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A business dedicated to changing people's minds

Lindsey Agness started out in local government, but is now a successful business coach using NLP. **Bonnie Yuill** reports on how she built her business – and reveals her tips for success.

Author and MD of The Change Corporation, **Lindsey Agness**, sums up her success by saying she “does whatever it takes”.

Lindsey's neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) techniques are transforming businesses across the UK, Europe and beyond.

The Kent-based businesswoman started her business in 2005 at the age of 46 and is proud to report that turnover has gone up every year – this year is the best ever, up by about 20%.

“NLP helps me because I have a different mindset from a lot of business owners – I'm not buying into all this doom and gloom,” she says.

“In fact, the NLP business has been much busier recently. There are a lot of people buying my book because they're wondering what to do next and I have still found that the phone has been ringing.”

Lindsey believes that the technique gives added value because it works well and it works quickly.

Valuing communication

“It really does value language and communication and putting things out in the right way. It's very easy for an organisation to start talking about what people shouldn't do and what's wrong.

“If you say to somebody, 'Don't think

about a blue elephant,' they have to think about the blue elephant in order not to think about it! NLP is partly about focusing people on what they need to do differently as opposed to what they've done wrong.”

Lindsey began her career in local government and was running all the support services in a social services department in outer London when she was poached by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC). Working there as a change management consultant, corporate trainer and coach for 11 years, she became focused on what she calls “the people side of change”.

“When I was at PWC I was in a situation where I was having to work at quite senior levels with clients and always seemed to be walking into rooms full of dark-suited men and having to present or influence a meeting! It was always pretty tough going, although I'm a pretty outgoing person.”

Fortunately, PWC sent her on an NLP course – something she'd never heard of before but which was intended to help her communication skills. She was hooked.

Although she loved her job, she decided she wanted to pursue the possibilities of NLP. “The opportunities within PWC were pretty limited at the time – PWC is big corporate, very low risk, and so I started building a vision for

myself of how I could use NLP both in business and with individuals.”

She had a trial run, leaving PWC to work as a director in a friend's NLP training firm, but soon discovered that it was really her friend's vision, not hers.

So she went back to PWC for a further three-and-a-half years – time enough to build her business at weekends and during the holidays. When she finally left and went full-time on her own, her confidence was high and she had the opportunity to experiment with a few things, which eased the transition.

Having absorbed the PWC culture for 11 years, quality was second nature when it came to setting up The Change Corporation. Although she is the first to admit that she probably spent more than was really necessary on her start-up costs, she believes an excellent brand image was crucial at the beginning.

However, the economic downturn, coupled with a lease for an old office building in Sandwich with some repairing conditions on it, meant that Lindsey wisely chose to downsize over the short term and gave up the three-year lease when it came up for renewal last September. Instead she has chosen to decant to a home-office.

“We probably had a lot more space than we needed but I had this idea that if we had an office I could do some coaching on site – I could have client

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meetings, I could even run some small training programmes on site and so I kind of had quite big ideas!

Building a team

"But to be honest in the four years the business has been going, I was hardly there to actually use it. Particularly with the corporate business, what I discovered was that clients like you to go to them – they very rarely will come out to you."

For the past six months she has been crafting a team of associates – other practitioners she hires in as the need arises. "The associates are very well known to me and that was really important because I wanted people that I knew and trusted because I was literally letting them loose on my clients."

Marketing and PR have proved more tricky, however. "That's been more on recommendation and I must admit I had a couple of goes at that. This is my second marketing person because the first one was not providing me with what I wanted and it's also my second PR person as well."

Lindsey has had to make some tough decisions. "My last PR person was a client, then a friend and I asked her to do the PR for me. It wasn't working out and at the end of the day as a business owner I've just got to put the business first – I can't afford to spend money on anything that is not getting me a result. So I had a very difficult conversation with her and very quickly."

But Lindsey is well aware of the initial problems faced by a start-up.

"As a small business I didn't really have the funding to start paying an agency or to start advertising for staff, so I think it's a more pragmatic approach in the beginning – you tend to look in the pool of people you know and see if there's somebody in there that appears to have the skills you need."

However, she recommends bringing in experts as soon as you can afford it, because it gets to the point when you just can't do it all by yourself.

"Now the business is doing well and I can actually bring a couple of people in, they only actually work on a retainer for me, but that gives me flexibility. I use them when I need them. I've probably spent two years faffing around reading marketing magazines, going on these webinars and collecting a lot of stuff in my head but then not being able to translate it into practical action because I haven't got the skill. It's such a relief now, having experts on board that can help me do that because it's a more economical use of my time."

Lindsey financed the business herself, mainly from her savings. "There was no redundancy package – at PWC, every time they made people redundant, I was one of the few hoping it might be me, but it never was!

"I had just gone through a divorce and we'd sold a property so I did have a little bit of money in the bank but I didn't particularly want to use it for the business – though I did use some of it in the beginning to help get things like the website and the leaflets and all that side of things set up."

She chose her website designer in the same way she went on to choose an agent to get her first book published – by going with what was already producing results for someone she knew.

Creating the right image

"I knew somebody who had a very successful business which was similar to what I wanted to do and I liked their

website, so basically I employed their guys. I spent £5,000 on that first website, which was a huge investment, but I wanted to have something in the marketplace that said The Change Corporation is a high-quality product."

Her book, *Change Your Life with NLP*, came about when she was housebound with a deep-vein thrombosis in summer 2006. She'd had a book in the back of her mind for a while and she drafted the whole book while she was laid up. She finds that the book is bringing in a lot of business rather than being a money spinner in itself.

Lindsey's next step is to launch a new NLP programme in September called *Age with Attitude*, "designed for mid-life women who are feeling like it's the beginning of the end – we want to change the mindset to it being the beginning of something very different." recommends one-to-one coaching for the MD.

This has worked well with many firms including a small design business she has dealt with recently in Tonbridge, where she still has an ongoing business relationship with the MD. Her team of associates will also go out and support small businesses.

"If it's very small then often the MD is so much the figurehead of the organisation that you have to start there, otherwise it's very difficult to get change lower down, particularly if they're the business-owner as well. You've really got to have them on board.

"Certainly with the design company in Tonbridge, I'd been coaching the MD and he said, 'OK, now I'm ready to take these ideas out to my staff group' and the staff group was about 10 people, so we organised a day to do that and I've continued supporting him afterwards to make sure those changes were implemented.

"Lots of ideas came out of the day, including one big change that the staff came up with: an idea to streamline the way work was booked into the busy design studio and how it was allocated



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to designers. It was very much bottom up and was implemented."

Staff collaboration – encouraging the boss to listen.

"I spend quite a lot of my time helping the managers of large organisations build some real collaboration with the staff, rather than just saying, 'This is the way it's going to be', because in my experience that can be a quite high risk strategy!

"I think one of the good things about leaders of small businesses, however, is that they do tend to be quite visionary and often quite charismatic and quite extrovert – and that is very helpful in a change programme.

"Often having someone at the top like that with a good vision that staff can buy into means staff will support them. I think sometimes my job is more to help them understand that they do need to listen – if staff come back and they want to make a tweak here or a tweak there, often they've got something very useful to contribute."

Affect a core group – staff curiosity is the catalyst.

"It's much more likely for the change to stick and to be sustained in an organisation if staff are actually asking to be involved rather than you telling them what to do.

"If you can get staff curious by actually seeing that some things are changing around them, then the ideal is for staff to come and to want to be involved in projects.

"At the end of the day you're never going to get 100% of people won round but if you can get a core group starting to achieve results then it's surprising what impact that can have on the people around them.

"Often it's about making sure people have got successes, quick wins, and that those are communicated and people know what's happening – those things are very important."

Marketing and sales – rapport-building.

"NLP strategies for marketing and sales include rapport-building for long-term relationships," Lindsey explains.

"It uses values to find out what's important to a client, eye patterns and communication styles to discover what the client is thinking and to match their style."

What is NLP? – "Creating a pull to engage."

The Change Corporation website explains that neuro-linguistic programming "focuses on creating a pull to engage, as opposed to a push to try and deliver. Unlike more traditional training courses, where you are often taught a method or procedure to follow, NLP examines fundamental thought patterns, behaviours and language, which greatly enhance our ability to improve our performance.

"NLP is quite simply learning about how what we think, say and do affects our results."

Why does NLP work? "It's very results-focused."

"As a change consultant you can imagine all the tools and techniques and models I have – I've got models coming out of my ears," says Lindsey.

"But one of the things with NLP that I really liked was that it's very results-focused, so it's very much about what's your outcome and asking that question right from the beginning and making sure you know how the outcome is going to be measured.

"I can go in and advise them on a level of communication and language, on goals and results and how to measure those. Also, I can offer coaching if someone needs some help to get rid of any limiting beliefs or fears they might have about what's going on.

"I think one of the things it helps me challenge is where organisations are not taking responsibility. I get that day-in, day-out – they want something to

change but actually they're not prepared to do anything really different.

"Part of my job is to hold up a mirror to them and help them understand that's not going to help them get to where they want to be." ❖

Infobank

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Lindsey's top tips

DO

- ✓ Bring in the people that know how to do the work when the cashflow allows.
- ✓ Whatever it takes to succeed – not all business owners are prepared to do that.
- ✓ Take the time to focus on the important details as well as the bigger picture.
- ✓ Keep on top of cashflow. "As a small business-owner you really have to be on top of projected turnover and what invoices should be paid this week. I find that I need to be at that level of detail to make sure the business is growing in the way I want it to grow."
- ✓ Consider writing a book – it may not make you a fortune but it can be a lucrative marketing tool for your business.

DON'T

- ✗ Spend money on things that aren't going to deliver and add value – and measurable value – back into the business.
- ✗ Lose money on overheads – you have to make every penny count.

REMEMBER



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"Whether you're a small, medium or large organisation, if you want to create change then you really have to create the burning platform (a clear vision) for people, whether you've got one person in your team or 40,000 of them. People need to understand why you're doing what you're doing and they need to be able to relate to it in some way."



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How involving your staff can boost success

Do what works – measure everything you do.

"If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got! It's surprising how many people will keep putting adverts into the *Yellow Pages* year after year without really having any measurement of whether they're adding any value or not, so we measure everything we do.

"Last year I did some radio advertising, which I was terribly excited about and we didn't even get one phone call so I'm never going to do that again. You have to keep yourself fresh."

Advice from a business coach

Change is part of the day job – not just a one-off.

"Often the leaders have got ideas and actually they're not really quite sure how to make those things stick in the organisation," says Lindsey.

"It's a bit like, 'We've got this problem, Lindsey – can you come in and work with our team to start getting some momentum going!' What tends to happen on a lot of change programmes is people are so focused on the day job, they see

change as something outside of that, so I suppose part of my role is to help them understand that actually as the manager that's part of the day job!

"I always work on the basis that I'm not going to do it for them – I'll set it up and facilitate but actually the benefit of them paying for me is that I can transfer those skills into the organisation."

Get people motivated – starting at the top.

As smaller businesses usually don't have the funding to bring on someone like Lindsey on a regular basis, she often