

'Broccoli time' and other tips to boost your year

Leadership Executive coaches say taking a few small, strategic actions can produce some big career wins, writes Hannah Tattersall.

With artificial intelligence expected to reshape the workplace in profound yet indistinct ways, corporate leaders are – not surprisingly – preoccupied with what it all means for the people who work for them, as well as their own careers.

Executive coaches in Australia say "AI readiness" is one of the top topics of discussion with their clients, along with the often inseparable issues of rapid organisational change and complexity. "Leaders today are seeking support to navigate relentless change, not just in technology but in people and culture," says Melinda McCormack, who describes herself as a leadership "futurist" and change strategist.

Leanne Wall, who previously experienced burnout in her own corporate career, says that in the past year her coaching conversations have shifted from "career development to career survival".

She says small behavioural tweaks can be transformational, and encourages her executive clients to "lead with curiosity", for example. "Replace judgment with questions, and it transforms relationships and builds trust," she tells them. And, acknowledge and validate others. "Recognition is often overlooked but has an outsized impact on motivation and culture".

Michelle Gibbings, the author of *Career Leap: How to reinvent and liberate your career*, says overwhelmed leaders can try clarifying their trade-offs. "You can do anything, not everything," she says. "The most effective leaders choose where to invest time and energy. They focus on what they can control and influence, rather than wasting effort on what sits beyond their reach. That clarity sharpens decision-making, lowers stress, and re-centres purpose."

1 Take control of your diary

"There is never enough time or energy, and so many people let others fill their diary," says Liane McGrath, a coach, facilitator and the chief executive of Gram Consulting Group. Execs who take control of their own calendar "ensure they are working on the right stuff and taking time for themselves".

2 Set aside 'broccoli time'

"Start every day with one small, high-value task of 15 minutes or less that nourishes your long game – the sort of thing that is important, but not urgent,"

says Nick Orchard, founder of Uncut Coaching and the coaching program The Big Refresh. "This is 'broccoli time' – a bite-sized investment in the health and nutrition of your long-term goals."

"This might be research, reaching out to a prospective mentor, critically reflecting on the previous day's meetings," Orchard says, adding that *Harvard Business Review's* The Power of Small Wins principle offers a great blueprint for this way of thinking. "Ringfence and protect the time. It changes the tone of your whole day."

3 Fail well

"We are wired to avoid failure, we don't like to feel vulnerable and put ourselves out there as someone who has failed. I call it the F bomb," says the author of *Mastering the Art of Reinvention*, Gary Waldon.

"But in times of uncertainty, there is one certainty and that is we will all experience failure. Take action, do something – anything. Taking a small step means that we are moving and growing. It has a positive impact on the feeling of being stuck and not in control. It's making a choice to keep moving and help strengthen the reinvention mindset."

4 Don't use your phone before breakfast

Danielle Colley, author of *The Chocolate Bar Life*, believes we are all living in a high state of reactivity due to the phones attached to our palms.

"Have clear boundaries around your phone usage and your availability," she says. "No phone in the bedroom, no emails after X time, no phone before breakfast and a shower, for instance."

5 Distance yourself from your anxiety

"One of the simplest and quickest ways to reduce anxiety, when you're 'on the spot' such as before a big meeting or presentation, is to visualise stepping into a 'best' version of yourself," says Sara Sabin, an executive coach and neuroscience practitioner.

"This serves to distance you from your emotions. Visualising just before the meeting how you want it to go, and how you deal with challenges, gets you in the best frame of mind to bring your A-game. This is a practice that you do for 60 seconds before a meeting starts, as a mental rehearsal."



Dumping low-impact, low-urgency work will ensure you have enough time to focus on what matters. ILLUSTRATION: BETHANY RAE

6 Focus on being present

"If you want more presence, you have to be more present," Sabin says. "Emotions are contagious, and so you want people to feel that a) you're regulated and calm and b) you are present with them, listening to them, and have a sense of their motivations."

"My clients are always surprised that the less they say, the better. Because when they do speak, it's powerful, valuable and people listen."

7 Forget confidence; choose connection

Two years ago, executives were seeking guidance on their presentation skills and confidence, says executive training coach and author of *Winning The Room*, Jonathan Pease. Today, they want to know how to get cut-through.

"Leaders have realised that in an AI-driven, hybrid world, human connection is now the top strategic advantage," he says. "Before jumping into data or logic, tell the room how you feel or what's at stake. Humans connect to feeling before facts. Anecdotal stories are also a great way to unlock emotion and empathy."

8 Stop saying 'yes' so often

"Rising leaders are rewarded for being dependable; senior leaders are rewarded for being discerning," says Robert Wilson, a professional certified coach with the International Coaching Federation who works for boutique firm Peoplenax. "The shift is from proving to prioritising."

"What you choose not to do becomes as important as what you take on. Discernment is the new productivity."

9 Delegate more

Delegate more and watch productivity soar, says Dan Auerbach, an executive

coach and the clinical director at Associated Counsellors and Psychologists Sydney.

"People want to grow. Give them a clear path and real responsibility, and they'll run through walls for you."

10 Focus on nailing the first 17 seconds

When presenting, plan and land the first 17 seconds, Pease says. "That's the window where people are at their most receptive. It's also when they decide whether to listen. Designing the right words, tone and pace in your introduction has an outsized impact."

11 Slow down

"Most people speak too fast, especially when they care about the subject matter or when they're nervous," Pease says.

To help in getting your message across and build connection, "building in deliberate pauses, getting your breathing right, and knowing the motivation behind each individual point can make a huge difference".

12 Dump low-urgency work

Having the courage to dump low-impact, low-urgency work is key to having enough time in the day to focus on what matters, says Sandy Halpin, a former accountant who founded executive coaching organisation Capital Idea.

"Reframe delegation from getting rid of an activity that you don't like, or that takes up time, to giving your team an opportunity to progress," she says.

13 Network up

"Make time to have a conversation with someone interesting in your network who's at least five years ahead of you in their career," says executive coach

Nicole McKenna, who suggests it's never too early to build connections.

Do this at least once every few months and invest in that relationship.

"Think of it as your investment in your future possibilities. And don't feel bad about it because they'll get as much out of it as you will."

14 Master the 'so what?'

Leaders know not everyone will be on board with their strategy or ideas. The best way to deal with pushback is to be in control of your message, Auerbach says. "Practise distilling your message into one killer sentence. Then build out three supporting points – one sentence each – backed by data," he says.

"Finish by restating your takeaway in a way that lands emotionally and drives action. Simple, clear, impossible to misunderstand."

15 Do what you say you're going to do

No one should underestimate the power of being highly reliable, says executive coach Tony Frost.

"Always do what you say you will do, on time and if you are going to miss a deadline, communicate this (and the reason) in advance."

Another simple yet important overlooked skill is listening, Frost says. "Become a better listener and stop interrupting other people. Surprisingly, few people are really good listeners. This can make a big difference."

16 Treat fear as information

"Fear is a signal that you are stretching and that it matters to you," Gibbings says. "The aim is not to eliminate it, but to learn from it. When you see fear as data to examine rather than a barrier to avoid, you build resilience, adaptability, and, in time, confidence."

17 Stare out the window

Many leaders spend all their time effectively running on a treadmill and not making any progress because they are dragged into too much detailed "doing" work, says accredited coach Sue Rosen, a former chief financial officer.

"Great leaders ask better questions rather than have all the answers. Overcoming their own assumptions about what a leader looks like is the work most leaders need to do." **AFR**



Executive coaches and workplace experts Michelle Gibbings, Nick Orchard, Sara Sabin, Jonathan Pease, Dan Auerbach and Sue Rosen.