Developing the leader as coach: insights, strategies and tips for embedding coaching skills in the workplace

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This article presents some practical insights, strategies and tips about how to help organisations embed leadership coaching skills in the workplace following participation by executives and managers in 'Leader as Coach' development programs. Given that organisations globally are increasingly using such programs as part of leadership development initiatives, it is important that we develop effective methodologies for teaching and embedding coaching skills in organisations. We argue that an evidence-based approach to program design and solid alignment with the organisation's goals, values and language are essential foundations for the process of embedding coaching skills. In addition to internally branding the program, using respected figures internal to the organisation as role models and champions and encouraging participants to personalise the coaching methods and models, we have found that regularly sending reminder tips on how to use coaching skills in emails or other web-based communications to be effective in prompting leaders and managers to use coaching skills on a daily basis. This article presents seven such tips and other ideas about embedding and sustaining leaders' coaching skills in contemporary organisational settings.

Keywords: coaching; leader as coach; leadership development; executive coaching; workplace training

Introduction

Coaching skills are a vital part of every leader's toolkit, although the necessary skills come naturally to only a few (Goleman, 2000). All too often organisations invest time, effort and money into developing the coaching skills of their leaders and managers only to find that, despite initial high levels of enthusiasm, they fail to adopt the taught coaching skills in the workplace and end up slipping back into old command-and-control leadership behaviour patterns. This is because ingrained behaviours are difficult to change (Prochaska, Velicier, Rossi, & Goldstein, 1994). Not surprisingly it takes time for leaders to develop workplace coaching skills. Research has shown that it takes at least between three and six months to get really comfortable with using coaching skills in the workplace (Grant, 2010). Given that organisations globally are increasingly using Leader as Coach programs as part of

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leadership development initiatives, it is important that we develop effective methodologies for teaching and embedding coaching skills in organisations.

It is always challenging for facilitators and human resource (HR) professionals to ensure that skills developed in the training room do in fact transfer into the workplace (Burke & Baldwin, 1999). Such transfer is difficult enough with technical skills, such as the use of computer systems or customer service systems. It becomes even more challenging with the so-called 'soft skills' such as coaching (Lindbom, 2007).

However, much can be done to smooth this process. This includes the choice of a robust theoretical framework and highly practical program content, ensuring program alignment with the organisation's goals, values and language, the championing of the program by respected figures internal to the organisation, and good logistical support by proficient HR professionals.

This article presents some insights on how to embed leadership coaching skills following participation in a Leader as Coach workshop program. In doing so we draw on both the scholarly literature and our many years of professional experience in designing and implementing Leader as Coach programs, including our extensive recent joint work with a leading Australian financial institution, the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA), an organisation with over 52,000 employees. This is the fifth largest bank in the world, with over 3000 people going through the Leader as Coach program that we jointly developed.

Embedding begins with design: use an evidence-based approach

Embedding begins with the design of the workshop itself. In our view the workshop program must be strongly evidence-based, as well as drawing on the best available scientific research about what is effective in coaching. This means that the workshop itself should employ the key principles of evidence-based adult learning (see Clark, 2010). These include the use of spaced learning; avoiding cognitive overload by breaking the content into small, easy-to-remember chunks; fostering cooperative learning; making the material personal by encouraging the participants to express the ideas and concepts in their own words; and using techniques designed to help participants remember key concepts (Leberman, McDonald, & Doyle, 2012).

Most importantly, to encourage transfer of skills, the program design should allow for skills practice back in the workplace (Grant, 2010). Here we seek to maximise positive transfer of learning; learning developed in the workshop is thus promptly applied in another context (in this case the workplace) – a key strategy in embedding learning (Foley & Kaiser, 2013). We arrange for participants to undertake a set number of documented coaching sessions in the weeks immediately following the workshop, and then to attend peer coaching groups, which subsequently meet regularly. In these peer coaching groups participants again further extend the learnings of the workshop by coaching each other on workplace-related issues. Participants then practice their coaching skills in a supportive environment, receive feedback, solve workplace problems and in doing so further develop a workplace culture that is supportive of coaching (Turner & Heneberry, 2013; Warhurst, 2013). In addition, we advocate for follow-up group supervision sessions where participants can discuss coaching-related issues with an experienced coaching supervisor – an important factor in the development of coaching skills (Grant, 2012).

Make it theoretically grounded and extremely practical

We believe that the program should be both theoretically grounded and extremely practical. Because within any organisation there will be a wide range of intellectual abilities and learning style preferences, a large-scale coaching program needs to be designed to engage a diverse range of people (Casey, 2005). A conceptually coherent theoretical framework can be an important intellectual attractor for the more cognitively orientated participant – some highly intellectual participants can be dismissive of over-simplistic coaching methodologies (for discussion on some of the barriers to learning experienced by intellectually sophisticated professionals, see Argyris, 2000). But theory can also alienate some participants. Thus, the program should also be highly practical with clear links between theory and practice, and the participants need to be able to see positive results immediately. In this way pragmatic or experiential learners are also fully engaged in the learning process (Honey & Mumford, 1982).

A solution-focused cognitive-behavioural (SF-CB) framework is well suited in this respect as SF-CB coaching is by far the most researched and validated approach to coaching (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010). As well as being evidence-based, SF-CB coaching has the important advantage of having a solid theoretical framework that is easy to understand and apply, as well as being jargon free and extremely effective (Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009).

The SF-CB coaching framework posits that goal attainment can be best facilitated by understanding the reciprocal relationships between one's thoughts, feelings, behaviour and the environment, and purposefully changing or structuring these so as to best support goal attainment (Grant, 2003). Incorporating a solution-focused perspective into a cognitive-behavioural framework helps ensure that the coaching is orientated towards the development of personal strengths and goal attainment rather than towards problem diagnosis or analysis, and we have found the framework's focus on solutions to be highly applicable in the workplace.

Because theoretical aspects of such programs are sometimes viewed as being in opposition or not relevant to 'real life' practice, we have developed a number of techniques in order to draw clear links between SF-CB theory and practice. For example, we present the SB-CB framework by firstly talking about the relationships between the one's thoughts, feelings and behaviour. We also discuss how the environmental context can play a major role in facilitating or hindering goal attainment. We use straightforward models to visually illustrate the key points. We then give personal examples from our own lives that illustrate the reciprocal relationships, discussing for example in relation to procrastination, how unhelpful thinking patterns and anxiety are related, and how those can instigate avoidance behaviours, which in turn result in procrastination. We then get participants to use those models to map out the cognitive, emotional, behavioural and environmental factors in relation to a genuine personal problem that they have. Finally, we get participants to use the SB-CB framework and map out the cognitive, emotional, behavioural and environmental factors needed to create a solution. This process gives a theoretical understanding, practical examples and personal experience of using the SB-CB framework to construct workable solutions, thus embodying key adult learning principles (Jarvis, 2012).

Program content

The program content needs to explicitly address the kinds of coaching challenges faced by managers in the contemporary workplace (McCarthy & Milner, 2013). Much professional executive coaching training is aimed at developing coaching skills for formal coaching situations. But in-house workplace coaching differs from professional coaching. In the workplace, coaching lies on a continuum from the formal structured workplace coaching session at one end to informal, on-the-run workplace coaching at the other.

Formal coaching typically involves scheduled meetings with explicit goals, with the sessions having a clear beginning and end and with most of the conversations being in 'coaching mode'. In contrast, informal coaching occurs during everyday workplace conversations – the few minutes snatched in the corridor in the midst of a busy project for a short highly focused coaching conversation (Greene & Grant, 2003) – in which coaching techniques are used more implicitly. This kind of informal coaching accounts for most of the coaching conversations that managers have (Anderson, 2013). In addition, we have found that making clear distinctions between skills, performance and developmental coaching helps participants gain greater clarity on the type of coaching that is required in any specific situation (Standards Australia, 2011).

Skills coaching focuses on developing a specific skill set, for example, improving communication skills, sales skills or rehearsing for presentations or negotiations. This kind of coaching often requires the coach to focus on specific behaviours, and the coaching sessions may be highly detailed. The coach may model the required skills, and coaching sessions usually encompass a rehearsal and feedback process (Witherspoon & White, 1996). *Performance coaching* is about improving performance over a specific period of time. In the workplace this is typically between a few weeks and one year. Performance coaching tends to focus on the way that the coachee sets goals, overcomes obstacles and helps the coachee evaluate and monitor their performance as they work towards their goals. This kind of coaching tends to be more strategic than skills coaching and in the workplace may follow a performance review. *Developmental coaching* also takes a broader strategic approach, often dealing with issues of personal and professional development. This kind of coaching may focus on enhancing emotional competencies, or working more effectively with team members.

Of course, these typologies are not discrete. For example, a coaching intervention which focused on enhancing the presentation skills of a shy or introverted coachee would have a substantial developmental element, and a developmental coaching program aimed at enhancing emotional intelligence or leadership competencies might well include some skills coaching. Nevertheless, coaching sessions, and indeed whole coaching engagements, tend to fall into one of these three categories (Grant, 2005).

The point here is that, in order to keep the coaching conversation on track, it is important to match coaching approach to the issue being addressed. For example, using a highly detailed skills-based approach when coaching for a performance or developmental issue can lead to both coach and coachee feeling overwhelmed by the resultant detail, resulting in lower self-efficacy and possibly obscuring the insights gained from taking a broader perspective. The differences in these varying approaches to coaching echo the metaphors employed by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) of being up on the balcony or down on the dance floor – that is, being

up on the balcony overlooking the dance floor and seeing the big picture, versus being down on the dance floor and caught up in the detail of the dance. To be better prepared for the diverse challenges of varying workplace coaching conversations we argue that participants need to be trained in all these approaches to coaching.

Ensure that the program is internally branded

For a Leader as Coach program to become fully integrated into the organisational culture, we believe that the program needs to be custom designed to align with the organisation's specific needs and values (Carmeli, Gelbard, & Gefen, 2010), in addition to being internally branded using (for example) the organisation's logos and language. We are wary of 'off-the-shelf' or proprietary one-size-fits-all coaching methodologies with overly complex, pseudo-scientific or highly technical jargon that do not sufficiently align with the organisation's values (Gehman, Trevino, & Garud, 2013) or lack the flexibility needed for effective organisational change (Dunford et al., 2013). Ideally, in order to make the program truly organic we argue that the organisation should also eventually aim to own the program intellectual property and develop its own accredited internal program facilitators.

Internal branding is a key issue here. Internal branding is about three key things: communicating the brand and the associated values effectively to the employees; demonstrating the branding's relevance and worth to employees; and successfully linking the work of the organisation to the espoused organisational values and thus ensuring that a consistent message is transmitted to the organisation's external customers (Bergstrom, Blumenthal, & Crothers, 2002). Obviously, employees are central to the process of brand building and their behaviour can either reinforce an organisation's values or, if inconsistent, can undermine the credibility of the organisational brand and potentially its relationship with its external customers (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). It is therefore important to consider how employees' values and behaviour can be aligned with an organisation's desired values, and the implementation of a coaching program is an important opportunity to reinforce key brand messages. For example, the CBA key branding terminology revolved around the word 'CAN' and their branding message to its customers was one of a positive, 'can-do attitude'. In addition, CBA had identified a number of values as being central to their corporate branding. These were reflected in the actual name that we devised for the coaching program – 'CAN Coaching' – and the notion of a 'can-do attitude' which was defined as; a willingness to tackle a job and get it done; being confident and resourceful in the face of challenges; and characterised by vibrant, purposeful action – clearly highly relevant to coaching. In addition, the coaching program explicitly included a number of CBA core values including collaboration and accountability – again highly relevant to coaching. The Leader as Coach program explicitly made frequent reference to such organisational language, thus enhancing the chances of embedding the coaching methodologies into the day-to-day operations of the organisation.

Use respected figures internal to the organisation as champions

The ability of positive role models to influence and shape behaviour has long been recognised in the behavioural sciences (Bandura, 1977b). Senior managers'

leadership styles have been identified as being one of the most important influences on organisational culture and behaviour, and the positive role modelling of desired behaviour by leaders is particularly important when driving innovation and organisational change (Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003).

Enthusiastic support for coaching initiatives and clear and consistent messages about the importance of the program from respected internal figures such as the CEO and other senior personalities sends an important signal that the organisation is serious about leadership development. We emphasise that the value of such overt high-level support cannot be understated. Thus, it is vital to make a strong business case for coaching in order to get the full buy-in and support of senior leadership. However, our views on what constitute a strong business case go beyond merely making a case for financial return on investment. Rather we take a broader, more holistic approach emphasising the positive impact that coaching has on well-being, engagement, organisational culture and personal and profession development, in addition to the often-cited benefits on goal attainment and financial return on investment. We find that this more comprehensive approach to delineating the business impact of coaching resonates with contemporary organisations, and research supports the idea of taking a broader perspective on return on investment issues (Aras & Crowther, 2013).

Use attraction rather than coercion

In the fast-paced time-poor contemporary working environment, it is easy for people to justify not making time for developmental activities (Conger, 2013). The temptation for the organisation is to mandate participation. Whist this may be effective in some contexts, we have found that fostering attraction to the program, rather than compelling attendance, is likely to be a more successful embedding strategy in the long run, and research on the advantages of using positive attractors over negative in facilitating intentional change supports this view (Howard, 2006).

A key strategy here is to develop enthusiastic and influential early adopters in the initial stages of the program roll-out, and have them carry a positive message to the broader workforce. We do this by having participants self-select into the early stages of the program, as participants who are not genuinely invested in the program can easily derail the workshop and make the experience less impactful and enjoyable for other participants (Phillips & Phillips, 2002). We recommend accepting participants in the early stages of the roll-out based on their ability to demonstrate key personal and interpersonal facets such as empathy, trust, insight and openness to change. If the program truly meets the needs of the organisation, as it rolls out it would not take long for other people to want to participate. However, the strategy of attraction needs to be augmented by having senior figures in the organisation repeatedly and consistently reminding others of the benefits of participation.

Monitor, evaluate and embed: the Personal Case Study approach

Monitoring and evaluation with actionable feedback is vital in any change process (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Most organisations will utilise internal evaluations of the impact of leadership development programs. Typically this is done through standardised organisational metrics which assess participants' perceptions of the

program (Phillips, 2012). These data are very valuable, but tend not to address the issue of embedding skills.

We utilise a new approach to evaluation and embedding – the Personal Case Study approach (Grant, 2013) – which is used in addition to standardised organisational metrics. In this approach, participants, at the beginning of the workshop, write about a personal coaching or leadership problem or issue they are facing at work, and then rate how close they are to their goal of solving that problem. They also rate their levels of confidence in being able to deal with the issue. In this way participants can generate personally meaningful metrics which can be used to evaluate their learning and provide useful benchmarks from which to measure change.

During the workshop, in addition to practising coaching skills, participants relate the workshop content back to their case study, noting insights and possible steps to solutions as they emerge. At the end of the workshop participants re-rate themselves. We have found typical outcomes to be in the region of a 40% increase in goal progression and a 70% increase in confidence in being able to deal with the issue (Grant, 2013).

By explicitly linking learning to a personally defined coaching or leadership problem, the Personal Case Study helps make the training personally relevant to each individual and provides clear links back to the workplace, thus helping further embed the learning (Dornan, Boshuizen, King, & Scherpbier, 2007).

Make it personal

In addition to the Personal Case Study we have found it valuable to encourage participants to personalise the coaching tools, techniques and strategies from the workshop. Such personalisation can significantly enhance information retention and can facilitate transfer to the workplace (Gerber & Oaklief, 2000). In our view, all too often people leave such development workshops sprouting jargon or using highly technical language that is not authentic or self-congruent. Not surprisingly such programs often fail to become embedded (Eunson, 2012). We actively encourage participants to express the taught concepts and principals in their own words, and to develop personalised phrases and language that feels authentic and genuine. For example, when practicing coaching skills in the workshop we ask participants to develop their own personalised phrases and coaching questions, and overall we emphasise the importance of participants understanding the workshop material from their own perspective. The aims are to give the participant a greater sense of personal ownership and to help them internalise the principles of effective coaching.

Provide follow-up coach-the-coach sessions

Ongoing support through group 'coach-the-coach' supervision sessions in the months following the initial program is another important means of embedding skills. In such sessions, through reflective learning activities such as discussion of real-life leadership and coaching issues, role plays and group coaching, participants can deepen their understanding of leadership and coaching principles (Donaldson-Feilder & Bush, 2009). This is often the forum in which insights and actions become transformed into habits (Franke & Felfe, 2012).

We recommend using a structured approach to these sessions. We typically take a strengths-based approach, starting the session with having each participant highlight some coaching 'success', before moving on to identifying issues that are common to the group, and then engaging in a problem-solving group peer-coaching process. This has the advantage of building self-efficacy and facilitating peer-coaching – both of which are key factors in facilitating behavioural change and leadership development (Bandura, 1977a; Goldman, Wesner, & Karnchanomai, 2013).

Unfortunately, such supervision sessions are sometimes viewed by organisations as an additional and burdensome expenditure. However, in terms of embedding skills, the cost of not providing these sessions can be greater than the cost providing them – supportive developmental processes make a significant difference in terms of improving coaching outcomes (Grant, 2008; Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997). Indeed, lack of such support can easily de-rail an entire leadership development program.

Mobilise a competent HR team

Whilst the above are important success factors, HR professionals within the organisation play a crucial role. Indeed, program success and longevity depend on HR professionalism and HR's ability to champion this work (Hailey, Farndale, & Truss, 2005). In our experience, in order to drive such programs, the HR team needs to be appropriately trained in coaching methodologies so that they can truly understand the value and importance of good-quality coaching programs and have a personal passion for coaching and leadership development (Hawkins, 2012). Most importantly, the HR team should be seen as 'in-house' experts and have the ability to marshal support for the program from key organisational stake holders.

In our experience HR's ability to manage the logistics of often-complex program roll-outs, whilst keeping key stakeholders such as senior managers engaged and enthused, is a key factor determining the successful implementation of a coaching program (Long, Ismail, & Amin, 2012). We want to emphasise that this is not an easy task, and some organisations may not have the required HR capacity. To address this issue, and particularly for large-scale programs, we have found that it is important to have a nominated full-time 'Head of Coaching' with requisite formal authority; indeed an increasing number of global corporations have created such positions (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2005). Some of the attributes needed by the HR professionals in this role include outstanding internal communications skills, attention to key stakeholder management issues, a solid understanding of the business and its needs, and the interpersonal attributes needed to navigate the organisational system as well as having good coaching skills.

Prompts to action: an overlooked methodology

The above factors are clearly vital to the success of Leader as Coach programs. Not surprisingly some of these have been discussed previously in the coaching-related literature (Williams & Palmer, 2009). However, a relatively unknown methodology that can help leaders develop and embed their coaching skills involves the use of tips, updates and prompts to action.

Gentle reminders such as emailing tips to leaders on a weekly or twice-weekly basis not only refresh memories of specific coaching techniques, but also prompt them to apply coaching skills on a day-to-day basis in the workplace, both with others and, just as importantly, with themselves. This approach, coupled with peer coaching and follow-up coach-the-coach sessions, provides solid support as leaders begin to internalise and embed the coaching skills needed to be a truly effective leader.

The following are some examples of the kinds of tips and reminders that we have found to be effective. Because coaching is a broad leadership capability (Bass & Riggio, 2005), many of these tips focus on a range of personal and professional issues, including self-management, active listening skills, personal authenticity and values, as well as core solution-focused coaching skills.

Introducing the tips

Each tip has a headline that sums up the main point, a brief descriptive narrative followed by a suggested action step by which the individual can practise their coaching skills. Each of these tips is prefaced and introduced in the following way:

> Please take a moment to read and reflect on this tip and think about how you could apply these ideas in your work today or over the next few days.

The seven tips are presented below, in no particular order, as examples of the kinds of tips that have been found to be useful in helping leaders develop and embed their workplace coaching skills.

Seven examples of useful coaching tips

Tip 1: Role model leadership coaching skills

A leader's behaviour has a significant impact on others. When a leader displays arrogant, dismissive or rude behaviours, those around them either copy them or turn away in disgust – the antithesis of a positive coaching culture. Good leaders role model the coaching behaviours they wish others to adopt – even when under pressure.

- Ask yourself: As a leader, how can I better role model positive coaching behaviours?

Tip 2: Pay attention to the way that you listen

The way that we listen determines what we hear and how people perceive us. But we rarely think about our listening styles. How do you listen? Are you people-focused? Do you listen for meaning, or are you typically more focused on listening out for errors? Are you judgemental in your listening? Are you time-poor and get impatient when listening? What effect does your listening style have on your relationships at work?

- Today I will pay attention to the way that I listen to others, and adjust my listening style in order to become a better listener and coach.

Tip 3: Recognise the personal strengths of others at work

People work best when they are aware of and utilise their personal strengths in their work. Yet all too frequently leaders, caught up in the rush of daily cooperate life, do not take the time to acknowledge the personal strengths of others, and this is particularly important in coaching conversations.

- Today I will take the time to recognise and acknowledge the personal strengths of others at work.

Tip 4: Enhance social capital through coaching

Organisations run better when people know and trust each other: teams are more productive, deals move quicker and people perform better when the relationships that make the organisation work effectively are strong. The social capital of an organisation can be vital to the organisation's success and its peoples' well-being.

- Ask yourself: What can I do today to increase trust and social capital through my coaching?

Tip 5: Take time to pause

So often we rush through the day, running from one meeting to the next, not taking time to pause or even catch our breath. The danger is that we can end up feeling drained and frustrated. When we are under such stress we are less likely to be able to coach and to respond positively to others.

- Today I will pause every so often during the day to recharge myself and put emphasis on having positive interactions with others at work.

Tip 6: Use goals effectively and flexibly

Research shows that goal setting is vital in bringing about purposeful positive change. For goals to be useful they need to be specific, otherwise it is difficult to measure whether or not we are achieving them. We often talk about goals needing to be SMART – specific, measurable, attractive, realistic and time-framed. However, if we get too fixated on the end result or too rigid in our use of SMART goals, we can restrict our ability to adapt to new situations or changing demands. We need to be flexible in the way we use goals, from time to time reviewing and revising our goals.

- Ask yourself: Do I need to pause today and take a fresh look at my goals?

Tip 7: Use self-coaching at work

To coach others we need to be good at coaching ourselves. To do so we need to be able to reflect, take stock and set goals for ourselves. Crass as it might sound, there is always room for improvement, even for the biggest and best of us.

- Ask yourself: What personal changes do I need to make this week? What would really make a difference to the way I work with others?

Concluding comments

Good coaching enhances goal attainment and increases well-being (Grant, 2003). Whilst the benefits of a constructive coaching culture in the workplace are well documented (Lloyd, 2005), driving cultural change is never easy. This is particularly the case when attempting to create behavioural change and facilitate the adoption of workplace coaching skills as part of a leadership skill set. Developing a clear business case for the use of coaching, employing a solid evidence-based approach to program design and ensuring alignment with the organisation's goals, values and language, are all important factors that can provide key foundations for the process of developing Leader as Coach programs. We have found these to be important initial steps in creating and implementing such programs. In addition, internally branding the program, using respected figures internal to the organisation as role models and champions, and encouraging participants to personalise the coaching methods and models have demonstrated utility in helping embed coaching skills.

In this article we have summarised and presented some of our professional experience in designing and implementing Leader as Coach programs. To date there has been relatively little discussion of these issues in the academic coaching literature (McCarthy & Milner, 2013). Future research into this emerging area of coaching practice should aim to empirically delineate the main factors that enable the successful implementation of Leader as Coach programs. Kotter's (1996) classic work on the eight steps that best facilitate organisational change may well serve as a useful model for this kind of research. Whilst such empirical research has its challenges, the development of sophisticated methodologies for developing leadership skills such as coaching has great potential to better facilitate the kind of positive organisational change that can result in more productive and engaging workplace environments. We look forward to further developments in these areas of coaching research and practice.

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Margie Hartley is a highly sought-after practitioner who brings a wide range of skills, experience and assets to her work as a consultant, executive coach, facilitator and keynote presenter. She has over 7000 hours of executive coaching experience. Her professional work focuses on building and stimulating individual, team and organisational potential. With undergraduate degrees in Sociology and Anthropology and extensive in-depth postgraduate professional training in Positive Psychology, Margie works with an extensive range of client groups in relation to a wide range of business challenges including strategy, performance and culture frameworks, communications, personal effectiveness and leadership behaviour and capabilities. Her client base consists of top ASX-listed companies, as well as small–medium business and entrepreneurs. Before establishing her independent coaching and consulting practice Margie was the CEO of the Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

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