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One of former ANZ boss Mike Smith's war stories includes being shot at work. Elizabeth Proust says CEOs need a safe space. PHOTOS: EAMON GALLAGHER

# FORGET THEORY. THIS IS REAL LIFE

**Mentoring** A new club makes CEOs' experience available to a rising generation of bosses, writes Patrick Durkin.

Former ANZ chief executive Mike Smith says it can be very lonely at the top. And when it's all over, chief executives can often feel like all their hard-fought war stories are wasted.

The former long-time bank boss, who was once shot during a kidnapping attempt at his job, has enlisted the help of a crop of high-profile ex-CEOs to start a mentoring club to share their experience with current and aspiring business leaders.

The list includes former and outgoing Telstra chiefs David Thodey and Andy Penn; former Wesfarmers CEO Richard Goyder; former Westpac bosses Brian Hartzler and Gail Kelly; and former Elders and Coates Hire CEO Malcolm Jackman.

"This not about management theory. There is no theory here. This is real life," Smith tells BOSS during an interview about the Mentor List in Melbourne.

"I felt it would be crazy to lose the experience someone like I had over so many years, and just lose that and not give that knowledge over to people. They can do what they like with it," Smith says. "This is not prescriptive. It's not being a teacher. It's saying: this is what I did, this is what happened and this is why this happened."

Smith says most people have no idea about the pressure of being the boss. There are few people you can turn to for help, which many CEOs fear would be perceived as weakness.

"What a lot of people don't understand is that being a CEO is quite a lonely role," he says. "The buck stops with you, everything stops with you. You are there to make the tough decisions. If it's not a 50-50 decision, then you shouldn't be getting it."

Other politicians and government specialists to lead a masterclass include former foreign minister Julie Bishop and long-time public servant and now leading company director Elizabeth Proust.

"Often people get to be CEO and suddenly a minister or prime minister wants to talk to them and it's totally foreign," Proust says. "Some people think, 'Well, you just ring the minister', but if you're working on energy or technological policies, you're working with the public service at different levels."

"If you think about the challenges of being a CEO, and they are becoming more and more complex, you need a safe space – sometimes that's your board, but not always – a safe space to say: 'This is an emerging issue. How are you dealing with it?'"

Asked about the most common mistake he sees among new CEOs, Smith warns that "ego" – something Smith was never accused of lacking himself – gets the better of many leaders.

"Ego gets the better of a lot of people,"

Smith says. "Starting to believe their own bullshit. I've seen that happen many times. And often people surround themselves with people who don't tend to push back. If you look at Vladimir Putin, he's a classic example. He has no pushback and I don't think he actually knows the full story."

Smith has "lots of war stories", literally. When he was running HSBC's Argentina business in 1999, he was shot in an attempted kidnapping, before ramming his Jaguar past his attackers to escape.

He says "learning from mistakes, as well as successes, is equally important". Smith has faced his own share of criticism for ANZ's failed Asia strategy. But he says the big lesson on Asia is "too many eggs got put in [the China] basket".

"All relationships have to reset occasionally," he says. "You generally need a catalyst and the change of government will be a catalyst here."

"Having said that, the China of ten years ago is very different to the China of today. We were too dependent on one market as a country, and it just got too easy, and I think business became complacent."

"The great learning there is like any supply chain you have to have choices and different markets."

Smith also admits his "big, bold" leadership style is now unfashionable, but "the core tenets [of good leadership] are absolutely the same".

The list of members – those willing to be mentioned – is almost as impressive and crosses all sectors. The names include Lendlease CEO Tony Lombardo, Charter Hall CEO David Harrison, Washington H Soul Pattinson CEO Todd Barlow, Hoyts CEO Damian Keogh, Platinum Asset Management CEO Andrew Clifford, Asahi Beverages CEO Robert Iervasi, ABC managing director David Anderson, Linfox CEO Mark Mazurek, NBN Co CEO Stephen Rue, John Holland CEO Joe Barr, Melbourne Mayor Sally Capp, Rio Tinto Australia CEO Kellie Parker and Salesforce CEO Pip Marlow, among many others.

The mentor group is invitation only but has expanded to include a crop of aspiring CEOs such as AMP chief financial officer James Georgeson, BHP chief financial officer David Lamont, IFM Investors chief financial officer Anthea Kane, EnergyAustralia chief operating officer Liz Westcott and Wesfarmers chief financial officer Anthony Gianotti.

Asked what tops the list of problems confronting the CEOs, Smith nominates the skills shortages and rising input costs, the major geopolitical trends driven by the war in Ukraine, tension with China and an emerging class divide from the new way of working after the pandemic. **AFR**

## BREAKFAST WITH THE BOSS



Things go better with honey: Optus chief executive Kelly Bayer Rosmarin tells Sally Patten how she keeps her email (and her sugar intake) under control.

**What time do you normally get up in the morning?**

It really depends. I work backwards from my first meeting and when I have to be in the office. I'm not a morning person. I can stay up until I am but I don't love getting up early, which is why I work backwards from when I have to get up. I generally wake up at around 6.15am or 6.30am. Most often I'm at work at 8.30.

**What's the first thing you do?**

Unsurprisingly, I check my phone first. The technology we provide is used by everybody and I like to make sure I know what's happened overnight. I will check my text messages and my emails to make sure there's nothing urgent or that's going to require me to replan part of the day.

**What time do you have your first coffee?**

About 10 minutes before I leave. I get ready very, very quickly. I'm not a fussy person. I'm usually good to go within half an hour: shower, dress, make-up, everything. And then I like to have 10 or 15 minutes to sit and have a coffee with my husband and to play with the dog a little. I have a latte with one teaspoon of honey. I used to have three sugars. Then I cut down to two, then one sugar and then my husband read somewhere that coffee tastes nice with honey. He's actually been ratcheting down my honey.

**What do you do for breakfast?**

I usually don't have breakfast. Occasionally, if we've got cinnamon toast, I have some. Or if I have a work breakfast, I'll eat something. Or sometimes, I'll be hungry at 10 o'clock and get a toastie. It really depends on the day. The routine is definitely the coffee.

**Is there a reason that you don't have breakfast?**

It is purely prioritisation of my time. [It means I don't] have to think about another meal.

**How many coffees do you have a day?**

Three to four. [My last one is] usually before [the café] here closes at 4pm, just for that last boost for those last few hours.

**Do you do business breakfasts?**

Occasionally. I like breakfast and lunch, anything that builds a relationship and gets that level of intimacy and informality is really good. [Breakfast and lunch are] a lot more low-key than a big dinner.

**Do you do exercise during the week?**

I definitely try to exercise during the week. Before COVID-19 I used to have a personal trainer who was happy to come to my house at 9pm at night. She was happy to come the nights I was free. I found a personal trainer who won't train me at 9pm but we train at 7.15 one night a week and I focus on strength and footwork.

And I play netball at least once a week in the evening. I'm training quite hard for netball because I'm representing Australia in The Maccabiah Games (sometimes referred to as the Jewish Games) in July.

I've got a frozen shoulder just as a complication and [the trainer] is helping me with getting movement into the shoulder. I do physio at least once a week for the shoulder because it's a lot of pain all the time.

Then we play netball on the Saturday in the league, and occasionally on Sunday we'll have an extra game.

My two daughters are playing in the



Kelly Bayer Rosmarin checks her phone as soon as she wakes up. PHOTO: NATALIE BOOG

under-18 and under-16 teams as well, and my husband's playing in over-45s soccer.

**Have you always played netball?**

Yes we're a big netball family. We're very into it. My mum played netball for South Africa.

I feel like anything you do, you have to give it your full effort and put in 100 per cent and be committed. There's so much that especially young girls can learn from team sport. It's not just about the game. It teaches them leadership resilience, how you step up in a tough game and put in extra effort and find that bit of lift, and how you respond to a win or a loss.

**Do you have breakfast on the weekends?**

Weekends are probably the least time I have for breakfast because I'll get up just before I have to go to kids' sport, or the physio if I've crammed that in before the kids' sport.

**What does your email inbox look like?**

I'm a huge email classifier. I love email because you can attach different coloured flags. I have flags that show it's either something I have to do, or it's something that I've sent to somebody else to do, and I'm waiting for them to follow up with me, or it's for reading, or it's for a specific project.

That really helps me manage a very large volume of emails. It means that if I've got 15 minutes spare, I can look at the to-do's. I don't have to look at everything because I've already classified it and I know what's happening.

**Do you have a zero inbox policy?**

Zero is very difficult. But if I'm under 20 to-do's, I'm happy. I'm very deliberate with how I spend my time. I'm the opposite of spontaneous. I run a tight diary because I want to fit everything in. Every half-hour is locked in, in advance. I never get to the end of the week and think: "Did I spend my time [properly]?" because I'm very deliberate about it.

I get my team to send me a weekly summary in three sections: the key achievements for the week, the key things that they're worried about, and anything else on their mind that they want me to be aware of. **AFR**