

RENATE VOGT
is general
manager
regulation
at electricity
distribution
network
(poles
and wires)
Powercor
Australia.



Advice for amping up

Stepping up to an executive role had unexpected challenges for Renate Vogt but a coach helped her navigate them.

PHOTO JESSIE MARLOW



MICHELLE GIBBINGS
was an
executive in
companies
such as NAB
and AMP for
more than
15 years
before
founding her
coaching and
leadership
practice.

■ MICHELLE GIBBINGS

Renate Vogt was going from a head-of role to a general manager role, and in her organisation that puts her at the table with the chief executive.

Prior to her stepping up, I had done some work with her broader team and the person she was taking over from, and I had been doing some coaching work with her. That work continued as she moved into that new role. When we started, we were working through where could her career go.

I don't have a formula, because if you do that you're assuming every individual is the same. I always take the position that everyone

is different and they will come into the experience with their own background, their own style, their own experiences of what's worked for them in the past and what hasn't.

It's about really understanding them, and then me working with them to go, 'How do I best work with you to help you get to where you need to get to?' Whereas if you say, 'In session one we do this and in session two we do that', you deny the organic development of the relationship and what that person needs to get out of it.

I always ask people at the beginning of the coaching arrangement, 'What are the objectives, what do you want to get out of this?' Often those objectives will change because something at work changes.

Every coach has a different background. I do a mixture of coaching and mentoring because of my corporate background. As a coach, you don't give advice, you ask lots of questions so your clients discover insights and work out what they need to do.

Most people come to me because of my experience in corporates. They trust the experience that I've got; that I'm not just talking from a theoretical stance and can actually share life experiences because I've been through similar things.

Sometimes when people move into a step-up role, they're also looking for mentoring because they want to talk to someone who's been there. I'm always really clear when I am in a coaching role and when am I in a

mentoring role. In Renate's new role, some of the stakeholders are the same, but she's also working with different people. She needs to establish herself with a team that she's worked with before, but in a different capacity. She's now the leader.

I always say to women, you need to know what you stand for, because being clear about that is really important. It comes down to what line you're not going to cross. If you don't know what that line is, you can get yourself into ethical dilemmas really easily.

Renate's a very fast learner, very good at what she does and very smart. She can take on an idea, but then work out what she needs to do with it. And that's important, because it's not about taking someone's idea and going, 'This is what I'll do'.

It is a real privilege to work with people as they're going through this type of transition and to really see them blossom.

RENATE VOGT

I was promoted to an executive level. This was quite a step up and I felt I needed an external coach to provide me with advice and help me navigate this new role.

That Michelle is a female who has worked in a lot of male-dominated businesses was very attractive to me, because I work in a male-dominated utility where there is only about 20 per cent females.

This is a more strategic role. We manage the poles and wires that deliver electricity to nearly 1.8 million homes and businesses in Victoria.

We're a regulated business and so the Australian Energy Regulator decides what we charge our customers and sets our revenue for five-year periods. My role is to work with the regulators and governments.

I've been doing this work for about 16 years now. It's becoming more and more frantic, and politicised, but that just makes it very interesting.

Now I'm responsible for the whole division and I report to the CEO.

I didn't really have a clear career plan. I just always went into work each day; worked

very, very hard; made sure I got the best out of myself and others; and then it just happened.

I know that's very different from the way a lot of people go through their careers.

Michelle said, 'You need a clear plan in terms of what you're going to achieve in the next year.' I had never gone through that process before. The idea of stepping up was terrifying.

This is the first time I've used a coach. I have had sponsors and mentors in the past, but this is a formal and professional relationship. The great thing about Michelle is that she doesn't work in the organisation, so she takes a very objective view.

It was my idea to work with Michelle. I knew her because she'd facilitated a lot of workshops for us.

She has a lot of energy. She's very pragmatic, very positive. It's really important, if you're going to have a coach, you need to have some personal rapport with them. Michelle is good at helping me take action towards achieving set goals and she's very good at just providing confidence.

Before I was promoted to the executive management team, the company sent me on an executive management course targeted at females, which I found very beneficial.

Taking this leadership role and having responsibility for achieving tasks didn't worry me too much, because I've been doing it for such a long time. Now I'm responsible for a larger team and the entire business.

I've had to improve my understanding of how the network operates and the

“ I'm being exposed to people with different ways of operating; it's quite something. ”

FOR BEST RESULTS



To work together successfully, coaches and clients need to share these four key qualities, says Michelle Gibbings:



TRUST:

clients need to feel safe to be open and transparent.



RESPECT:

it's about the client's needs.



GOAL FOCUS:

coaching works best when there are specific goals.



LEARNING

MINDSET:

the client will go outside their comfort zones and they need to be supported.

new technologies that are emerging. I've had to improve my understanding of the operational aspect.

Michelle would provide frameworks to help me be very clear what my goals were, whether or not they were personal development; improving my understanding of the business; developing better relationships with people that I work with, particularly networking; and then assessing what actions would fall under each of those headings.

She's also there to provide advice with anything in particular going on at work.

It is a far more political environment than I had been used to. I'm quite happy to deal with our external stakeholders and governments and regulators, it's the internal stuff that's more challenging.

Each of the business units has a very different culture. Our business unit is a bit of a think tank for the rest of the business, so we are a bit academic and quiet. Now I'm at that next level I'm being exposed to different people with different ways of operating; it's quite something.

I am also our diversity and inclusion leader. One of the great difficulties we have is that there are very few women in electrical engineering, so there are very few women in the pipeline.

We've done a lot of work establishing a scholarship for female electrical engineers. Now, we've got five female apprentices, which I'm very proud of. But it's going to take a long, long time before we even get close to 50 per cent.

I've taken some of the tools that Michelle has provided for me professionally and applied them to my personal life. That includes exercising more and painting my house. I do lots of running, bike-riding and swimming. I've got two children, and I work full-time, so exercise is my time-out and it's great for reducing stress.

Working with Michelle I've become far more clear about what I want to achieve. I feel far more confident and I feel far more effective.

Michelle Gibbings and Renate Vogt spoke to Theo Chapman.