



When you make it to the top at a young age, the pressure to perform is even more intense. On the other hand, as technology transforms our world, youth can be an advantage for business leaders. The *Boss* Young Executives of 2014 recognise that the leadership skills needed to successfully navigate the business landscape are changing, too, and success lies in being comfortable with ambiguity, open about their weaknesses and head coach of their team rather than master and commander.

In September, 10 young executives, chosen from 85 applicants, were put through a gruelling day-long exercise formulated by talent management agency DDI. Playing the role of chief executive of a fictional company, they were asked to analyse the gaps in the business, devise a strategy to address the weaknesses, present a vision statement and deal with a series of mini-crises. As the day wore on, the pressure intensified.

Interspersed with the role play was a panel interview with top Australian business figures including George Frazis, chief executive of St George Bank, Michael Rebelo, chief executive

of Saatchi & Saatchi Australia, and Bonnie Boezeman, former director of PayPal Australia and chairman non-executive at POLi Payments, who grilled the candidates about their leadership style and strategic skills.

As the CEO simulation progressed, the demands accumulated, revealing not just the executives' strong suits, but also the gaps in their capabilities. Ultimately, six *Boss* Young Executives were selected.

"Under intense pressure, on a day like that, what comes out is who you really are," says Mark Hewlett, national head of business development, fuel and convenience at Woolworths. "And no matter how hard you try to hide from that, I don't think you can."

Other participants found the process clarifying: "As a senior executive you operate in a bubble day to day and this process helps burst that bubble, and forces you to ask, 'Is this really the way you should be operating?'" says Andrew Conway, chief executive of the Institute of Public Accountants.

According to Young Executive Lauren Williams, chief executive officer of

# YOUNG EXECUTIVES 2014

The high calibre cohort share the secrets of their success from their careers and the *Boss* competition.

STORY JOANNE GRAY PHOTO JANIE BARRETT



Mark Hewlett is pictured on next page.

CarsGuide.com.au, the key challenge in her job, which the candidates also tackled during the DDI simulation, is forging a purpose that engages all employees.

"One of the things that really struck me about the day was the need to create a vision. There are a million things going on every day in a business and you have to rise above that and always show a clear path of what needs to be done and why we do what we do."

In her role Williams says she has been challenged by the need to make the swift transition from a manager to leader.

"I've come up through the ranks and I'm a doer, and all of a sudden all the doers are looking at me. It's about me making sure the

leaders in my team are making sure the doers are on the right page and providing the vision and leadership to help them manage that."

Philip Hardy, national leader, financial services assurance and advisory at Deloitte, says one of the key lessons from his own recent career, which was highlighted by the Young Executives' experience, is the value of decisiveness.

"The need to consult and get different perspectives is critical. But at the end of the day, as a leader, you need to get the team to make a decision, even if that means you make the decision or you have to make it through others," he says. "Sometimes, it is unimportant what the answer is, people just want an answer, so they can get on with it," says Hardy. "You can worry too much about getting it right, whereas agility comes through getting it right most of the time."

Hewlett says he has learned to calm his own tendencies to take impulsive decisions in a domineering way by nominating a "questioner in chief" in all his team meetings.

"If I am the one that's implicitly making the decision, I want this person to say, 'Hang on, are we all on board, is that the right thing for the business?' That's helped me put into context, is this a group decision or am I just being impulsive? I want my team to be comfortable to challenge."

All six panelists agree that as leaders in their organisations they've had to develop self awareness.

"It's taught me to be honest with my team about my weaknesses," says Conway. "When I first became CEO I was 28 and I said to my team, 'I don't have all the answers. But I will work with you to get them.'"

Hardy reckons that even though the appearance of diversity is important in a team, the real value goes far beyond perceptions.

"If you are clear on what they bring to cover a flank, for you, that's so critical and that requires you to have an honest appraisal of where you are at."

Equally, team members need to know exactly where they stand. Renee Garner, general manager, retail regulation and compliance at EnergyAustralia, says straight talking is one of EnergyAustralia's key values, and the value of tackling the uncomfortable conversations head on is reinforced by the >



**MARK HEWLETT**  
national head of business development, fuel and convenience at Woolworths.

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what do they need from me at the moment? Do they actually need consoling and a guiding sort of leader at that point because they know they've made a mistake? Do they need a wake-up call or do they need direction?"

Barnett says the role play was also useful because with little knowledge of the business, no assumptions could be made about how to tackle problems. "Because I knew nothing about this business," says Barnett, "I couldn't come in with preconceived ideas about what it should be and what should happen."

"When I got to the end of the day what I realised was that I was not guessing and making those assumptions, so I actually went through with a much clearer process to get to the outcome. There's nothing that prevents me from doing that day to day in my own job."

Mark Busine, managing director, DDI Australia, says the *Boss* Young Executives possess the leadership skills and behaviours judged in DDI's Global Leadership Forecast 2014-2015 as being most critical to success, including retaining and developing talent, managing complexity, leading change, leading with integrity and having an entrepreneurial mindset.

This year's young executive cohort, he says, "demonstrated balance across interpersonal, leadership and business management domains". But their key capability gap was the need to continue to focus on coaching and developing others.

"While individually they recognise and embrace opportunities for change they need to ensure that they take others on the journey," he says, "and recognise that others may not immediately identify with and embrace the need for change."

### WHAT THE JUDGES SAID

This year's judging panel have strong views on the new skills that leaders need in these times and how these differ from capabilities that were valued in the past.

George Frazis, St George Bank chief executive and one of the Young Executives 2014 judges said the winners were distinguished "by their broad outlook". "Their view of the world is that it is intimately interconnected and so they have developed a holistic outlook. They were not just results driven, they had a sense of the importance of diversity of thought, innovation and sustainability." Frazis believes tomorrow's leaders will also have to motivate and influence in a more ambiguous environment, without the authority conferred by a hierarchy. "They will need to think strategically about how to release potential through motivation and collaboration."

Leaders must also have a much deeper understanding of technology. "They will not have the option to delegate this capability," he says. "New leaders will have to grasp the digital and mobility revolution in the context of their own fields, and how this will transform their industry or their company. It used to be sufficient to be a quick follower, but the leaders of tomorrow will have to lead to stay ahead of the curve to remain relevant and valuable."

Bonnie Boezemann, chairman at POLi Payments who has been a Young Executives judge since its inception 11 years ago, offered some sage advice to those who feel the urge to constantly push their careers forward by moving companies. "It is OK to nurture your career with a good company with a great leader," says Boezemann, "and not be pressured to change jobs every few years because of the Gen Y, X and Z's peer pressure to constantly move." She says they have to be self-starters, have a strong ethical framework and respect their employees as well as their peers and bosses.

Mike Rebelo, CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi Sydney says the judges found it exciting that this year's winners "were true agents of change in their businesses, not just adaptors of change". The six shared valuable qualities: "Empathy, courage and passion permeated through all of our winners," Rebelo says. **BOSS**

role play. She found the exercise useful because it reinforced the need to think strategically about key interactions.

"What I got out of that day was planning. There was so much going on. There was so much stopping and thinking, 'How am I going to manage my time? How am I going to prepare?' That allows you to think strategically but also get into the issues and plan in an effective way for those moments, so that you are having the right conversations."

"The difficult conversations drive a better outcome for everybody because there are clear expectations," she says.

It's crucial to understand before the "tough" conversation "what does the person needs to hear from you, versus what you want to say", says Marc Barnett, chief operating officer at Mi9. "If I'm frustrated and angry that you've made a mistake and I say that, I'll feel better because I got it off my chest. If you shoot from the hip, you feel better about it, but you've dented their confidence further and you are not even getting the outcome you want."

"So as a leader you need to suspend what you want to get out of it and think through