

The CEO willing to be vulnerable to be better

Turning point A workplace where people thrive.

Deanne Stewart

I left university and started out at BT Funds Management where I had the privilege of an amazing mentor.

She sat me down and said I needed to get more life experience and look really clearly at the problems I was trying to solve. She really encouraged me to do an MBA and I had the opportunity to do one at Yale.

The real reason why my mentor encouraged me to do it was to learn far more about how you create the strategic framework to solve problems that you face. That gave me a lot more structure and context to the way that I solve little everyday problems or big problems that I face as a CEO.

You say: "Let's look at the purpose, let's look at the people, let's look at the process." You can very quickly solve a problem rather than getting caught up in the minutia, all the detail. That's an example of a framework that came straight out of my MBA.

(At the age of 30 she was running an international business unit at Merrill Lynch with a brief to turn it around.)

I knew exactly what we needed to do,

I had a really clear vision and a clear strategy. But six months into it Merrill Lynch did some formal leadership training which involved 360-degree feedback.

That was a really pivotal moment. My direct reports were saying: "You have a really clear vision, you have a really clear strategy, but we don't have that as a team."

For me that felt like a real comment on my leadership style and what I needed to do. I took it upon myself and said: "I'm only 30 years of age, I'm not a perfect people leader. This is an education, this is an opportunity for me to improve."

I got an independent person to come in and run a day with my team. I said: "I'm here to learn and if you're willing to be vulnerable, I'm willing to be vulnerable if it will help me become a better leader."

If you don't let yourself be vulnerable you won't learn, you won't get better. If you think you're good at everything, or if you pretend you're good at everything, people won't put trust in you.

They were really supportive. They said: "Here's what we need from you. We need you to be more collaborative, we want to do this together. We will be so much more motivated and engaged."

That was a pivotal moment. It really changed my leadership style. I've become a far more compassionate and



Deanne Stewart ... willing to stay the course for a more collaborative workplace. PHOTO: DANIEL MUNOZ

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aring leader because of choosing to do something about that feedback.

Often in your earlier career you think

success is getting to a more senior position or earning more money. I got to a point where both were happening but I didn't feel I was personally thriving and really at my best.

I looked around me in financial services and saw lots of people in similar situations. There was lots of stress and exhaustion and I saw a lot of really senior leaders who were leading with their head and not their heart.

I thought, actually I have a really burning desire to create an environment where people come to

work and they thrive, they don't just survive. That set me to the next chapter in my journey where I have the opportunity to run an organisation.

My real desire is to create a special environment where people use their head and their heart, where there is high performance but also care and compassion.

I want to create a culture where you can have both.

Deanne Stewart is CEO of MetLife Australia.