

# Meet the coach who fine-tunes the chiefs

**An Olympic runner has a coach, and a CEO can have one too, writes Michael Smith.**

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It was about nine months into his role as Leighton Holdings chief executive - a job fraught with high drama and controversy - that Hamish Tyrwhitt first met executive coach Gary Ranker.

Tyrwhitt was under enormous pressure as the construction giant faced hefty write-downs on problem projects.

He says it was important to have an external adviser not involved in the day-to-day running of the company to help navigate a volatile world.



Hamish Tyrwhitt PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

"I have a degree in civil engineering, but half the time I need a degree in psychology," Tyrwhitt says.

"He [Ranker] has brought to me personally the skills to be able to make myself more aware and more equipped to deal with situations; the ability to be resilient in certain areas and to step back and prioritise.

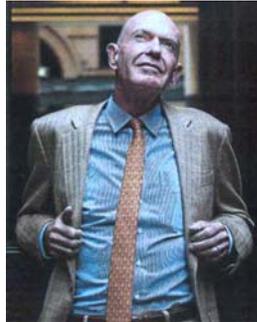
"I have moved from being reactive to spending more time in a pro-active space."

With the average tenure of a chief executive dropping to three or four years, Tyrwhitt says it is important that corporate leaders find a way to survive longer in the job. He has also been open about having a support network of other chief executives to discuss common challenges with.

Nowadays, he has regular Skype conversations and quarterly meetings with Ranker, who is in Sydney this month to see some high-profile clients.

New York-based Ranker, who specialises in advising senior executives in demanding cross-border roles, is considered one of the "fathers" of an industry that appeared just 20 years ago.

Ranker entered the profession as an experiment in 1989 when he was hired by General Electric as a consultant to help manage a former US submarine commander who had a senior role in the company's energy division.



Gary Ranker. The modern-day chief executive is not very different from a professional athlete. PHOTO: LOUIE DOUVIS

Executive coaching has taken off since then. There are about 1500 coaches in Australia alone, although not many advise at a CEO level. Ranker hopes coaches will become as common in the corporate make-up as hiring an external auditor.

"I can look any CEO in the eye and say 'You can't do it alone'," he says.

Ranker's job is a balancing act of adviser and confidant on all matters from how to communicate with staff, to avoiding social friction, personal development, balancing the demands of constant travel and being sensitive to cultural differences.

Ranker likens the job to engineers improving a wind tunnel. They already have a successful aerodynamic shape, but removing the slightest distortion in an executive's behaviour can deliver results.

"It is a clear recognition that it is a highly competitive environment where someone else is going to jump higher and run faster next month. You can't stay the same," he says.

"The CEO has to find ways of becoming more productive and more efficient because the environment expects it. They can't work more hours; they are already doing that. They cannot become more diligent. They cannot become smarter.

"What they can do is have an outside person make minor adjustments."

Ranker says the modern-day chief executive is not very different from a professional athlete. "A person at a high

peak performance level such as an Olympic runner has a coach, so why should it be different for a CEO?" Ranker asks.

**"As long as you wish to stay in the game in what is a very competitive environment, the coach's role is integral to your success."**

Gary has coached more than 100 executives at General Electric, and his clients include a number of high-profile Australian chiefs.

The bulk of his work has traditionally come from the United States and Europe, but Ranker says he now spends about a third of his time working in China, where demand for executive coaching is booming.

Ranker's advantage is that he has spent time on both sides of the desk, which enables him to build trust. He has held senior executive roles at Hallmark Cards and Textron Inc and worked all over the world.

He says it is sometimes difficult giving advice to people who are used to being told what they want to hear.

"These are very successful people and that actually gets in the way. When someone gets to the CEO level almost no-one is willing to give them truth, let alone small suggestions on how they can improve," he says.

"It is an extraordinarily lonely role. Everyone has an agenda and you have to think about what you say all the time.

Then there are the people coming to you who mostly have something that they want"

Finding a balance between work and life is almost impossible at a senior level, he says. Personal relationships often take a back seat, while even the pressure to look fit and healthy is a challenge in a time-constrained role.

"We expect CEOs to look very fit. Yet that person has even less time to work out in the gym, and has more propensity to have something to drink or avoid exercise," he says.

"I do try and help people have balance, but I do realise if you accept a position as CEO it is impossible to have that work life balance. You have to accept there is a price you are paying."