each here for a very short time and each have gifts and burdens differing. I intend to live my life to the fullest possible extent with as few regrets and complaints as possible. I am always amazed to see people with long faces and sullen expressions. Do they think this life is a dress rehearsal?

If you had to start over from scratch, knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?

I would go my own way earlier on, rather than try to satisfy family and social expectations and win parental, sibling and societal approval.

What's the most important discovery you've made in the past year?

The most important discovery I've made in the past year concerns the innate plasticity of the brain and the implications indicated by that reality.

Neuralplasticity refers to emerging scientific proof that the human brain is structured along the lines of a flexible and adaptive ecosystem whereby if one part of the brain is damaged or malformed, then other areas of the brain can be 'programmed' by repetitive thought or

'patterning' physical movements to gradually create new synapsistic links between the area of the body's nervous system that is sending the chemical or electric impulse to the brain and that part of the brain that is taking over the original function from the damaged section of brain.

This understanding of brain capability and activity is in contrast to the previous scientific model which conceived of the brain as being along the lines of a rigid, unchangeable mechanistic apparatus.

Interestingly, this revolution in scientific understanding of brain function mirrors the radical transformation in physics from a Newtonian model of matter as existing within the framework of a universe that functions much like a gigantic clockworks, to a post-Einsteinian model of a universe where matter at a sub-atomic level can seemingly exist in two places at one time, where molecular matter can defy the laws of Einsteinian macro physics and, among other improbable feats, be in two places at once and even penetrate supposedly impenetrable physical barriers. In essence, the current revolution in understanding the brain is little more than a variation on our understanding of universal physics principles at a sub-atomic level. In some ways then, although literally 'mind-blowing' in a sense, it is not particularly surprising that our Newtonian model of the brain, perfected during the 19th century, is now, belatedly giving way to a more accurate, post-modern concept which is more in tune with our understanding as to how the external universe functions.

For access to primary sources, please refer to the following secondary source:
<http://www.normandoidge.com/>

What are the three greatest threats to your business success?

Fear, procrastination and indecision. I focus very consciously and creatively on potential available solutions to whatever current challenge I am facing in order to banish those threats.

What do you observe most people in your field doing badly that you think you do well?

I tend to think way outside the existing structures and definitions concerning how to help people break-through to new levels of consciousness in both their business and personal ways of dealing with challenges.

Describe a business challenge you had and how you resolved it.

Challenge: My biggest business challenge was probably embedded in the realization that I was no longer interested in corporate life and not particularly entrepreneurial. So, I set out to learn how to run my own business doing what I loved doing, which was working with individuals, one-to-one, to energize and inspire them with useful insights.

Although like anyone else, I have had numerous challenges in my business career, the most fundamental consisted of trying to move at the age of 47 from working within a corporate structure for 28 years either as a paid employee or as a commissioned

salesperson, to working as an entrepreneur, something I had not done since I was 16 - 19 years of age when I co-founded and co-owned what started with one lawn-mower and a few tools in the back of an eight year-old car, and quickly became one of the largest landscape build/maintenance firms in Toronto. As a teenager, I had been "Mr Inside" - the Operations guy, so even then I had not really been the entrepreneurial brains behind the enterprise.

Additionally, although I had tremendous experience in large and small organizations, in sales, marketing, line management and business consulting, I had never once worked in an HR capacity. And my ambition at 47 years of age came to focus on working with individuals in what was in essence an HR oriented function as a coach and consultant. It took me several months of badgering to convince a London UK based firm to allow me to operate as an unpaid Associate whereby I was given an office and administrative support on the basis that I would "eat only what I killed myself." It took another three months to land my first client. Eventually, I was billing more than anyone else in the office. However, as interesting an achievement as that was, I found myself back at square one two years later when my wife and I decided to return to Canada. Ironically, although a Torontonian by birth, I had no credibility in terms of credentials (no coaching certification) or track-record in Canada, no understanding of the corporate HR services market in Toronto and no connections. I tried to get hired corporately but to no avail. So, I started my own practice and depended largely on word-of-mouth to attract new clients. The challenges consisted primarily of generating sufficient client work to make an income, and secondarily of quickly convincing clients that I knew what I was doing despite the lack of an HR background or pertinent credentials.

Resolution: The resolution of the challenge was simple and elegant: Provide one half hour of free consultation by phone. Then bill strictly by the hour on the basis that the client would never be on the hook for more than one hour of consulting advice at a time. In other words, I HAD to deliver or else I would be in effect 'fired.' The major lesson I re-learned was one I had first learned as a teen-age. When people are paying with their own hard cash, as opposed to soft corporate dollars, they are extremely demanding and expect fast, effective results. It is essential to very quickly establish trust, dispense with the niceties of a more structured approach, and demonstrate an ability to understand both the individual and that person's perceived challenges (which might in fact be very different from my perception as to their primary challenges) and then get right to the heart of how to generate solutions to those challenges. In other words, I operated more like a surgeon in a battle field medic unit with limited access to back-up and technological resources or in an ER room of an inner-city hospital rather than in the more gentrified manner of a corporate HR practitioner or surgeon in a suburban hospital setting with access to all the best equipment and resources.

As a result, now that I am working within a more structured environment once again, in a quasi-corporate capacity as an Associate, I am able to combine the best of the corporate world (access to tremendous technological and human resources) with the best of the lean and mean entrepreneurial mind-set which demands and conditions one to think outside the box and quickly develop innovative approaches in real-time to client's real-life challenges on an individual rather than a corporate cookie-cutter, traditional HR perspective, basis.



As arrogant as this might sound, I firmly believe that in addition to the essential traits of empathy, technical expertise and good listening skills essential to anyone who aspires to be a 'consultant' in any capacity, the combination of my many different life and business experiences within many different business (sales, marketing, manufacturing, telecomm, business & technology consulting) within diverse geographical contexts (Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Alberta, London, Edinburgh and Glasgow UK) is part of my secret to success as one who would aspire to advise people concerning business challenges. Who would you rather have as a business, leadership and career advisor - someone with multiple coaching and related designations who has spent twenty five years in Toronto in various HR capacities, or someone with a wide and deep variety of business and life experience in multiple locations, an MBA majoring in Strategy, minoring in Operations with a thesis focused on Leadership and Empowerment, with a mind-set and world-view which is coming from a relatively unorthodox perspective?

What lessons did you learn in the process?

1. I learned to follow my dreams regardless of what obstacles were in the way
2. To remain optimistic and persevere no matter what other people thought or said about what I was doing
3. One is never too old to reinvent oneself
4. Challenges and pursuing a dream reinvigorates one at any age
5. It's a wonderful life
6. To never, ever be complacent or accept limitations without first trying very hard and for a very long time to overcome them
7. The more you accomplish, the more that other doors of opportunity open for you
8. The biggest obstacles any of us face generally reside within our own world and self view rather than out in the external environment.

Tell me about your big break and who gave you.

My big break was convincing my wife to marry me. That relationship has been the foundation for all of my business success.

Describe one of your biggest failures. What lessons did you learn, and how did it contribute to a greater success?

My biggest failure was in not recognizing or having confidence in my own potential as a young adult. As a result, I worked at manual labour and other mundane jobs while other fellows were going to graduate school. Eventually, I wrote the LSAT (pre-law exam), scored in the 93rd percentile and realized I was actually quite bright. That gave me the confidence to do an MBA, go into Business & Technology consulting and then enter the Leadership and Career Coaching fields.

What has been your biggest disappointment in your life - and what are you doing to prevent its reoccurrence?

Not having children. My antidote is to live my own life to the full.

What's one of the toughest decisions you've had to make and how did it impact your life?

The toughest decision I have had to make was to walk away from a friendship of many years that had turned sour. To this day I feel the loss, but despite my best efforts there was no way I could discover to turn the situation around.

How did mentors influence your life?

Mentors have influenced my life more by their actions and their own ways of conducting themselves rather than by any specific mentoring per se.

What's one core message you received from your mentors?

Establish trust by being principled and doing what you say you will do.

How do you integrate your personal and professional life?

My personal and professional life are seamless in the sense that I work almost every day and I set my own hours, so one blends into the other in that respect. On the other hand, I make a very clear distinction between clients and friends. Sometimes one becomes the other and vice versa, but for the most part my private life is just that.

What's a major regret that you've had in life?

I regret not having traveled the world when I was in my twenties instead of jumping right into a career.

What are five life lessons that you have learned so far?

1. Treat everyone as a friend unless or until they give you reason not to do so
2. Seek to understand and only then to be understood
3. Be completely trustworthy, as trust is the foundation for all true relationships
4. Be true to yourself
5. Treat everyone with dignity and respect, but be especially gentle with the old, the young, the weak and the less fortunate

When you have some down time, how do you spend it?

I spend my "down-time" in one of four ways: thinking/reflecting on my own; working out physically at the gym or at home; reading; with close friends, usually one-to-one.

What process do you use to generate great ideas?

Take the situation, consider the conventional wisdom and then try to turn it on its head and see what comes up. In other words, think in a consciously contrarian style.



How do you define success?

Success as I define it is an intensely personal and individual reality. For me personally, success fundamentally consists in being true to my own ideals and life philosophy while engaging in a genuine way with clients and friends such that they feel enriched for having spent time with me.

In your opinion what's the formula for success?

The formula for success is simple: Chase your dreams, not other people's ideas of success.

What does it take to succeed in your field?

To be successful in my field one typically needs empathy, compassion, a conscientious work ethic and a background in HR. However, to be truly outstanding one additionally needs a great degree of life history in a variety of business settings as well as a high degree of intuitive and innovative intelligence in order to be able to work with people from numerous diverse backgrounds who are each struggling with very individual career and life challenges. In a word, one needs wisdom. And typically, that can only be accumulated over a long period of time after encountering a variety of challenging situations in one's own career and life.

Which one book had a profound impact on your life?

Hero of a Thousand Faces by the great mythologist, Joseph Campbell. He taught me to 'follow my bliss.'

If you were stranded on a deserted island, what are five books that you would like to have with you and why? Give a brief summary of each book

- *Don Quixote*, by Miguel De Cervantes: The first modern novel, this book revolutionized the imaginative approach to the then core myth of Chivalry, itself a central concept in most European's self-construct. This book reminds us never to take at face value the assumptions of the society in which we happen to live because of vagaries of our birth in a particular geographical space, social context and time.
- *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History*, by Philip Bobbitt. An erudite and sweeping review of European history until the 19th century and then an analysis of world history in the 20th and early 21st centuries viewed from the dual perspectives of Law and War. This book provides a context within which to grasp the complex geopolitics of the world we currently live in.
- *The Poetry of Robert Frost*: All eleven of his books - complete, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. This book reminds one that the only life worth living is one including a degree of reflection.

- *The Measure of a Man: a Spiritual Autobiography*, by Sidney Poitier. This book teaches a man how to live as a man. In a day and age when men are increasingly out of touch with their essential masculinity, Poitier's story of his personal challenges, triumphs and philosophy of life reads like a melodic breath of very fresh air.
- *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fuelled His Greatness*, by Joshua Wolf Shenk. A biography that reads like a detective novel. The real Lincoln is far more fascinating and inspiring than the manufactured American myth of the man. Like Poitier's book, this one provides insights into what is possible to achieve and, far more importantly, what it means to live life as a man who is true to his own vision, come hell or high water. Interestingly, in Lincoln's case it was the hellfire of a bullet, whereas for Poitier it was a near-death experience with high water.

**If you had a personal genie and she gave you one wish, what would you wish for?
Or, if I gave you a magic wand, what would you use it for?**

If I could have one wish granted, it would be to have all of my future wishes granted on a reversible (if unintended consequences ensued) basis. But seriously...it would be to see President-elect Obama lead the world, by astute understanding and management of long-range American foreign affairs interests, out of the political and economic bankruptcy created by the current American Administration and into a new era of relative peace and stability.

Complete the following, I am happy when.....

I am happ(iest) when surrounded by a few very close friends, discussing world affairs, telling jokes, enjoying the warmth of each other's company and generally having a good laugh while stretching our minds.

About the Interviewer Avil Beckford

Avil Beckford a writer, researcher and analyst is the author of *Tales of People Who Get It* and its companion workbook *Journey to Getting It*.

For more ideas, and if you love stories, read the responses of the 34 people profiled in *Tales of People Who Get It* <http://stores.lulu.com/store.php?fAcctID=670937>.

Be sure to check out Avil Beckford's website at <http://www.ambeck.com>

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