



Special Theme
Top
Coaches
Switzerland

A rare interview with a kingmaker

It is hard to find a publicity-shy coaching company, but we found one of the oldest established firms tucked away in the heart of Zurich's charming Old Town. I.J. Martin & Co Ltd, Executive Coaches for Global Business Leaders, keeps a low profile, but its clients are some of the world's best known and most successful business leaders.

TEXT: SONJA IRANI | PHOTOS: I.J. MARTIN & CO LTD

"Look at this!" said Iain Martin, with a big smile. "This is what really excites us!" He had just received news of a client's big promotion as we started our interview.

Scots-born Iain Martin is worldwide chairman of this high-end leadership coaching and mentoring firm. Marlene Uetz, an internationalised Swiss, is co-founder and MD of its Singapore-based sister company. Their close-knit team comprises 16 hand-picked coaches, all former C-Suite executives, located in three continents. This is

coaching for leaders, by leaders, as Iain Martin and Marlene Uetz explained in our interview.

I was lucky to find you in Zurich. You seem to be travelling constantly between Europe, USA and Asia.

MU: That's because our clients are senior leaders in global corporations. We are always available to them, so we want to be in their time zones. We also need to be with our local teams, based in strategic locations around the world.

Is that what makes your coaching firm different?

IM: It's certainly an important aspect. Having founded our firm in 1998 means we can draw from a lot of real-life coaching experience. Furthermore, we are bottom-line focussed, with our own well-tryed common sense techniques and a no-jargon policy.

MU: Clients also like dealing with a trusted single source for their worldwide coaching needs. They benefit from our consistent approach and the combined wisdom of our team.

What was the initial idea in founding I.J. Martin & Co Ltd?

IM: After I had consulted a coach myself in 1985, my career took off in a big way. I soon moved up to global CFO and CEO roles in Europe and Asia and I still use what I

learned every day. In the mid-1990s, I was CEO of a company in Dongguan China – just me and two thousand Chinese. The saying “it’s lonely at the top” was never more true. I knew that ‘experience-based’ coaching could benefit others like me.

MU: When Iain sold the company in China and returned to Europe, we started to build our global coaching boutique. Our objective was to provide a new kind of practical coaching service – to help companies grow the bottom line through excellent leadership.

What are the most important qualities that business leaders should possess?

MU: A leader is someone that others want to follow. Looking at history, the best leaders shared three key qualities - a powerful vision, repeated articulation of that vision and the ability to influence events without direct authority. Think of Moses, Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr., as prime examples.

IM: Global business is complex. ‘Command and control’ no longer works. A two-dimensional matrix is inadequate to describe today’s international organisation. Modern businesses are three-dimensional ‘hollow cubes’, with relationships between all points therein. Giving out orders does not work. Sharing an exciting vision motivates people, influences events and moves the corporation in the right direction. In my leadership writings, I show how ‘influencing inside the cube’ leads to business success.

How has the role of leader changed since you founded your firm in 1998?

IM: Good leadership is timeless and its attributes have never changed, but the global business environment has. The world has experienced at least two major business disruptions in the last two decades, and it still suffers from the events of 2008. Demands for greater transparency, better governance, short-termism by activists, economic and political complexity and cyber-security issues have all combined to make leadership life more challenging. The value of an experienced discussion partner/coach has never been greater.

How can you help an executive become a good leader?

IM: Leaders are made, not born. I really believe that! Our coaches help you maximise your career potential and learn real leadership qualities. We clarify complexity and offer you thinking space. An experienced, objective discussion partner gives you reassurance, helps you see reality through honest feedback and challenges your business assumptions.

MU: We’ve been called ‘The CEO’s Secret Weapon’. Many of our clients test their early strategic thinking on us first, in the strict privacy of a coaching meeting. If it makes sense, you read it later in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *FT*, but you never see our name.

Which awards or projects are you particularly proud of?

MU: Our coaching helped a US corporation to restructure around the world and it saved an ongoing \$500 million on the bottom line. The ROI in this and all our mandates is huge.

IM: Mostly, though, we are really proud of our clients’ personal successes. One newly-promoted client told me: “This leadership stuff is great – I love it!” So did his company! Great leadership spreads throughout the organisation. We are proud of our role in making it happen.

Any last advice for our readers?

IM: If you want to be a great leader, remember history’s role models. They had never heard of spreadsheets, but they did share their dream repeatedly, until the people believed that they could achieve the impossible. Start your leadership like this, and only then can you achieve the unthinkable in your business.

www.ijmartin.com

Portrait: Iain Martin, Chairman.

Below: Marlene Uetz, co-founder and MD Asia.

Bottom: Coaching discussion on a business challenge. (left) Iain Martin explains the value of Visionary Leadership. (right)

