

Chapter 1

At the edge

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“A Good City is home to an above average number of entrepreneurs.”
Bishop of Newcastle’s Good City hearings, 2004

“If we receive funding next time, we’ll know that our business support project has been a success.”

Anonymous business advisor

“Nobody in their right mind could call me a Marxist,” said Sir Richard O’Brien, chair of the Church of England committee that produced the ground-breaking *Faith in the City* report in 1985. He was responding to anonymous government briefings warning that the report was going to be wildly and unfeasibly leftist. As it was, *Faith in the City* happened to coincide with another round of urban riots, including the destructive disturbance at Broadwater Farm, which served to underline the urgent need for radical solutions.

Faith in the City was not the first report to identify the need for business support for local entrepreneurs in places in need of regeneration, but it was the first to get the idea seriously onto the policy-making map. It made sense to all sides of the political divide, but it also came with it a radical assumption that the regeneration industry had not so far grasped: that decaying neighbourhoods did, in fact, have a rather important resource at their disposal – local people and their drive and imagination.

The Church report came three years before the government’s Action for Cities, the apotheosis of the idea that regeneration was about fabric not people – the fantasy that once a place like Salford Quays or the Isle of Dogs *looked* better, the job of regeneration was done. But the idea of business support was also by then firmly in place.

I was first involved in regeneration in the East Midlands at that time, and the grant money available was overwhelmingly about rebuilding. It was true that the rebuilding was aimed partly at underpinning the efforts of business people, to start up and employ people. It was for managed workspace, or small industrial units, in areas of high unemployment.

In its own terms, this was a successful policy. The units were built and they were used. The trouble was that they were rarely used by anyone who actually lived there. Small businesses were starting up, and they were employing people, but mainly these were people from somewhere else who were gleeful at the prospect of cheap business accommodation.

In the following decade, with the introduction of Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) grants, there was an attempt to knit together the budgets for very different but equally vital

funding streams. It was then possible to find funding for salaries, where appropriate, as well as buildings. The business support infrastructure was also gearing up. But there was an inherent weakness to SRB, which has still not been addressed by subsequent area regeneration programmes: they were driven by targets set by outside funders rather than reflecting the local context and local success criteria..

The difficulty, then and now, is that these funded, area-based programmes found themselves 'buying outputs' rather than delivering appropriate support. There is, in practice, a real tension between meeting targets and good practice in supporting new businesses starting-up, whether they are profit-making or social enterprises. This tension results in an uneasy reciprocal relationship, whereby funders cascade the money down the food chain of regeneration agencies, but they require outputs in return for the help they provide. There is often a major difference between targets and outputs and what you originally wanted to do with your organisation because it was necessary.

This tension is exacerbated by the problems of centralisation and nervousness about fraud. Governments have now introduced so many measures to stop fraud that the pressure on regeneration officials is always to look first at the financial implications of any support. They therefore tend to be risk averse and then to have considerable sums left unspent at end of the programme. To reach their required targets, they then need to go out and find anyone who is likely to fulfil them – who may not be, and in fact are usually not, the people who would most benefit.

Bottom up regeneration, that really makes a difference, is impossible if the controlling strategy comes from distant funders requiring abstract outputs. Over the years of running BizFizz, we have found many brilliant and committed business support professionals. But they are hamstrung by being driven by targets that are sometimes appropriate to their work, but more usually get frustratingly in the way. They need to cling onto clients when it may not be in their interests. They need to prevent those clients seeking advice elsewhere, even when they need it – because that would lose the valuable outputs to which the money is attached. BizFizz is a business coaching programme that avoids that fatal pitfall.

I first came across BizFizz when I was working in Birmingham. The Small Business Service had just agreed to fund four BizFizz pilot areas, via the Phoenix Fund. I was at the time working for a social enterprise development agency and I was finding it frustrating. Most of the people who wanted business support did not actually want to set up social enterprises. But we were funded only to help them do that, so all I could do was to point these entrepreneurs in other directions.

So coming across BizFizz was a revelation to me. It was a process that gave both the advisors and their clients the freedom to be what they actually wanted to be. It was not about imposing a structure on people that never quite managed to fit them. Entrepreneurs would decide how to run their new business, whether it was going to be a social enterprise or not. At least they had the choice.

Having discovered the programme, it was only a matter of weeks later that a job came up at the Civic Trust which gave me the opportunity to work on BizFizz more directly. That was, for me, the beginning of an extraordinary journey to see what is really going on under the radar of regenerating neighbourhoods.

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First and foremost, the inspiration behind BizFizz was E. F. Schumacher's book *Small is Beautiful*. There is no direct parallel to BizFizz anywhere in its pages, but the spirit of economics "as if people mattered", as he put it, is at the heart of the idea. Both are assertions that, if you get the small things right, then big things happen as a result.

That was the starting point. From Schumacher's approach to economics, a number of questions followed about conventional regeneration. Why, for example, are so few entrepreneurs coming forward in regenerating neighbourhoods, given the considerable amount of business support that is supposed to be available? After working for four years in Birmingham city centre, I knew that the percentage of small business start-ups was tiny compared to those emerging in more affluent suburbs just a few miles away.

There was another question too. Given that imbalance, is there really no entrepreneurial spirit or behaviour in these rundown communities? Because that was often what was inferred by policy-makers. Spending any time there should be enough to convince anyone this is not the case. Far from it, there is a great deal going on, some of it in the shadow economy – some of it actually criminal – but it is certainly entrepreneurial and takes considerable effort.

Then we had to ask: is there anyone out there who has found a way to tap into that energy and use it to regenerate communities?

The answer was yes. There were organisations like Five Lamps in Yorkshire, funded by Business Link to do outreach work in regenerating communities and advising people how to start business. There were others like the Prince's Trust which was pioneering the idea of using a 'panel' to support business start-ups. We also looked abroad and found innovative work in the USA, India and Australia.

Back in the UK, Mikyla Robinson and Bernie Ward – respectively working at the Civic Trust and the New Economics Foundation – had discussed these conundrums and were looking for some kind of project that knitted some of the ideas together. Both their organisations were dedicated to looking at the kind of assets that economists tend to ignore when they evaluate regenerating neighbourhoods. These are, after all, communities that may not have much capital, but they have people and ideas and also a considerable combined spending power.

The Civic Trust had, and still has, a regeneration unit. The organisation as a whole dates back to 1958, and – even back then – the creeping realisation that physical regeneration can never work by itself without reference to the people who live there. Over and over again, we have some of the best urban architecture that money can buy, but because nothing is done to address or listen to the dreams and desires of the people who live there, the same levels of deprivation emerge again shortly afterwards. The height of this folly came with the slum clearances of the 1960s which simply decanted people to outlying estates and towers, breaking up what social networks of support existed before.

The Civic Trust was launched to start with to support local amenity societies, and through this emerged a national policy that set out programmes of support for the people who lived in these regenerating neighbourhoods. One forerunner of BizFizz at the Civic Trust was a programme called Winning Partnerships, helping residents to learn how to develop effective partnerships with the public and private sector. We had a strong belief at this stage that networks of people were the key to regeneration programmes. BizFizz was a way of delivering business support locally that recognised this.

The New Economics Foundation (nef) was a younger organisation, dating back to the critique of economics that emerged out of The Other Economic Summits (TOES) in 1984 and 1985. It is central to nef's way of doing things that social capital is at least as important as economic capital when it comes to regenerating a neighbourhood. Also that places where these two kinds of asset intersect – the way the money flows around a local economy – can provide clues about hidden assets that impoverished neighbourhoods possess. Helping communities measure these money flows was a forerunner project that Bernie Ward organised at nef before moving onto BizFizz.

She and Mikyla led the initial work. It was Bernie's idea to call the central organising tool of BizFizz 'business coaches'. The BizFizz title itself was suggested by Perry Walker, head of nef's Centre for Participation, at a brainstorm held at the Civic Trust in 2001. The Phoenix Fund agreed to the pilots and those involved found themselves learning a great

deal about coaching methodology, and why it looked the best way of delivering any sort of advice.

By then, BizFizz was based on a critique of conventional regeneration that recognised that it:

- Focused on investment in things and not in people. Capital programmes left a legacy of new buildings and facilities but still no reductions in underlying deprivation.
- Frequently helped set up community groups, drawing on some form of central funding, but overlooked the role of individual entrepreneurship as a driver for regeneration.
- Geared support towards the achievement of central aims of commercial growth rather than on the needs of aspiring entrepreneurs.
- Tended to undermine the value of support being given by setting inappropriate targets for support programmes.

In response, Bizfizz was developed as a programme that could operate within defined communities, usually of around 8,000 to 15,000 people. It was vital that the local community, in some form or other, would have to identify the opportunity offered by Bizfizz as an approach and to organise itself to host the programme. That local organisation would include:

- A local management group (LMG), a small team which was to be responsible for helping to address any strategic or institutional barriers identified through the coach's work with clients – leaving the coach free to focus on clients and not get involved in committees. The LMG was to include a local resident, representatives of local agencies, the local authority and other partners, and members of the local business community. The coach was to keep the LMG informed of the real issues facing small businesses, helping them to deal with some of the strategic issues.
- A local panel which would be a much larger body (30 - 40 people), including , , entrepreneurs, residents, professionals and anyone else who the coach might think would add value. They were to be volunteers who would meet every month or two to act as a problem-solving panel for individual business cases brought to them by the coach. Through their contacts, their local knowledge, and their links in the community, they would begin to find ways that individual entrepreneurs could overcome barriers and integrate their businesses.

The idea was that Bizfizz coaches, who would be entrepreneurs themselves, would be at the heart of that community, making contact with local groups and representatives, helping to put people in contact with each other, letting potential entrepreneurs know that they were

there if needed, and then being available to meet them at times, places, frequencies and circumstances suitable to the clients.

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The time had come to launch the programme. We had attracted applications to be pilot areas from up to 25 different places. We sent a small team out to visit them, and prepared a SWOT analysis, reflecting details included in the applications as the basis for that conversation. Even this turned out to be controversial. On more than one occasion, we were shouted at by residents who regarded our SWOT analysis as deeply insulting.

By the end of this process, we were prepared to launch in four areas. They included Horden and Easington in Durham, a former coal mining area on the coast, and Tuxford in north Nottinghamshire, a small market town and the few villages around it. We chose another market town, Thetford in Norfolk, and the former shipbuilding town of Jarrow. We also began interviewing our panel members.

Our initial thinking was that we wanted a panel to provide solutions to the problems entrepreneurs would have, and a perfect example of how this was supposed to work came up almost immediately in Tuxford. We were helping a local ceramics business, which made replica pots for museums. But they were based outside Tuxford and wanted a shop on the high street so they could showcase other products. A quick chat with the local estate agent ascertained immediately that there was no property available. We brought the problem up at the very first panel meeting.

There was a local farmer at the meeting, who said he had a barn right in the middle of Tuxford, which he used to store rusty machinery. The BizFizz coach Fred Foreshaw then worked with the farmer to help him arrange to make the building useable, and brokered an arrangement so the company could use it.

I thought that was a beautifully elegant example of how the panel should work. The farmer had no direct reason for being on the panel other than a passion for Tuxford, and wanted to do something to help. He wasn't part of the great and the good. It wasn't his job and he represented no voluntary organisation. He simply agreed to give two hours of his time to the panel, and as a result, a small but significant change happened. The resources of the town were also better used.

The panels quickly became a central component for a whole new way of organising regeneration. BizFizz was beginning to emerge as an idea with some radical propositions at its heart, which upset some accepted notions. For example:

Just providing advice undermines potential entrepreneurs

Conventional business advice services have a central problem, which is that – because they only have recourse to certain solutions – they are often hamstrung by their official agenda. Business Link, for example, can suggest that a client goes on a training course, and that might be very useful for some people. But there are many reasons why that might not be appropriate for everyone. The needs of aspiring entrepreneurs can be so diverse, so it is vital that that we did not simply say: “Well, thanks for telling me that. Now, what we normally recommend to people starting out in business is ...” One of the benefits of coaching – is that the client/coach relationship is led by the client, wherever they happen to need to go.” BizFizz coaches have come to talk more recently about how they ‘hold the client’s agenda’, just as the panels hold a BizFizz agenda in the local community. The coaching process is designed to identify and draw out where the entrepreneur is strong, and what they are passionate about.

Funding targets support the funder at the expense of their effect on the ground

Business support that is driven by fulfilling targets is focussed on fulfilling those targets, rather than meeting the individual needs of clients – whatever they happen to be. These targets are embedded in the payment system for New Deal for Self-Employment, for example, which protects the benefits of new entrepreneurs for six months, takes any other earnings and gives them back to you the day you come off benefits. Payment for the agency also comes when the business starts. There is enormous pressure, because of this, on client and advisor, to launch a new business whether it is appropriate or sustainable or not.

Being an entrepreneur is not about ploughing a lonely furrow

All our evidence suggests that social networks, and embedding entrepreneurs in them, leads to much wider and more successful entrepreneurial activity. We have become used to the idea of entrepreneurs as heroic individualists, when actually most successful entrepreneurs are primarily brilliant networkers: the difference between success and failure is probably the networks of local people who can help them. Recent research in the east of England also confirms that successful single parents, bringing up children and holding down a job, manage it because they are supported by very good networks. BizFizz was therefore designed around a panel that provided access to local networks. The panel members also provide a temporary team around the entrepreneur, filling gaps in their skills or knowledge. At the beginning,

coaches would be in the middle of this network, but would hopefully become increasingly peripheral to them as they developed.

Promotion and marketing distort the regeneration process

We agreed at the outset that coaches would work without doing the kind of promotion that is considered ubiquitous in business advice programmes. Coaches would have to find canny ways of getting word of mouth going – and one route might be to get panel members to refer people they knew. But if networks make the difference between success and failure, then reaching over the heads of people's networks to persuade people that they wanted to set up a business – and that they also badly needed advice – was counter-productive. The process of spreading the word would have to support the networks that were so badly needed.

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The first hurdles to cross were about convincing funders that these heresies were worth risking in practice. We insisted to our funders, the Phoenix Fund and Small Business Service, that we would accept no targets, and were delighted when they agreed almost immediately – influenced at the time by the Policy Action Team report (PAT 17) from the Social Exclusion Unit that outcomes were more important than targets.

It has sometimes been more difficult to persuade some of the coaches, some of whom found that it was a struggle to start with if they had no set numerical goals. But, two years into the job, I believe they vowed not to go anywhere a target again.

We found we were testing some of our propositions almost instinctively. There was no conventional job description for a business coach, for example, because there was no such thing – in regeneration at least. There was also the problem of how we were going to train them. They were far more experienced about business advice than we were, so we could hardly tell them how to do the job in the usual way. We hoped instead we could encourage them to think about the task ahead in new ways, and looked around for an organisation that might help us.

We found the solution in a very unexpected place: relationship guidance. Relate North East was a regional branch of the national service for relationship guidance counselling, and they had begun to work training business advisors with counselling skills. We hired them to help us and they ran a coaching training session in Nottingham. Most of what we all learned there was the theoretical aspects of being Relate counsellors.

Looking back, the Nottingham training was enormous fun. We looked at transactional analysis, as well as at bereavement and other counselling skills – listening, summarising and reflecting. But more importantly, there was something about the power of self-reflexion that people in their normal work rarely have the opportunity to do – we are not normally encouraged to do it at work. Once you start that process, it can be very powerful. It made us, I believe, constantly curious about clients. I also think it encouraged us to take the necessary risks that made BizFizz such a success.

We were also meeting together for the first time, staying in an almost empty Nottingham hotel. On the second night, we went out to the Old Trip to Jerusalem pub, the inn where the crusaders set out to Palestine in 1190. In the minibus taxi on the way back, the driver said: “You don’t want to stay there – that hotel’s been closed for six months after one of the guests died of Legionnaires Disease.”

It is possible to imagine a whole range of significant icebreakers, but there is nothing as good as shared terror. When we got back to the hotel, we realised it was in fact very strange – and it closed permanently a few months later.

Over that weekend, we found we had employed four extraordinary people as coaches. There was the Horden coach, Elliott Patterson, who had been in training development. There was Tuxford’s Fred Foreshaw, a former consultant engineer. For Thetford, we chose Alison Ball, who had worked for Business Link and had worked in a print co-op. In Jarrow, we chose Keith Jeffrey, who had been working for the National Glass Museum in the north east.

They were all interesting, dynamic self-starters, who would probably describe themselves as mavericks. They certainly gave us a hard time by pushing at the boundaries of what we were hoping to achieve, but they were as curious as we were about what was possible. They were all four really passionate about business support and all keen to have the freedom to do things in new ways. They did not, for example, set out immediately in the same direction. I know Fred spent much of first few months working with existing businesses, while Keith concentrated on younger people who had never set up in business before.

Then we ran into the first operational difficulties. The first panel meetings learned a great deal, but the discussion was very theoretical to start with. Our intention was that there should be at least 30 people, and these should be third business advisors, a third from the local great and good, and a third entrepreneurs and residents. Sure enough, at the first panel meeting in Jarrow, six business advisors turned up.

The first client in front of the panel was a 19-year-old who wanted to set up an IT networking business, and who was bringing a marketing question. The business advisors

started immediately, not with an answer to his question, but with conventional advisor questions – how old is he? Has he got enough cashflow? Can we see a marketing strategy? As the discussion continued, they got increasingly exasperated, because they were not getting their questions answered, any more than he was. Then one member of the panel stood ostentatiously in the middle of the room, and said that BizFizz should not be dealing with this client at all. “*We deal with 19-year-olds,*” he said, referring to his own business advice service.

This convinced us of one lesson at least. We could only have one business advisor on the panels, unless they were really passionate about both BizFizz and the area. We uninvited them, and explained the main difference. They were driven by targets; we were not. They were seeking information for themselves to reinforce their own models of how a business should be run – we wanted information to help a client inform his own learning about his business.

This quickly emerged as a bigger divide than we had imagined. Elliott was contacted by a man who had been convinced to start a painting and decorating business, and had been sent by conventional business advisors on a test trading course for three months. This was strange to start with: you can do a business plan for that kind of business in a day – what painters and decorators need is to get out and find a market. Given this, he was finding the course soul-destroying.

But when Elliott eventually asked the trainee painter and decorator what he was passionate about it, he said it wasn't decorating at all. He was doing that in order to get £1,000 so that he could get a licence to be a hang-gliding instructor. Elliott's next question was “If I can find £ 1000.00 for you, what would you do?”. “Set up a hand gliding school”, was his answer. Brilliant! Elliott's question gave the man an opportunity to forget his immediate concerns (his reality) and step in to the future, and then share for the first time his true passion.

That one story, so early in the whole programme, demonstrated to us the power of coaching, and why target-driven business advice means that the motivation comes from the advisor and not the entrepreneur. It was clear that we needed to investigate the mechanics and the possibilities of coaching further, and we did so.

Another founding principle of BizFizz was becoming clearer too: energy and passion made things happen, and the energy from people finding ways of doing what they were passionate about was infectious.

A little later, at another panel meeting in Jarrow, I met someone from the Inland Revenue, and I asked her why she came. She said the main reason was that she came from

Jarrow herself, and she enormously enjoyed spending two hours on a Friday evening every so often helping people from there. It was, in a way, passion about a place that was motivating her, and these things are infectious too, in a way that meeting targets are not. Passion was what drew together the entrepreneurs and the panel members, and gave them something in common.

That passion provided a commitment to really get to the bottom of why clients were there. The hang-gliding story was repeated in so many other ways, as we discovered increasingly that what people really needed was not something that fit easily onto a list of official outputs.

One client with plans for a mobile cleaning business actually needed coaching for himself and his wife to help them agree if this was a sensible move from the family's perspective. Another was visiting twice a week with small enquiries before feeling comfortable enough to discuss his large debts and the fact that his business was a big factor in restoring his self-esteem. Each of them required a very different approach to be taken, and we had adopted a system that provided the flexibility to do this.

As the new businesses moved through their various stages of development, coaches could help where they were needed to help them, whether that was market research, business planning, cash flow forecasting, marketing plans, risk analysis, seeking finance, rules and regulations, HR planning, and so on. But with BizFizz, the relationship can and does develop in unexpected directions, and coaches find themselves helping in quite curious ways:

- Manning the client's mobile food wagon for a couple of hours while the client meets with a possible corporate customer.
- Meeting builders at a client's shop premises, enabling them to do quotes, while the client manned his market stall.
- Driving a finance application around to get appropriate signatures in order to meet a tight deadline.
- Acting as an intermediary between a shopkeeper and a recalcitrant landlord.
- Negotiating deferred terms on a new business premises.
- Taking an aspiring retailer around the nearby shopping centre to get the feel for what the competition was like.

Conventional business advisors might say that none of these was their job, but in all those cases, that small piece of practical help made a fundamental difference to that entrepreneur's future.

By the time we reached the second phase, we were working with a much more defined model. In 2004, the programme was extended to cover eight more communities: Ocean Estate (east London), Bowthorpe (Norwich), Winsford (Cheshire), Alnwick (Northumberland), Belgrave (Leicester), Toxteth (Liverpool), Stanley Green Corridor (Co Durham), and Clowne (North Derbyshire). This second phase also received some support from the Phoenix Fund, but was mainly financed by local sources of funding. In fact, Bizfizz programmes are now being commissioned in various communities around the country, using a variety of local funding sources.

Each of the Bizfizz communities is very different in their geography, culture, existing commerce, levels of wealth and deprivation, and the types of other organisations already working within the area. So each of the programmes reflects the development context it sits in and the outcomes of each programme are determined by local context. Towards the end of the pilot phase I heard a number of policy makers suggest some BizFizz pilots had failed as other pilots had a greater number of business start ups over the pilot lifetime. I believe that without understanding local context, using “outputs” as a comparator to determine success or failure was pretty meaningless. In response to what we began to believe was common thinking across regeneration and business support practitioners we invited members of the local management groups of second phase programmes to name their local success criteria. In Clowne, the LMG felt that if half the shops on the high street were run by local entrepreneurs the programme would be successful. In Winsford, the LMG wanted to measure the impact of the programme in neighbourhoods that according to the local social services were “undergoing family stress”. Also Gary, the LMG chair said, that he would know the programme worked if some walked up to him in the street and told him that BizFizz had changed his life. This happened eighteen months into the programme.

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The real battle with BizFizz has been around redefining the concept of entrepreneur.

When we first did a presentation about entrepreneurship and passion, we found that people understood what we were trying to say about the central importance of passion very quickly. But the work ‘entrepreneur’ continued to bug people. People in the voluntary sector preferred the word ‘enterprise’. Others assumed you were talking about the owner of a national or multinational business. We say that it isn’t a person or a thing; it’s an attitude.

Most surveys confirm that about 20 to 22 per cent of the adult population have entrepreneurial attitudes. They are interested in selling things or making things happen. The truth is that this sense is not about a few individuals, or confined to middle class suburbs: you will find entrepreneurial activity everywhere – including the informal economy. Once people realise they are not expected to behave like Alan Sugar – in fact they may get a great deal further if they don't – then they can start doing something.

I believe that coaching methodology is the best way to deliver business support to entrepreneurs resident in the communities we work with. Over the last twenty years business support has been offered in the communities we wished to work in and we observed that economic decline in these communities had not been reversed and in many cases had got worse. There was no doubt that Business support agencies employed advisors who had knowledge and expertise; what we discovered and then challenged was how that advice was offered to entrepreneurs. There are accreditation awards for business advisors that test their competencies and institutions that form policy and develop standards for business advising and what became apparent was these institutions and awards concentrated on what the advisor knew not how the advisor offered the knowledge they had to a client.

I do not proscribe a particular methodology as coaches choose to work with methodologies that suit them. We offer to new coaches the over arching principles of coaching to inform their practice and to tease out the differences between coaching, advising, mentoring and counselling and then invite them to investigate and practice a coaching methodology of their choice.

At a conference in 2005 – Sue Stockdale (author of Kickstart your Motivation) told the story of a team of mixed experience arctic explorers. The slowest skier was placed at the front of the line, with the most experienced behind her. Heading through dangerous crevasses he shouted his instructions ahead to her. In frustration & anger she turned & asked him to stop yelling orders – but to tell her what he would be looking for if he were leading the line. She wanted to learn for herself. They then agreed that if he saw something she'd missed – he would shout 'STOP', and ask her questions that would enable her to see this potential danger for herself.

A great analogy for business coaching. It's not enough the business advisor just giving out instructions; they aren't even in the crevasse with you! Running a business requires fast learning for the entrepreneur – about themselves, their business, the market environment and everything that will impact on them as they get deeper into their chosen territory.

In this book we share our learning about the values and components of BizFizz, the relationships between funders and institutions, business support agencies and clients, coaches and entrepreneurs and offer stories that tell of resourceful and passionate people we met in communities labelled by others as “disadvantaged and deprived”. There is also in the book, an underlying discussion about power; who has it and who doesn’t and how this affects the delivery of business support in the communities we work in. We say that BizFizz is a client focused process, that any decision taken by a coach, panel members, institutions and the national team are informed by the question “does the client benefit?”

We believe that entrepreneurs find power within themselves and express this through their passion and energy to start and grow businesses; they are not empowered, rescued or created by anyone else. And yet common practice in advising is often the complete opposite of our belief. We have seen and heard advisors talking about motivating their clients, getting them to perform, I heard an advisor tell how it took him six months to convince a client to become a photographer “ I got him in the end” he said. This need of the advisor to put another notch on the bedpost tells us as much about the institution that employed him as it does about him and where and how power is used. An advising relationship can lead to dependency when an advisor “lends” their energy to a client so the client performs for and is motivated by the advisor. In this type of relationship an advisor is using their expertise to lead the client’s business development which denies the opportunity for a client to learn. When the advising relationship ends, which in the current climate of business support rationing, it does pretty quickly, the major driver of the business idea leaves, what the entrepreneur is left with is the knowledge of how another person would run their business. We believe that the entrepreneur has sole responsibility for the business, that it is their passion that drives it and they must have the opportunity to learn about their business and about themselves. Which is why in any stage of business development of growth we ask “who’s the entrepreneur?”

Interlude: Nostalgia Designs, Alnwick

“I’d been ill, and wanted to return to work but needed a flexible job. My husband designs wedding dresses – so we turned a 25-year hobby into a reality. We refurbished the shop and brought it into the 21st century. It’s been the right thing to do, and it’s well accepted in the locality. I’m happy, and everyone’s so excited when they come to the shop!

I called the local BizFizz coach, Mark, when I heard about him in an interior design shop – the owner is on the BizFizz panel. I’d been trawling business advisers and it was Mark’s approach that appealed – he’s natural, and he treated me seriously. Not all of the others did that. He believed I could do it and he offers practical help.

I tell everyone about Mark and BizFizz because it’s great. If something goes wrong, Mark looks at it in a different way. He looks at the downside as an opportunity.”

Joan Orr

Ends/5350 words