

## SPOTLIGHT ON

# GWEN STIRLING

Gwen Stirling tells *TJ* about her passion for organisational development

**G**wen Stirling is the director of organisation development and transformation at Berkshire Consultancy Limited. The L&D consultancy invited her to join the board in September 2014 following a management buy-out. Having run her own organisation development (OD) consultancy successfully, she is working to build a cutting-edge OD practice with the team at Berkshire.

Gwen defines organisation development as, “creating a healthy and high performing organisation, where strategy is brought to life and individuals can thrive and bring their best”.

Gwen completed an MBA at Ashridge Business School in 2000, returning again in 2011 to complete an MSc. in organisational change. She invests regularly in her professional development and is currently undergoing training in systemic constellations.

Gwen entered the OD field through a commercial career in retail sales and operations, working her way from store management to her final role as head of UK Operations for Body Shop International. Throughout her career Gwen’s been known as someone who is a catalyst for getting

things started and ‘sorting things out’ to transform performance.

Gwen left Body Shop to become a full-time MBA student, launching her own change management consultancy at the end of her studies. After volunteering for a three-month expedition in Namibia with Raleigh International, the renowned youth development charity, she ended up staying four years as the country director, before returning to the UK and consultancy in 2006. These rich experiences sowed the seeds of her current OD practice.

Gwen’s consulting philosophy is “changing organisations, one conversation at a time”. She believes there are not enough good quality conversations held at work, and by changing what we talk about and the way we talk about it, we can change organisations.

She approaches her OD consulting work as “an informed, practical guide”, working alongside her clients on their transformation journey.

#### Why training and how did you start?

Helping others learn through different kinds of training has been a part of my life from a young age. As a teenager I was a coach and trainer at my school

gym club and I had early ambitions to train as a PE teacher. Training others has featured throughout the different careers I’ve had, although now I wouldn’t class myself as a trainer, my work is more facilitating, guiding, and orchestrating.

In my early consulting I thought I was a change management expert, ‘telling’ people everything I knew. I cringe when thinking of those training



***I believed change could be managed and controlled and followed a set plan where things were unfrozen, changed, and refrozen.***

sessions and my directive approach. I believed change could be managed and controlled, and followed a set plan based on Kurt Lewin’s work, where things were ‘unfrozen, changed and refrozen’.

Now, my approach is very different. Through my experiences and research I realise those leading change need to embrace a more participative approach →



if change and transformation is to be successful; involving those who are impacted by the changes across as much of the system as possible. Frequently, it's the human dynamic that prevents a change initiative being successful.

I also realise the people who work in the organisation know more than me about what might or might not work. In this complex world there isn't one 'right' answer; if there were, the smart people would have already figured it out!

So my approach has become less 'expert training' and more guiding, facilitating and orchestrating others' participation, because when people care about what happens in their organisation, feel they are being heard, encouraged and supported to generate ideas, explore the art of the possible together, amazing things can happen. After all, an organisation is essentially groups of people engaging in a continuous flow of conversations,



**Knowing intellectually that endings need to happen to make space for new beginnings to emerge doesn't make them any less painful**

interactions and sense-making. When you disrupt and change those conversations – either by changing what gets talked about, or the way they take place – there is space for something different to emerge. That 'something different' could be just the breakthrough needed to transform performance and sustain the organisation's existence.

As an OD consultant, I know how to bring groups of people together to talk about things they don't normally talk about – and can offer approaches and processes that are helpful in achieving this. I believe, collectively, we can find a number of possible answers, experiment to test them out, and find a way forward.

I'm always humbled when I'm invited to create and hold a space for powerful conversations to take place – and by what emerges when I'm able to bring people together like that. I see

## THE 360 DEGREE

"Gwen is one of the most 'learned' learning and development professional that I know. Her eagerness to continue to develop herself makes her a powerful role model to those whom she works with – she practices what she preaches. Gwen has a calm and supportive presence, which provides a safe environment for people to explore their developmental issues in a deeper way. Her love for people, her commitment to developing people, her deep knowledge of the field of leadership and personal development, her willingness to use herself as an instrument to intervene both in and outside of a development event makes her a pretty magical developer."

**Dr Mee-Yan Cheung-Judge, Quality and Equality**

"Gwen's greatest contribution to her work is her humanity. She has remarkable intelligence and integrates that skill and knowledge to great benefit for all those around her. As a colleague she is unwavering in her support of me. She has the capacity to be both visionary and strategic – by no means an easy task. She manages this with grace, dexterity, agility and above all with a great sense of humour. She inspires those around her to move way beyond the boundaries of the possible. Fabulous!"

**Keith Jones, Berkshire Consultancy**

"Gwen is a talented facilitator with a great style which engages participants and ensures that the events where she is involved are among the most valued in Hitachi's development calendar. She has a very business-focused approach and always positions our development programmes in a broader strategic context and adds real value."

**Stephen Pierce, Hitachi Europe**

"I was lucky enough to be introduced to Gwen when looking to further develop my OD career and practice. As a mentor, Gwen brings a breadth of knowledge and wisdom gained from an impressive career portfolio, yet she shares her learning with great warmth, candour and humility. Time spent with Gwen is thought-provoking, energising and always fun!"

**Kim Newton-Woof, University of Southampton**

"Gwen is passionate about her role in Berkshire Consultancy and shares that passion with the team's that she engages with. Gwen helps inspire the people she trains, and strives to focus on the positives of any situation, and the possible ways to overcome any perceived barriers that others may think they have."

**Jason Winstanley, Hitachi Solutions**



Painting in Namibia



Trekking



India yoga trip

it as fulfilling the potential of individuals and organisations, and transforming people's experience of work.

### Who or what inspires you?

The people who have helped me to become aware of my potential inspire me. Their insights and advice have made a huge difference to my life, and I'll always be grateful to them. So I work to help others discover their best; those 'light bulb' moments when they see their own potential and talents that are visible to others but have been invisible to them.

Seeing people find their voice inspires me. As the youngest of six siblings, I know sometimes it's a struggle to be heard and what that

can feel like. I see similar impacts in organisations when people don't feel heard and the transformation that occurs when they do, so I work to give the unheard the power to speak.

I'm inspired and motivated by the challenge and potential of making a difference and helping create sustainable organisations where people can thrive and I can bring out the best in them.

Colleagues and other practitioners also inspire me. Working with like-minded people who are passionate about what they do, inspire me to be my best and help me to grow.

I also identify with the purpose and ambition of our consulting company: 'transforming people's experience of work'. It helps frame the part I play in building the OD practice to fulfil that ambition.

### What has been your lowest moment, and what your noblest hour?

My lowest moments all relate to the ending of different chapters of my life and the painful realisation things couldn't, and wouldn't, be the same again: the loss of loved ones, leaving Body Shop, leaving Raleigh International and Namibia, ending personal and professional relationships. Knowing intellectually that endings need to happen to make space for new beginnings to emerge doesn't make them any less painful.

My noblest hour was the opening ceremony for the first school I was responsible for building with Raleigh International in the remote village of Epembe in northwest Namibia. I feel a surge of emotion and pride when I remember the look on the faces of the children's parents and head teacher, when we cut the ribbon and opened the doors. The celebrations, singing, and dancing went on all evening. The young volunteers who built the school were bursting with pride; smiling and laughing through the dust and dirt on their faces as they took precious photographs to capture every moment.

### What and when was your career turning point?

I've had more than one career, so there's a number of significant turning points.

Being promoted to head of UK Operations at Body Shop and

being asked to change head office to become more store-focused. This was one of those times someone saw potential in me that I hadn't seen, and it became my first internal change project. My first attempts went very wrong and triggered my curiosity in change management.

Leaving Body Shop to study for my MBA and starting my first change management consultancy. Studying was a big step, as I'd not done an undergraduate degree.

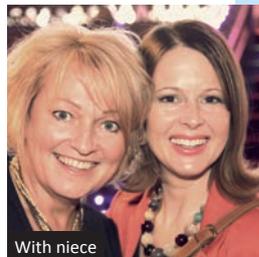
Volunteering for three months with Raleigh International in Namibia and then staying to become country director.

Meeting Dr Mee Yan Cheung Judge, which led to my joining the NTL OD Certificate Programme in 2009, starting my OD career, and finding my professional and spiritual home.

Undertaking my MSc in organisational change, deepening my practice and academic learning. The reflective practices I learnt help me achieve a deeper understanding of how I 'use' myself in my work.

### Describe your best learning and development experience?

My best personal learning experience was being Raleigh International's Namibia country director. Leading numerous expeditions each with 100 young people – camping in the desert, cooking on open fires and living with remote communities taught me more about myself and my impact on others than any formal learning experience. I learnt group dynamics, leadership, resilience, personal agility and humanity – and how to create →



With niece



Sailing



Namibia environmental project

## IT'S ALL ABOUT ME

**Age**  
54

### Education

MBA, MSc in Organisational Change, and Institute of Behavioural Studies NTL OD Practitioner

### Family

Divorced; loving my role as aunt, great-aunt and godmother. I'm the youngest of six siblings so am surrounded by nieces, nephews, great-nieces, and great-nephews.

### Location

Work – wherever my clients are based in the UK, Europe or beyond. Home – Lymington, New Forest.

### Hobbies

Sailing (on the Solent, and anywhere in the sunshine), yoga, meditation and walking

### Favourite places

Braye Beach, Alderney; the Dorset and Devon coast; and anywhere in Namibia

### Book

I've always got numerous books on the go, and collect them like a magpie. They sit in piles beside my bed and in my office. At any one time I'll be dipping in and out of a few business-related books and always have a fiction novel on the go on my Kindle. My current business book is *Dialogic Organisation Development* and my current fiction is the final instalment of Ken Follett's Century Trilogy *Edge of Eternity*.

### Music

Everything from classical (especially Beethoven and Chopin piano concertos), to jazz blues, and pop. Music sets the tone for my day and accompanies me through the day. I work, write, and design programmes with classical music playing in the background.

### Movie

I rarely go to the cinema and watch most of my films on long-haul flights. The last ones I watched and really enjoyed were *The Theory of Everything*, *Steve Jobs*, and *The Imitation Game*.

### Technology

All Apple, but I know I don't get the best from it all. I definitely need to get more techno-literate!!



a safe space for real exchanges to happen. I still draw on those techniques when I'm working with clients.

Reflecting on the best experiences I create for clients, some common characteristics emerge: bringing leadership teams or groups together in a safe space where there is time to slow things down; bringing 'real work' into the room; helping people to have conversations about things they don't normally talk about; 'working live' – responding to what starts to emerge, adjusting the agenda and format as things unfold – and, importantly, being playful and experimental. Afterwards people tell me how much progress they've made on important issues, how connected they feel to what they are here to do, and how much deeper their relationships have become.

**What's next in your career?**

Right now I'm committed to building our consultancy's OD practice into something we are all proud of. That

will involve continuing to experiment with approaches and methodologies, and being stretched and inspired by my colleagues and clients. I'm also continuing to offer my support as a mentor, helping grow the next generation of OD consultants. I get real pleasure in seeing people develop their confidence and self-belief, stepping into their brilliance as they see the positive impact of their work.

Further into the future I want to write about my work, maybe lecture at a university on an OD programme, and find the time and space for my studies and a professional doctorate. **TJ**

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Gwen Stirling can be contacted via [www.berkshire.co.uk](http://www.berkshire.co.uk)  
 To nominate an L&D professional whom you feel deserves recognition in the pages of *TJ* contact the editor at [debbie.carter@trainingjournal.com](mailto:debbie.carter@trainingjournal.com)

**PLAYING TO WIN**

**Continue your own learning**

Don't get complacent and rely on doing your work in the same way you've always done it. Reacquaint yourself with feeling uncomfortable and the sense of 'not knowing' that happens when you are a beginner; it connects you more to those who may attend your workshops or events.

**Be playful and experiment!**

I love the quote from the therapist Flora Colao "Life is playfulness. We need to play so that we can rediscover the magic around us and within us". The latest research in neuroscience shows us what happens when we are playful and experiment. I've run workshop sessions outside, and I've turned a PowerPoint slide into a whole body experience by getting participants to physically recreate a model and notice what happens when they change positions.

**Trust your intuition**

Trust the quiet, inner voice of your body. Sitting quietly at the start of each day to breathe slowly and connect with myself sets me up for the day ahead..

**Try 'working live'**

Rather than running a workshop that is separated from the work a team needs to do, increasingly I put work at the heart of an event to develop new skills and behaviours 'real time' while the team work on a critical business issue. These can be high-intensity sessions, and can feel a bit scary for them (and for me too), but this high-impact approach shifts individual and team performance faster than anything else I've tried.

**Have crucial conversations**

Build your skills and confidence in having those tricky but crucial conversations. They are never easy but I've found being courageous and taking the initiative to instigate these conversations has shifted a situation or relationship for the better.

**Continually develop 'use of self'**

Develop your ability to reflect and get to know yourself on a deeper level; discover more about your potency and impact on others, and experiment to flex your approaches. Our impact as OD consultants is through the way we first show up in the system and the way we choose to act on our observations and intervene across the whole system.

**Love what you**

I know it's a bit of a cliché, but it's true. I consider myself fortunate to have found what I love. I don't separate my work and non-work life; they both are formed and shaped by each other.