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The surprising things this CEO learnt from his executive coach

From being too positive about every idea to being overly intense, CEOs and top executives are increasingly turning to coaches to help improve their business game.

Patrick Durkin [[/by/patrick-durkin-j7gb7](#)] *BOSS Deputy editor*

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Orica executive Andrew Stewart has always been known professionally as the guy who can get stuff done.

From his student days working on the grill and then running a McDonald's to overseeing the Asia Pacific operations of global engineering group Wood, Stewart has won several accolades including becoming a BOSS Young Executive in 2010, for being personable, hands-on and a go-getter.

So, it came as a bit of a shock to him when his [chief executive coach and psychologist Amos Szeps](#) [<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/leaders/why-an-executive-coach-is-now-a-must-have-for-ceos-20220719-p5b2sq>] told him that the same strengths that had got him ahead were the traits he needed to recalibrate as he moved up the ladder.

"I'm enthusiastic, so I tend to warm to things very quickly," Stewart says. "Amos has really encouraged me to be more thoughtful, measured, more consultative at times, knowing when to surge, when to think."



Orica executive Andrew Stewart, left, and his executive coach, Amos Szepts, outside Orica in Melbourne. **Eamon Gallagher**

“Rather than charging off and getting things done, it was being more thoughtful, considering: ‘Is this an enduring action? Does it have an impact beyond just getting it done?’”

Stewart, who is now chief development and sustainability officer at Orica, says it was in 2017 when he was appointed CEO of the Wood Americas arm that he felt he was in over his head. He needed to change the way he operated. It was a sector with a tough image and Stewart needed to learn to be less hands on.

“I was a young Australian moving to Houston, Texas, to run fundamentally an oil company in US shale, which was this very Texas cowboy, bravado type business,” he says.

“When you get up to running a \$4 billion business with 18,000 staff, you can’t have the same connectivity with the business and the people as you had, so I had to let go of stuff, which was really uncomfortable.”

He learnt to have a harder edge, become more sceptical and even a little more unavailable.

”I’ve learnt to lead through questions, rather than lead through doing, because you realise you can’t do it all any more, nor can you oversee three levels down into the business.”

CEO of Peplemax [<https://www.peplemax.com.au/>], Szeps says Stewart is typical of many of the executives and CEOs he sees.

”Andrew [has] the drive, the energy, the optimism and connection with people on an emotional level. But there’s a shadow to that (in other words, a negative to the strength).

“It is just about how do we lever the strengths that you have and fill in any gaps that you have.”

Too intense

Szeps’ process involves speaking to up to 10 work colleagues and co-creating survey questions, which provide the basis of coaching objectives.

Szeps also typically sits in with companies to observe the CEO and their executive team in action.

US executive Joseph Sczurko, now president of US environmental consultancy WSP USA, also met Szeps at Wood.

For Sczurko, his personality diagnostics revealed that he was too intense.

“The 360 degree review told me that some people were intimidated by my intensity,” he says. “That was diminishing my effectiveness as a leader.

“Even my boss found my intensity intimidating. What came back was, ‘Joe, you’re always on. You have to tone it down.’

“My subordinates had tremendous respect for me but they worried about my sustainability.”

Sczurko says that Szeps would at times sit through meetings to provide direct feedback on his performance.

Continual improvement

“I’m a huge sports fan and I’ve grown up playing sport, so I very much identify with the idea that ‘you can do this better’, that there is continual improvement. Sometimes you will be successful, sometimes you will not, so what can you take away to do better next time?”

Sczurko says the best advice Szeps gave him was saying he “had to do better, personally”.

The former Wood executive continues: “Such as when I needed to force myself to get onto the same page as a peer I might not agree with.

“I might have previously thought, ‘He’s an asshole, I’ll deal with him in the business context.’

“Amos would say: ‘Put away the business context. Get to know the person more. The next time you are in Aberdeen, for crying out loud, have a one-to-one dinner. Find out what’s important to him, find out his non-work agenda, show some emotion around the person.’”

Both Sczurko and Stewart say that the changing world of leadership and the younger workforce have made the role of their coach more important.

“The world of leadership is now much more judgement orientated than core finance driven, which it was when I started,” Stewart says.

“When I started my career it was all about how do you win and make money.

“It was pretty one-dimensional. Now it’s about, ‘Yes, you need to make an economic return, that’s one part, but you need to stay relevant to your clients and your clients’ needs are rapidly evolving because of all the

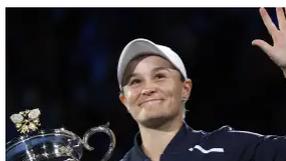
environmental, social and governance pressures, and you need to meet societal and community obligations.”



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