

## BUSINESS EDUCATION

# NO DREAM IS TOO BIG FOR COACHING

Students in the Executive MBA program at the John Molson School of Business learn how to build on their assets and become well-rounded leaders

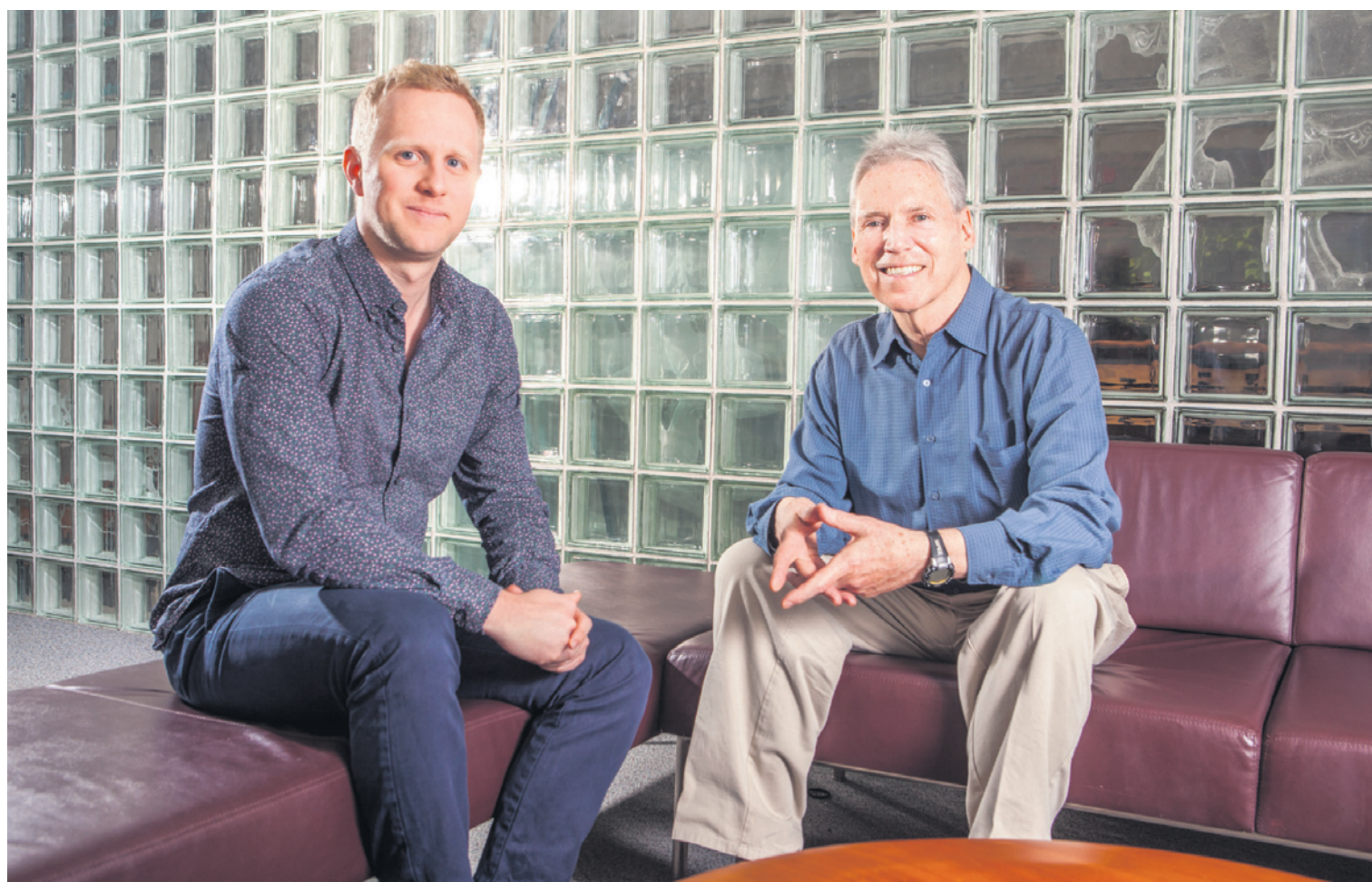
At Concordia University's John Molson School of Business (JMSB), students in the Executive MBA program are being coached to develop into a new style of leader — a business and community leader, a leader in all phases of life.

Traditional leadership development often involves a “360-degree assessment” in which an executive's peers, superiors and those who report to them are asked questions about their attributes and performance. The results are presented to the executive as a form of feedback which can be the basis for his or her development, often through an executive coaching session. What sets apart the Molson School's unique Leadership Effective and Development coaching program (LEAD) is the expansion of the traditional 360 degree assessment through “a second loop” in which the executive's health, interpersonal dynamics and social support systems are explored in relation to their overall effectiveness in living.

“We look at them emotionally, interpersonally, physically, psychologically, cognitively, in terms of their ecological awareness and what they are contributing or paying forward in the world,” James Gavin, who oversees LEAD, says. “We want to understand the individual in all dimensions of their lives.”

The loops around work and life fit the EMBA program's philosophy of taking a holistic approach to developing the “complete executive,” a leader who is committed to continuous learning, personal and professional development and contributing to his or her community. The old style of leadership was not sustainable, for the individual or the company, Professor Gavin, Concordia's resident coach, and a professor in the department of applied human sciences, says. “In the old command and control world, 20<sup>th</sup>-century executives would throw themselves at the system. The at times devastating fallout, both personal and corporate, was underplayed, perceived as unimportant.”

For instance, a revolving door of chief executive officers may leave a legacy of employee skepticism, and the organization



Concordia University's resident coach James Gavin (right) with entrepreneur Andrew Sider: Executive coaching is an investment in the individual, and a means of taking a career to the next level.

may ultimately lose credibility in the marketplace, Professor Gavin says. And the executives' ability to stay on top of their game may suffer because of their hard-charging lifestyle.

“First, we help the individual to understand their impacts on the immediate and larger worlds that they live in. Second, we help them to understand leadership sustainability, so that they can maintain good cognitive processes, decision-making and engagement with others over a longer period of time. Third, in the frame of planet Earth, we hope they realize that there are no throwaways, that everything comes back and impacts us.”

“We want executives to be conscious of how they are entering any engagement, whether it is at work, at home or in their communities, in terms of the benefit they are providing and the repercussions, short term and long term. Short term it can look very profitable. Long term it can be disastrous.”

A single business leader does not transform a company; it is always a question of a number of people working together, Professor Gavin says. Thus, the students engage in group exercises in which they learn “about their impact on other people, about how to work better with others and how to intervene to create better results without manifesting the ‘lone-ranger syndrome’ of being the hero.”

Professor Gavin, a licensed psychologist and a master certified coach, says good coaching makes use of positive psychology, a field led by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman, both of the United States.

“It looks at people in terms of what unrecognized assets and strengths they have and how they can build on them. No dream is too big for coaching.”

Andrew Sider's dream was to be an effective leader like the late Steve Jobs of Apple Inc., but also stay true to his own nature as a

people-oriented leader.

Mr. Sider, a 30-year-old entrepreneur and co-founder of Bunch, a Montreal-based start-up with six employees, is being coached by Professor Gavin. Bunch is a web-based discussion forum in which like-minded people can talk with one another about a variety of topics, including books, photography and travel.

Steve Jobs “was a results-oriented person and the results were incredible,” Mr. Sider says. “I aspired to that sort of result but I wanted to do it true to who I was as a person. I always wrestled with the apparent dichotomy between those things.”

Professor Gavin helped him both in big-picture thinking and in short-term tactical decisions. “Jim is a really good listener and I'm sure this is a trait of a good coach. Over the course of months he got to know me and he respected who I was. That's what rooted him in being my trusted partner. He created a safe

place for me to speak openly. He helped me verbalize the truth of it all within that comfortable place where I know I can say things and get true feedback.”

Rather than Professor Gavin advising him what to do, he would “lead me down a path of letting me realize it for myself. We would role-play a conversation. The conversation may have been with an employee I would be giving hard feedback to, or a message I was going to deliver to investors. He would have me say it out loud and then just stop and say, ‘if you're the person listening at the table and you heard that, how would you feel?’ Often it's pretty obvious but it's a very powerful exercise because it makes you incredibly self-aware.”

At first, he says, he was skeptical about the value of a coach. “But it didn't take long before it became really clear Jim was going to help me take my career and management style to the next level.”

## LEADERSHIP

## No more ‘shoulds’

Coaching can help young executives stop trying to be like other people and become the leaders they want to be, say James Gavin of the John Molson School of Business, and Andrew Sider, co-founder of the Internet startup Bunch.

**Q:** What challenges arise in coaching the next generation of executives?

**James:** They have a lot of images of ‘shoulds’ — of what they should be. They're trying to transform themselves into other people instead of recognizing their own strengths. Coaching provides a powerful opportunity for them to embrace what is magical and special about them and adapt it to their way of being extraordinary leaders — not someone else's way.

**Q:** What is the biggest mistake coaches make?

**James:** To presume they have expertise in the client's world, whether that's their personal world or business world, and advise the coachee accordingly. A coach is in the beginning, middle and end a development-process expert, who enables you to see yourself more clearly by creating mechanisms and ways and questions that will bring you to confront yourself wholeheartedly and without judgment, but also with a commitment to change and to engage in action.

**Q:** Explain your approach to working with Andrew.

**James:** I tried to get him to look at his strengths, and not to say ‘because I'm a very openhearted, collaborative type of person I can't make hard decisions.’ But rather to understand how to make hard decisions with compassion. It's leveraging his strengths and folding them into a pattern that he wants to evolve in himself.

**Q:** In the LEAD coaching program, you focus on both management and personal challenges. Do business leaders need to be perfect now?

**James:** I've worked with a lot of executives and I would say they're anything but perfect. The demands as you climb the ladder of an organization increase exponentially. I often wonder how these people sleep at night because they're managing so much. So, they don't have to be perfect, but by taking a more holistic approach to their development, they can be better positioned to face the overlapping demands of all aspects of their lives: family, friends, health and career.

*James Gavin, author of Lifestyle Wellness Coaching, 2nd Ed. (Human Kinetics, 2013), is the head of the Leadership Effective and Development coaching program at Concordia University's John Molson School of Business in Montreal.*



**Q:** What prompted you to seek out an executive coach?

**Andrew:** As an entrepreneur you're always on your own. It doesn't seem that way — there are lots of investors, advisers, colleagues, fellow entrepreneurs — but none of them is a true trusted partner in the entrepreneur's personal or professional development.

**Q:** What makes a good coach?

**Andrew:** Listening is a big part of it. I think corporate exposure and emotional awareness are also important. Jim has a rooting in psychology and an understanding of how people think, and of different management styles. This sounds academic in nature but he's able to bring it into our discussions in a way that is very actionable for me.

**Q:** What kind of person do you need to be to benefit from coaching?

**Andrew:** You need to be able to be self-critical. You need to be open. You're going to hear some tough things and you're not going to like them. You need to be honest with yourself. You're going to get in a room with somewhat of a stranger and say things you haven't said to anybody. I also think you need to be patient; a lot of entrepreneurs are sometimes shortsighted and want immediate results, and a lot of these things you work on in coaching are long-term outcomes.

**Q:** How did Jim's coaching help you develop your own leadership style?

**Andrew:** Jim helped me crystallize and explore two types of leadership models. One I will call task-driven — picture a tyrant figure who is very effective in outcomes but very abrasive in delivery and relationships. And the other is a more people-driven leader, but one who might not always deliver results. Jim helped me take the best of both models and develop a management style that delivers results but in a way that's consistent with my people-oriented style.

*Andrew Sider is chief executive officer and co-founder of Bunch, a mobile-discussion platform bringing together like-minded people on the Internet.*

