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## Coach Larry Robertson takes the blinkers off CEOs



Bosses succeed at management, where the daily questions are what, how and when. But a leader must also confront who, why and where. Bjorn Rune Lie

by **Mark Abernethy**

It's lonely at the top? If some of the executive surveys are to be trusted it seems that the further you rise in an organisation, the less likely you are to support your direct reports, inspire your teams or spend time with your people. You're even less likely to be a woman.

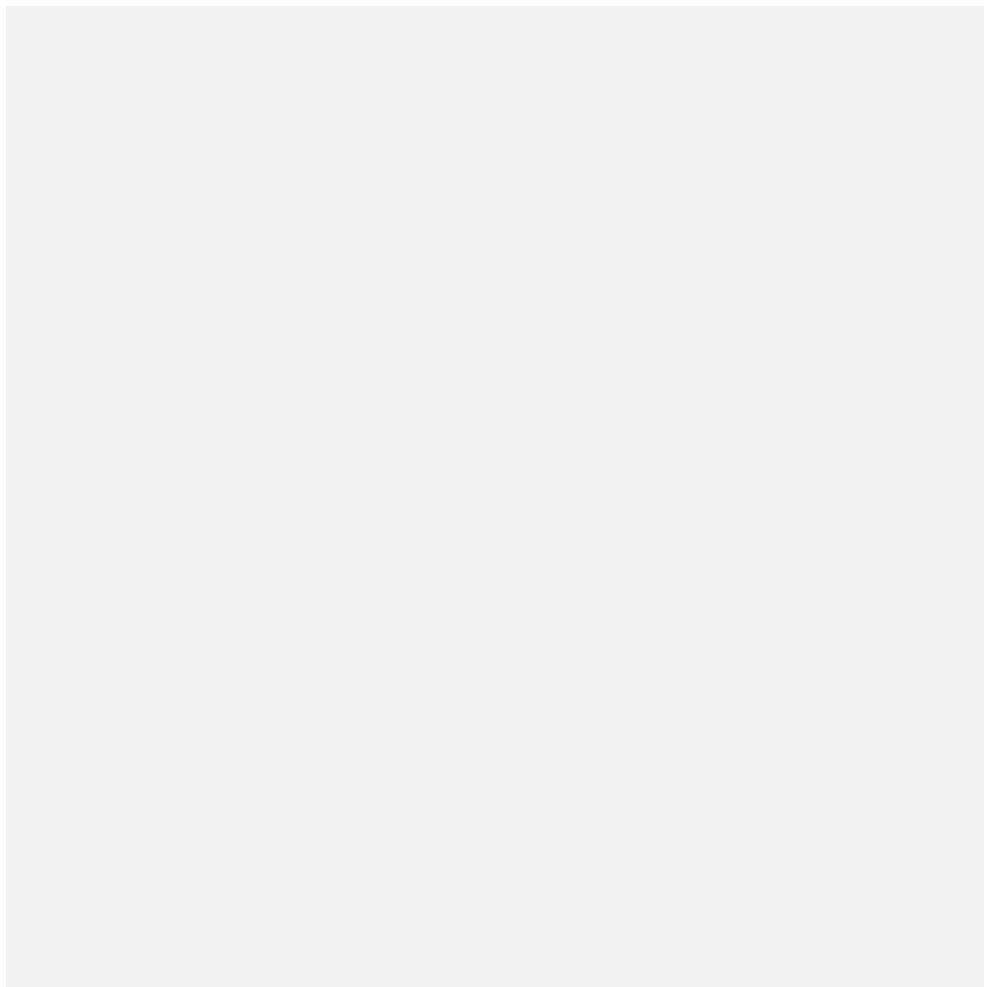
The Corporate Executive Board survey last year labelled Australian chief executives as suffering from tunnel vision because they know how to lovingly tend their home patches while letting the outliers freeze in Siberia.

It seems there isn't enough love going on, although money isn't the problem. In *The Australian Financial Review's* [latest Executive Salary Survey](#) the top 20 chief executives' total remunerations range from \$7.8 million at Suncorp to \$19.5 million at Nine Entertainment.

The problem is that when people have the chance to lead a large organisation they come with technical skills but not necessarily human ones. So many seek out some sort of coaching or advice to make the transition from competent manager to

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successful leader. Two of the better-known coaches and advisers in the corporate eyries have foreign accents and distinctive styles.



Executive coach Chip Mcfarlane: CEOs may have the technical skill but lack the human ones. **Natalie Boog**

"People I've worked with say they've been 'larried'," says Larry Robertson, a leadership consultant at Sydney consulting firm, Robertson Burns. "I'm sure they mean it as a compliment."

Robertson admits he may get away with more than the typical adviser, perhaps because he sounds like, "an upper-class English twit whose been to all the right schools." Which he is.

Robertson had a privileged childhood, went to Cambridge and Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and was commissioned in the Irish Guards. After working in advertising in London and Sydney he formed Robertson Burns and has been working with leaders at every level since.

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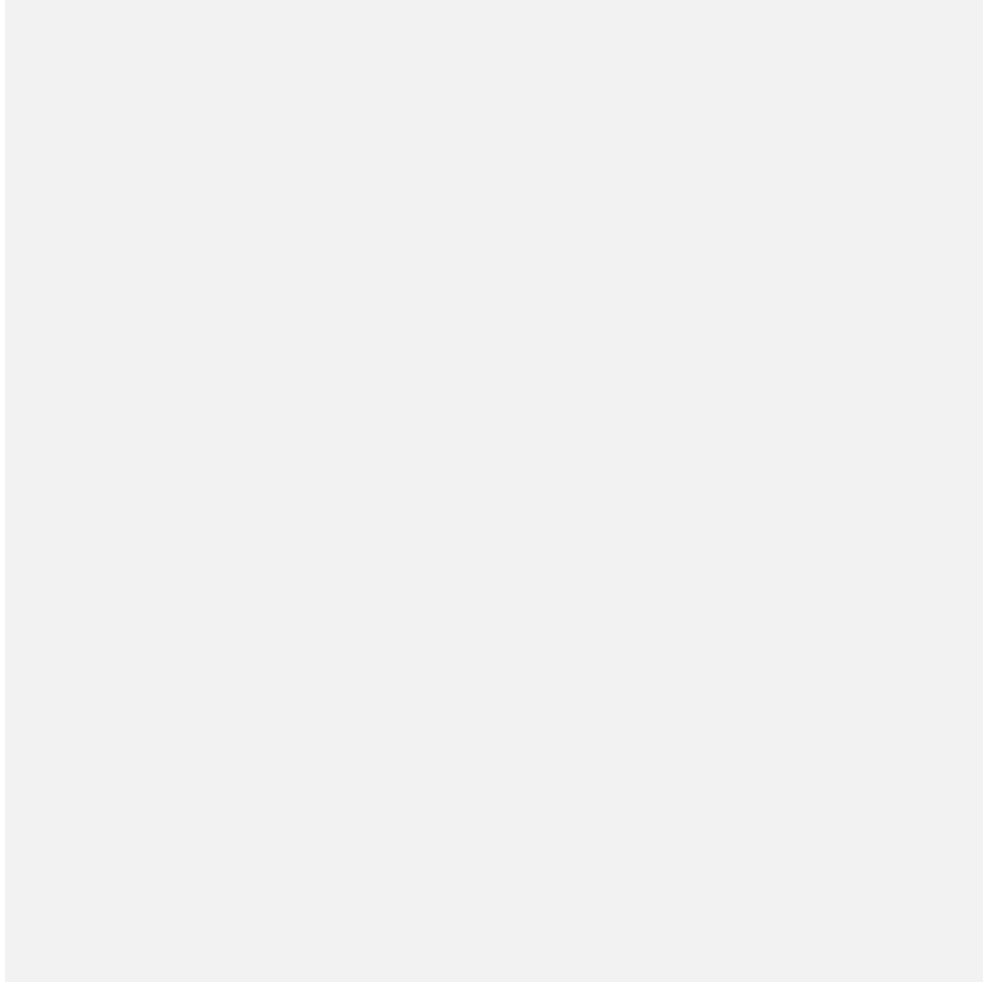
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"I can't help people much with technical skills," says Robertson, in Sydney. "The people I work with are much smarter than me. There are some very clever people in the executive ranks – my job is to bring out the whole person, because that's when you can truly lead.

"I can be confronting, cheeky and – frankly – difficult, but there's value in it."

Robertson aims squarely at some very old concepts: respect, trust and purpose.

"At the heart of every good leader is an ability to connect with people and make them feel the trust and the respect, an understand the purpose. People are motivated by these things – they want to follow."

He says leaders succeed at management, where the daily questions are what, how and when. But a leader must also confront who, why and where.

"I challenge my clients," says Robertson. "Why would someone take a job with you? Why follow you or invest in you or buy from you? Good leaders start the day by looking in the mirror and asking 'why?'

"A manager has proved themselves in substance, many times. But to succeed as a leader they have to bring the sentiment. They have to give a reason to be followed,

often under a lot of pressure."

The good news, according to Robertson, is leaders can be made. He says many corporate success stories have it in them, they just need someone to show them how to reveal the whole person again.

Robertson talks about freeing the human from the machine, and about the battles he's had with senior managers from HR, corporate comms, legal and investor relations.

"The machine is there to protect leaders and give them an easy ride if they want it. They can parrot corporate mission statements about optimising shareholder value, or instead go the edge of a stage and really communicate with shareholders. Which of those is the leader?"

He's referring to a time he sat with a chairman who was being furnished with speeches and PowerPoint slides for the AGM, at which massive losses were going to be being announced.

"Politely ignoring the comms-legal people, I asked this chair of one of the country's largest companies to be humble and courageous, and just talk with his shareholders. He gave an informal three-minute speech and remained on the edge of that stage for five-and-a-half hours, answering every question. That's a leader."

## CUTTING THROUGH THE JARGON

Robertson says leadership is 80 per cent communication and removing jargon and dense language from corporate communications is "absolutely essential for effective leadership."

"You know, Winston Churchill had one of the great vocabularies, but his speeches had simple words, short sentences and clear meanings. Leaders set the tone when they communicate – they're golden opportunities."

Along with communication and human qualities, he sees culture as a powerful agenda which is always set by leaders. Culture, he says, drives performance.

"A simple example; you go into a meeting room where another team has just left, and there's coffee cups left on the table and chairs in disarray," says Robertson. "Real leaders are respectful. They leave people and places better better than they found them."

Another executive coach with a distinctive foreign voice is Chip McFarlane, the former New Yorker from International Executive Coaching, who also coaches the coaches.

He says Australian senior managers are smart, hard-working people who can get things done. But when they step up to the big chair, the role changes.

"Leaders have to think more deeply, about some deep questions," says McFarlane.

"When you're a manager, your role, your title and your performance is tightly defined by the organisation. But a leader is beyond definitions – these are people who inspire. You know a good leader because when they leave an organisation and go elsewhere, their direct reports will follow."

## THREE REASONS TO GET A COACH

McFarlane says there are three types of coaching engagement: where a leader has to arrest a decline in the business and they start by changing themselves; where a senior manager is preparing themselves to go for the top job and wants a new style; and a successful executive who wants to step up from "survival mode, into self-actualising mode."

Leaders can be made, says McFarlane, and it takes a strong person to alter a personality-style. "In New York, executive coaches don't take engagement for less than six months. You can create a habit in between 120 and 160 days. That's what we're doing – changing habits, changing thinking."

He starts an engagement with some very challenging questions of his client, and pushes from there. All good leaders have to start with understanding the importance of relationships and the way teams build relationships like a family.

He points to the coach of the Australian Wallabies, Michael Cheika, who took his team to the Rugby World Cup final having taken over the team only 12 months earlier, when it was in disarray.

"Cheika didn't teach those guys how to play rugby," says McFarlane. "He got them to believe in themselves, to act as a team and chase a goal. That's a what a leader does – gets the team to achieve greater than just the sum of their parts."

In the end, says McFarlane, leaders want to improve the world they live in, not take the path of least resistance.

It echoes Larry Robertson. "We have to leave things better than we found them," he says. "Anyone who has had a decent education has the responsibility to do that."

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