

# European Connection

## *A Voice in Leadership*

The following is an interview with the co-facilitators of the ICF European Leaders Network, Kaj Hellbom, ACC, President ICF Nordic, and Virginia Williams, President ICF Switzerland.

What started as a small group of European ICF leaders coming together to share common ideas five years ago has evolved into a strong force of leadership within the global ICF coaching community today.

“It’s a work of passion and love,” says ICF Switzerland President Virginia Williams, about the ICF European Leaders Network, which she currently co-facilitates with Kaj Hellbom, ACC, president of ICF Nordic. “When I first came to this group it was about resolving conflicts and finding common ground, but now it’s about the global vision to make coaching an integral part of society and ICF coaches leaders in the coaching profession.”

The ICF European Leaders Network meets in person twice a year and is open to all European ICF Chapter leaders. The next face to face meeting of this group will take place June 13–14 in Brussels with the theme “Coaching to discover the Pearls of Vision for the Future.”

According to Hellbom and Williams, the purpose of this group is two-fold. First, and true to its name, the group intends to help build a strong network of European leaders to act together on common projects and initiatives.

“I see the role to build a European network as the main purpose,” says Hellbom. “We have our own challenges. We are very isolated. We are here to help countries to develop their chapters, especially in the beginning.”

Secondly, the group provides a broader presence for Europe within global ICF, says Williams. “We have become a voice of leadership within the ICF. As a group, we now bring much more visibility to Europe, which I think is one of the network’s biggest accomplishments,” she says.

According to Williams, the core group of 15 or so leaders has steadily grown and meetings can attract up to 30 individuals from around Europe. Some countries to recently join the network are Lithuania and Bulgaria. Between face-to-face meetings, teleconferences are held.

The history of this group of European leaders can be traced to conversations in 2003. The first in-person summit took place in May 2004 near Frankfurt, Germany. From this group, work began to plan the 2005 European Coaching Conference (ECC) which took place the next year in Tonsberg, Norway. Many of the events and work of these leaders continue to coincide with the ECC, which Williams chaired in 2008.

While the co-facilitators enjoy working together, one of the

challenges they face is bringing together a group where the players change regularly and making sure the leaders who attend meetings take away information that is relevant to their needs.

The meetings, like the one next month in Brussels, typically cover a broad array of practical issues and challenges that all European chapters face—how to be a successful volunteer board, how to deal with conflicts within an organization, fundraising, marketing, mentoring, and finances, for example.

No meeting agenda is quite the same and sometimes special presentations are made. For instance, ICF UK Chapter President and 2008 ICF President’s Award recipient Neil Scotton, ACC, spoke at a 2008 meeting about taking his chapter from scarcity to abundance with chapter finances. The co-facilitators say they are always looking for success stories to share with their group.

Both experienced coaches and accomplished business owners, Williams and Hellbom find it personally rewarding to manage this network of their peers.

“It’s highly valuable to meet people from other countries and to network,” Hellbom said. “It’s inspiring to meet with this group of European folks twice a year.”

Williams agreed: “Sharing knowledge among peers is the best way to feel connected and gain this global perspective of coaches.” She said the power of peer leader networking is helping each one become better leaders.

When it comes to the evolution of this group, Williams and Hellbom point to the support of 2008 ICF President Diane Brennan, MCC, and ICF Assistant Director Magda Mook, who have attended meetings and not only listened to, but also acted on the needs and concerns of the ICF’s European leaders.

“Their commitment has been absolutely crucial,” says Hellbom. Williams adds, “The support of Diane and Magda has made a tremendously positive difference for us as chapter leaders and for the ICF coaches we represent in Europe. Our collaboration across the Atlantic has been a boost in energy that is felt across Europe.”

In addition, ICF Headquarters opened a Regional Service Centre in Brussels in October 2008 to support members in this region.

“My hope is that all European countries will actively participate in these meetings, that all countries will become more active in global ICF and we can feel as one,” Hellbom concluded.



Hellbom



Williams