

More and more organisations are turning to coaching to help their black and minority ethnic staff overcome barriers of perception – both real and imagined

**By Sonya Welch-Moring**



# **CROSSING THE DIVIDE**

**A** growing number of forward-looking employers are using personal development coaching to encourage their black and minority ethnic (BME) staff to progress through the organisation, recognising that ethnic and cultural factors can slow down careers and prevent people from BME backgrounds moving into more senior and prominent positions.

Coaching can be very effective in helping BME people tackle obstacles to progression in the workplace – obstacles that may be real or imagined, and that may stem from within the organisation or within the employees themselves and their own self-belief systems.

Questioning and reframing help to uncover meaning and intent in order to support employees in challenging their perceived reality and asking themselves difficult questions. As coaches, we need to help the client untangle what the reality is. There may well be real issues of discrimination, personality clashes, problematic attitudes and behaviours, or simply a lack of fit between personal and organisational values. On the other hand, there may be much that is imagined.

When clients carry strong beliefs about their ethnicity, they are often holding on to feelings of not being good enough or not being accepted by the majority culture. Negative experiences in a work environment can reinforce this belief, making it hard to separate what is real from what is imagined. Working on surfacing and contextualising beliefs and feelings allows clients to look at their behaviour and adopt the skills and attitudes necessary to support them in progressing their career, as the following case studies demonstrate.

#### **CASE STUDY 1: Is my ethnicity holding me back from promotion?**

Naveen worked as a team leader in a social-work setting and was anxious about how she was

perceived by her work colleagues. She felt there was little chance to progress in the organisation, surmising that her colour and cultural background were holding her back. But was her belief founded in truth, or was she imagining a glass ceiling above her, perhaps as an unconscious strategy to avoid greater responsibility and promotion?

Such questions are important as self-sabotage is a common thread at work, whether it's an all-white or a multicultural environment. In contrast, people with high self-belief often find ways to move through barriers.

Unravelling the real barriers that prevent BME employees from progressing, be it low self-worth or workplace discrimination, can be highly challenging – but always rewarding.

The challenge for me as Naveen's coach was to create an environment in which difference and questions about perceptions of discrimination could be discussed, so that she could work out for

## Learning points

### **Top tips for coaching across BME boundaries:**

- Meet the difference head-on, even if you don't have the same background as the client.
- Be prepared to raise the agenda about difference without being asked. Use your intuition as a guide.
- Continually challenge your self-perceptions without guilt or blame, and with curiosity.
- Bottom-line it: don't be afraid to challenge clients on issues of race and ethnicity.
- Remember that not everyone from a BME background wants to talk about their difference – generally, however, they want it acknowledged.
- Be ready to ask powerful and challenging questions that test – but don't break – a client's belief system.
- Maintain the relationship with the client as one in which the "difference" can enter and thrive.

## Powerful questions you should ask:

- Looking around your organisation and others like it, are there any people from a BME background in a senior position?
- If you were in a senior role, how would you bring BME staff into senior positions?
- By thinking like this, how have you stopped yourself from progressing?
- What does that belief do for you and say about you?
- Are you prepared to stay where you are rather than challenge the system?

herself how much of her perception was real and what was imagined. It was important to acknowledge and support her perception, while exploring her belief system.

As a result of coaching, Naveen started seeking – and receiving – positive feedback from her colleagues and developing stronger working relationships with senior colleagues. She acknowledged that there were some senior managers from BME backgrounds in the organisation. Within a few months, Naveen became a member of a prominent professional committee and later gained promotion to assistant team manager in another local authority.

### **CASE STUDY 2: How do my colleagues really perceive me?**

Andrea was a middle manager who was very popular with her colleagues. Her opinions and views were often sought out both in the office and after work. But she was the only black manager in a team of almost exclusively white males, and was suspicious about why she might be popular.

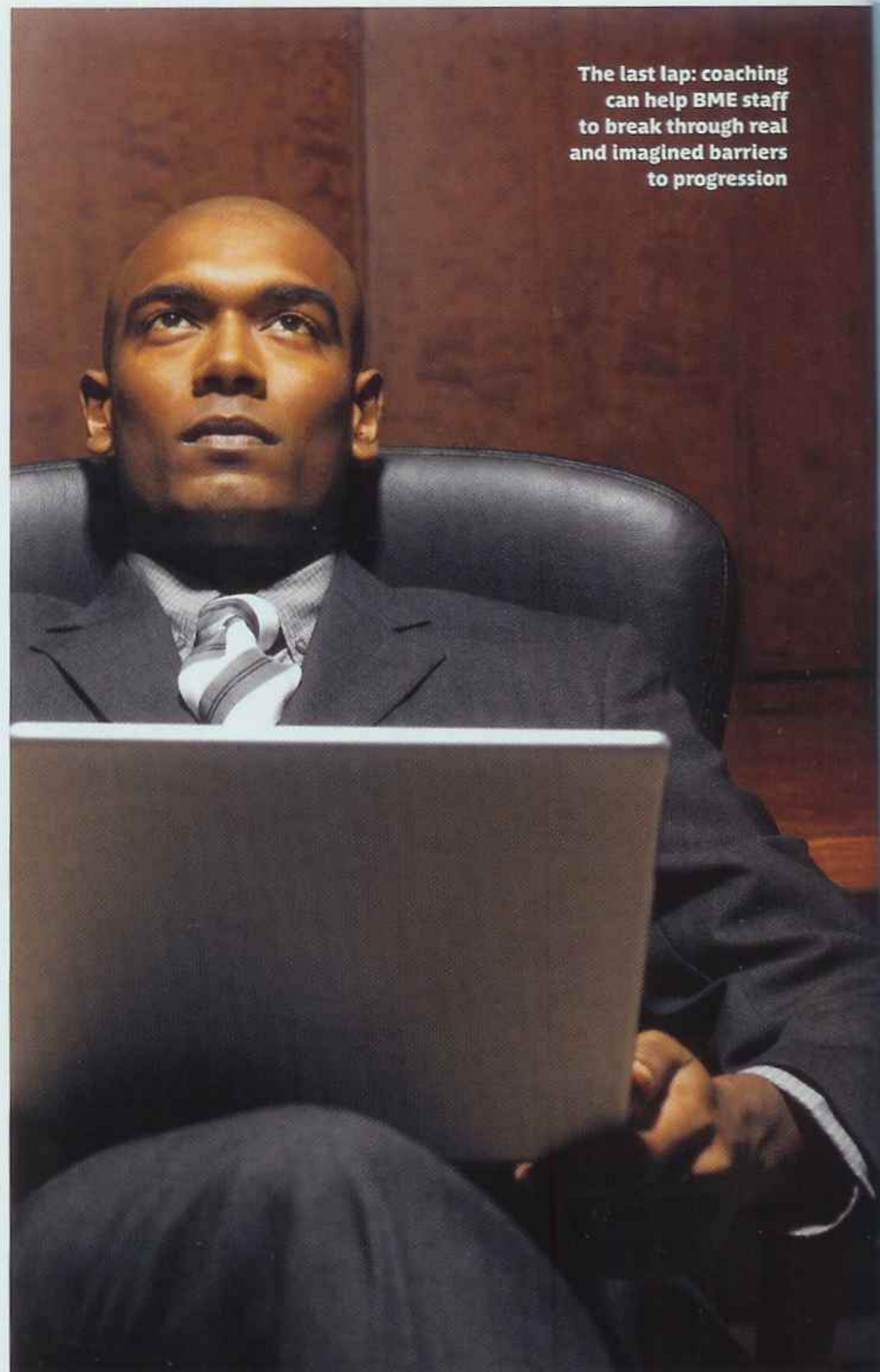
She was underestimating herself as she was lively, bright, fun to be with and good at her job. Coaching challenged her to think through why she was making negative assumptions about her colleagues' intentions.

Powerful questioning allowed Andrea to assess her professional qualities in a different way, recognise her personal power and see her racial and cultural background as only one factor in her success. Having acknowledged that her difference could be an asset, allowing opportunities for building relationships across racial and cultural backgrounds, she was able to move from inertia to action. She made a decision to talk again to her boss about developing her role into one with more responsibility.

### **CASE STUDY 3: Can my work colleagues understand me?**

Roy was a new manager in an IT department and was worried about his performance in meetings with senior managers, where his expertise on software would be required. It became clear that his concern was about his accent and whether he would be understood by his colleagues, especially when explaining technical information. He interpreted any failure to be a result of his cultural background and command of English. Coaching helped him to realise that the issue was about his presentation skills rather than his communication skills and ethnic background.

With some practical input, Roy developed a range of strategies to support his negotiating and influencing skills in meetings and other professional contexts. He realised that he was making assumptions about how colleagues would react to him, and this new awareness proved useful in helping him to change his behaviour.



The last lap: coaching can help BME staff to break through real and imagined barriers to progression

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## Michelle's story

Two years ago, I began working with Michelle, who had been teaching children with emotional and behavioural problems for 15 years. Michelle wanted to use coaching to help her realise her potential and move towards her dream of becoming a family therapist.

During our early sessions Michelle talked a lot about her "internal barriers" – the belief systems she held about herself that might be preventing her from reaching her dreams. She identified some of these as financial and others as relating to her background. Michelle was the only teacher in her service from a BME background and although she got on well with her colleagues she also sometimes felt isolated.

We worked on the self-limiting beliefs, helping Michelle to acknowledge her successes, which included two years working in a US school. Challenging her self-perception created an internal shift; she developed more confidence and began to feel less isolated as she explored some of the dynamics of her work environment. The greatest challenge came when Michelle's two-year contract ended. She said that, had it not been for coaching, she would not have had the courage to apply to do a full-time MSc in family therapy.

However, as Michelle started her MSc, doubts re-emerged. Once again she was the only person from a BME background, surrounded by other people she perceived as being more privileged and academic than her. She became unsure about whether her "rags to riches story", as she put it, was possible, describing coaching as the raft keeping her afloat when sinking in doubt.

We explored the concept of "exchange", asking what she had to offer this very different group of people, and what they had to offer her. Michelle mentioned this as being a very powerful moment for her – the realisation that she had something to offer that was different yet equally valid. Her professional experience – working with children with behavioural difficulties from varied ethnic minority groups and faiths – was extremely valuable for her peers, many of whom had not had much contact with people from different cultural backgrounds.

As Michelle became more confident, she found her voice. Before, she had spoken little during lectures and clinical sessions – now, she began to talk about her experience and found it was well received. Although she continued to struggle with the more theoretical aspects of the course, she became a powerful voice in the more practical clinical sessions.

This summer Michelle passed her exams and finally achieved her dream – becoming a psychotherapist in a school for children with behavioural difficulties.

client's experience and background. But by probing deeply into the issues with the client's consent, coaches can help their client to see where the boundaries of race, personality and organisational culture have become blurred.

It is important to be reflective and proactive as a coach. The more clarity we have beforehand about what we think, know and feel, the easier it will be when presented with a diverse viewpoint. Assuming that colour is blind can have repercussions for both coach and client. Equally, as a coach from a similar background, it is important to be aware of the assumptions that you make about having a shared experience. For example, if I make an assumption that the experience of prejudice I have as a black woman is similar to that of another black person, I may not challenge my client about other factors that may be involved. These might include personality differences, communication misunderstandings or organisational factors.

It can be an easy option to refer clients on if you don't think you have the necessary skills and background, or if you feel uncomfortable with certain issues. In fact, coaching someone who is different from yourself can work really well.

Client and coach challenge each others' belief systems. And if coaching is all about reaching one's potential and challenging internal perceptions, what could be better than that? ■

### How can coaching help?

To explore, bring to the surface and name racial and cultural factors as part of the coaching relationship is to become transparent as a coach to your client. It is a way of saying: "I see you in your entirety." As coaches, we normalise conversations that in other settings are difficult or sensitive. By using this approach, we invite the other person to make decisions about the degree to which they want to explore or minimise identity factors. The coaching relationship becomes a safe place to talk in a way that might not be pursued in other work relationships with colleagues and managers.

This can be challenging for the coach, particularly if we come from a similar racial or cultural background to our client and have had similar experiences. It can be easy to collude with the client by agreeing without questioning. If we are from a different background, we may feel that it is not our right to question the

## About the author

**Sonya Welch-Moring** is a professional development and business coach with a strong background of working in the public sector. She is passionate about helping people to communicate more effectively across cultures and to build solid, positive working relationships.

She draws on her experience in facilitation and mediation to help coaches manage complex and sensitive work situations.

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