

# CEO WORLD

February 2026

LEADERS

The long-term opportunity is not just to build a platform.

Roger Thomson amplifies that belief in a way only he can. Roger is the kind of leader who can take a complex idea,

## TRAVEL ADVANCES

The industry is now at an inflection point.

The global travel market is projected to surpass \$11 trillion over the next decade,

Why I Chose to Build a Movement Instead of Another Travel App

# DEREK CAFFERATA

Travel today sits at a crossroads. For all the technology, comparison tools, and algorithmic promises of smart travel, the experience for most people has become more overwhelming, not less. In an industry saturated with noise, Derek Cafferata recognized a truth others had overlooked. Travelers were not searching for more features. They were searching for more confidence. They wanted clarity, trust, and a sense of being understood. That insight became the foundation for Travel Advances, a platform built not as another travel app, but as a movement grounded in emotional intelligence.

Derek's conviction was shaped by decades of leading global teams and building organizations in which clarity and disciplined execution drove success. He learned that people respond to confidence, connection, and genuine support. Yet the travel industry had drifted far from those principles. It had become transactional, algorithmic, and increasingly disconnected from the emotional realities that drive people to travel: to celebrate, to heal, to reconnect, to rediscover themselves. Travel Advances emerged as a response to that gap, designed to guide rather than pressure, support rather than sell, and restore humanity to an experience that had become far too mechanical.

The early development of Travel Advances revealed a critical insight. Complexity was the enemy of confidence. Initial prototypes resembled every other platform in the market: dense, feature-heavy, and indistinguishable. Through rigorous testing and honest internal debate, Derek made a decisive pivot toward simplicity and clarity. That shift became the company's first defining milestone and the core of its competitive advantage.

To elevate the mission, Derek brought in two leaders whose expertise transformed the vision into a scalable reality. Roger Thomson, former Vice Chairman and Chief Operating Officer of Capital Markets at HSBC, joined as a strategic co-author of the movement. Roger brought narrative clarity, global financial discipline, and the ability to articulate the company's philosophy in a way that resonates with investors and industry leaders. He reframed emotional intelligence not as a soft differentiator, but as a strategic one.

To build the technological foundation, Derek partnered with Rakesh Mittal, former Managing Director at Genpact. Rakesh rebuilt the architecture with engineering rigor, transparency, and operational discipline. Under his leadership, Travel Advances evolved into a secure, enterprise-grade platform capable of global expansion. Together, Roger and Rakesh represent the dual engine of the company, the narrative and the architecture, the story and the system.

Today, Travel Advances stands at the forefront of a global travel market projected to exceed eleven trillion dollars in the coming decade. In a fragmented and noisy landscape, the company occupies a wide-open lane defined by trust, clarity, and emotional resonance. Derek's vision is ambitious: to build the world's most trusted travel companion, one that travelers instinctively turn to for reassurance, insight, and calm.

Travel Advances is not simply a platform. It is a movement dedicated to restoring meaning to travel and honoring the emotional truths that define human experience. Travelers want clarity. They want confidence. They want a guide that does not shout at them from the digital rooftops. Someone has to raise the standard, and we are more than comfortable being the ones who do it with clarity, conviction, and a smile that says we know the industry could do better.



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# CEO WORLD

LEADERS

## DEREK CAFFFERATA

Founder of Travel Advances

### TRAVEL ADVANCES

The industry is now at an inflection point. The global travel market is projected to surpass \$11 trillion over the next decade, with digital platforms capturing an increasingly dominant share.



# TRAVEL ADVANCES:

## Why I Chose to Build a Movement Instead of Another Travel App

I created Travel Advances because I saw something the industry had stopped seeing. After decades of leading teams, scaling brands, and building systems across continents, I realized that travel, one of the most emotional experiences in a person’s life, had been reduced to a transaction. It had become a marketplace of noise. Every platform promised the “best deal,” the “smartest itinerary,” or the “top ten must-see attractions,” yet travelers were not feeling any smarter or more confident. If anything, they were more overwhelmed. They were drowning in options, starving for clarity, and increasingly unsure of who to trust. At some point, the industry had mistaken chaos for innovation. I knew the world did not need another travel app. It needed a movement. It needed a platform that advanced not just where people go, but how they feel while going there.

My background shaped that conviction long before Travel Advances had a name. I had spent years architecting organizations where clarity, emotional intelligence, and disciplined execution were the difference between momentum and mayhem. I learned that people do not respond to noise. They respond to confidence. They respond to connection. They respond to feeling understood. And if you can deliver that consistently, people will follow you anywhere, even across time zones. I had seen this play out in boardrooms, in global operations, and in the countless teams I had the privilege to lead. The pattern was unmistakable. When people feel supported, they perform better. When they feel seen, they trust more. When they feel guided, they move forward with conviction.

Meanwhile, the travel industry was moving in the opposite direction. It was becoming more transactional, more algorithmic, and less human. The irony was almost comedic. Travel is one of the most human things we do. We travel to celebrate, to heal, to reconnect, to escape,

to rediscover ourselves. Yet the tools guiding us had become some of the least human experiences imaginable. I remember thinking, “If travel platforms were people, most of them would be shouting at you from across the room.” That was the moment I knew something had to change.

That insight became the philosophical foundation of Travel Advances. I set out to build a platform that restored emotional intelligence to travel, something the industry desperately needed but had never prioritized. I wanted to create a space where travelers felt guided rather than pressured, supported rather than sold to, and understood rather than analyzed. I wanted to build technology that behaved more like a trusted companion and less like a vending machine.

The entrepreneurial journey that followed was defined by intentionality. In the early days, our prototypes looked like everything else in the market, feature-heavy, data-dense, and indistinguishable from competitors.

If you squinted, you could barely tell which app was ours and which belonged to a billion-dollar incumbent. That was my wake-up call. Through rigorous testing and honest internal debate, I recognized that complexity was the enemy of confidence. Travelers did not need more buttons. They needed more breath. They needed a platform that felt like a guide, not a puzzle. So, I made a decisive pivot to simplify the experience, sharpen the language, and make clarity the core product value. That pivot became our first defining milestone. It aligned the team around a philosophy that would ultimately become our competitive advantage. And it taught us something important. When you remove the noise, people finally hear what matters.

As the vision sharpened, I knew I needed partners who could elevate the mission. When Roger Thomson, Vice Chairman and former Chief Operating Officer of Capital Markets for HSBC, joined as a strategic co-author of the movement, everything accelerated. Roger brought global financial discipline, narrative clarity, and a rare ability to translate vision into investor-ready language. He helped articulate what I had always believed. Emotional intelligence is not a soft differentiator. It is a strategic one. His influence transformed Travel Advances from a promising concept into a compelling investment thesis.

But vision alone is never enough. To build something that could scale globally, I needed a technology leader who could turn philosophy into architecture. That is where Rakesh Mittal entered the story. With his background as a Managing Director at Genpact, Rakesh brought the engineering discipline, architectural rigor, and operational clarity required to build a platform capable of global expansion. He engineered the systems that transformed Travel Advances from a beautifully designed idea into a resilient, enterprise-grade product. His approach was methodical and uncompromising. Every system had to be transparent. Every workflow had to be reliable. Every feature had to reinforce our philosophy of emotional intelligence. Under his leadership, the technology became a fortress, scalable, secure, and built for long-term growth. Investors immediately understood the significance. With Rakesh, the company was not just visionary. It was structurally sound.



From the beginning, I designed our business model around a single belief. Travelers do not need more tools. They need more trust. They need a platform that reduces noise, restores confidence, and helps them make decisions with clarity rather than anxiety. Every part of Travel Advances exists to solve that problem. I built the company to remove friction, not add to it. I built it to guide people, not overwhelm them. And I built it to create a travel experience that feels human, intuitive, and emotionally intelligent. The strength of our model comes from that purpose. It is simple, scalable, and grounded in a universal truth. When people feel supported, they travel more. When they trust the platform guiding them, they stay loyal. That is why Travel Advances works.

My growth strategy has always been rooted in clarity and discipline. I have never believed in chasing trends or building features just for noise. I have seen too many companies sprint toward whatever is fashionable that quarter, only to discover they have built a product that impresses everyone except the people who actually use it. We expand intentionally, guided by data, user behavior, and emotional resonance. The innovation is not in the number of features, but in the intelligence behind them. Travel Advances is not trying to outdo competitors. We are trying to clarify them. And in a world where travelers are overwhelmed by choice, the platform that reduces friction and increases confidence will win.

Leadership is the heartbeat of that philosophy, and I have always believed that a company's quality is a direct reflection of its people. I built Travel Advances on a foundation of clarity, discipline, and team-driven execution. Clarity is treated as a strategic asset, not a communication style. Discipline is embedded in every decision. We move with purpose, not noise. And our breakthroughs come from collaboration between product and engineering, editorial and design, leadership and frontline teams. I have worked with many teams in my career, but this one is different. This one is built on trust, candor, and a shared belief that emotional intelligence is not a luxury. It is a competitive advantage.

Roger Thomson amplifies that belief in a way only he can. Roger is the kind of leader who can take a complex idea, strip it down to its essence, and articulate it with such clarity that investors lean forward in their chairs. His background as Vice Chairman and former Chief Operating Officer of Capital Markets at HSBC gives him a global perspective and a strong financial discipline that strengthens every strategic decision we make. But what makes Roger invaluable is not just his experience. It is his ability to elevate the narrative. He helps translate the heart of Travel Advances into language that resonates with sophisticated audiences. He brings a calm, steady intelligence to the table, and he has an uncanny ability to see around corners. When Roger speaks, people listen. And more importantly, they understand.

If Roger is the voice that amplifies our mission, then Rakesh Mittal is the architect who ensures it can scale. Rakesh brings a level of engineering discipline and operational clarity that is rare in any industry. His background as a Managing Director at Genpact means he has built systems that not only work but also endure. When Rakesh joined, he did not simply refine our technology. He rebuilt our foundation. He engineered the systems that transformed Travel Advances from a beautifully designed idea into a resilient, enterprise-grade platform. His approach is methodical, rigorous, and uncompromising. Every workflow must be reliable. Every system must be transparent. Every feature must reinforce our emotional-intelligence philosophy. I often joke that if emotional intelligence had a structural engineer, it would be Rakesh. Under his leadership, our technology became a fortress, scalable, secure, and built for long-term growth.

Together, Roger and Rakesh represent the two sides of Travel Advances: the narrative and the architecture, the story and the system, the vision and the execution. And the broader team reflects that same balance. They bring creativity, resilience, and momentum. They challenge assumptions. They push for clarity. They care deeply about the traveler's experience. I have always believed that great teams are built, not found. And this team is the strongest proof of that belief.

The challenges along the way have shaped us. The travel technology sector is crowded, and early skepticism was inevitable. Some questioned whether emotional intelligence could truly differentiate a platform. We proved that it could. Others wondered whether simplicity could scale. Rakesh's engineering systems demonstrated that it could. And as we grew, we faced the challenge of maintaining emotional resonance at scale. Roger's narrative clarity and our editorial discipline ensured that growth did not dilute the mission. Each challenge became a catalyst for refinement and alignment. And each challenge reinforced something I have always known. When you build with the right people, you can build anything.



The industry is now at an inflection point. The global travel market is projected to surpass \$11 trillion over the next decade, with digital platforms capturing an increasingly dominant share. Yet the space remains fragmented, noisy, and largely undifferentiated. Most platforms compete on price or convenience, leaving a wide-open lane for a brand that competes on trust, clarity, and emotional resonance. Travel Advances is positioned precisely in that lane. We are not participating in the travel market. We are redefining it.

My vision for the future is ambitious and global, and I say that without hesitation because ambition without direction is noise, but ambition with clarity is momentum. I want Travel Advances to become the world's most trusted travel companion, emotionally intelligent, globally connected, and universally accessible. Not the loudest platform. Not the flashiest. The most trusted. The one traveler's instinctively opens when they need clarity, reassurance, or simply a moment of calm in the middle of a chaotic airport. The roadmap ahead reflects that intention. We are building deeper AI-driven personalization that feels less like technology and more like intuition. We are expanding Travel Mates globally to help people find meaningful connections in a world that is increasingly mobile yet often emotionally disconnected. We are curating travel experiences that resonate more deeply, the kind that stay with you long after the suitcase is unpacked. And we are forging partnerships with airlines, hospitality brands, and cultural institutions that understand the value of elevating how people feel, not just where they stay.

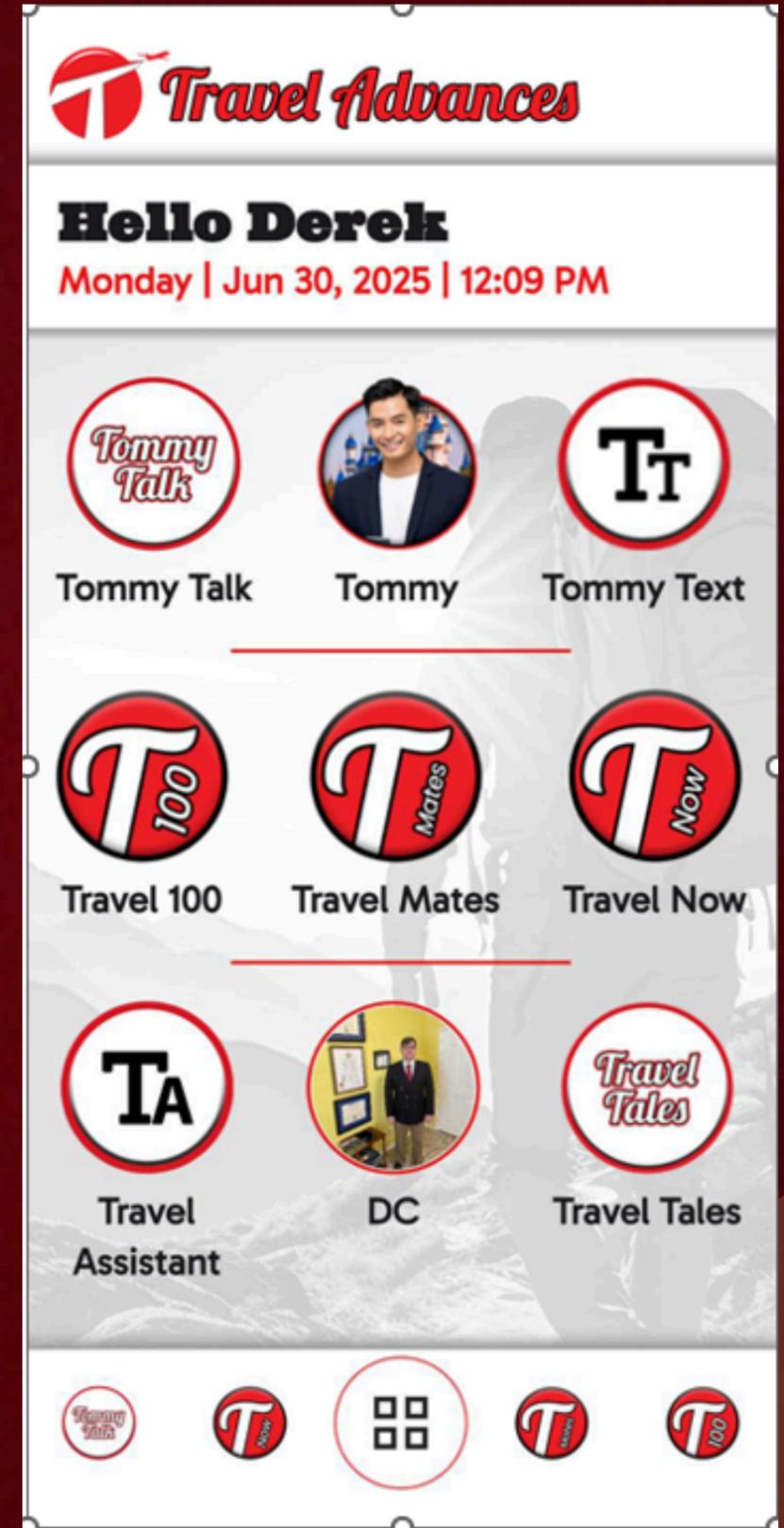


The long-term opportunity is not just to build a platform. Platforms come and go. Movements endure. What we are building is a movement that reshapes how people experience the world, one emotionally intelligent interaction at a time. I want Travel Advances to be the quiet confidence behind every great journey, the companion that makes people feel supported, understood, and empowered. If we do that well, the rest will follow.

And at the center of that movement, I remain guided by the same conviction that started it all. Travel is emotional. People want clarity. People want confidence. People want to feel understood. These truths are universal. They do not change with trends, technology cycles, or the latest buzzwords. They are the constants that define human experience. Travel Advances is my commitment to building technology that honors those truths rather than ignoring them. It is my answer to an industry that forgot the emotional side of travel, somewhere between the price comparison widgets and the endless pop-ups insisting you “book now before someone else does.”

The message I want to leave readers, investors, and future leaders with is simple. The most powerful innovations begin with a person who sees the world differently. Not louder. Not faster. Differently. I believe the future of travel belongs to those who understand not just where people want to go, but how they want to feel along the way. That belief is what drives me. That belief is what built Travel Advances. And that belief is what will carry this movement forward.

Because at the end of the day, travel is not about miles. It is about the meaning. And meaning is something worth building for.





# CEO WORLD

LEADERS

**Gwen Meyer**

CEO & Founder of Incremental Steps

INCREMENTAL  
**STEPS**  
To Countless Possibilities

**WHAT IS YOUR  
PHILOSOPHY ON  
LEADERSHIP, AND  
HOW DO YOU  
INSPIRE AND LEAD  
YOUR TEAM TO  
SUCCESS?**

**HOW DO YOU FOSTER A  
CULTURE OF  
INNOVATION  
AND CREATIVITY  
WITHIN YOUR  
ORGANIZATION?**

**Brief us about your outset story  
of your career.**

**Gwen Meyer**

CEO and Founder Incremental Steps

INCREMENTAL  
**STEPS**  
To Countless Possibilities

**M**y career in IT and management consulting started on a train in Paris, in 1984, when I found myself seated opposite a distinguished looking businessman in the carriage in which I was travelling. Turns out this man was the Sales and Marketing Director for IBM Europe, based in La Defense, Paris.... and by the end of the train journey, I had accepted an invitation to take an aptitude test at their Head Office the next day.

We also discovered the most incredible connection. Not only was Alasdair South African but he was married to the sister of a very close family friend from the same small farming community in which I had grown up in Zimbabwe.

I was 20 years old on a post graduate travelling experience in France and was working as an 'au pair' for a French family, studying and tutoring French (which was one of my major subjects) and teaching English to the French children I was taking care of. I had been considering a career in translation in the diplomatic arena but ended up going to IBM to take that aptitude test and the rest is history....41 years later.

Alasdair was my first mentor and enabler in my career, and we are still friends today. In fact I met up with him in Adelaide early last year when he was visiting his daughter who lives in McClaren Vale. I realized very early on in my career, the power of mentorship and relationship building - and of course the Universal assistance of synchronicity and perfect timing.

**What motivates you on a daily basis to continue pushing the boundaries and achieving new milestones in your industry?**

I have always been ambitious and driven to learn more, simplify more and share what I have learnt. I discovered that to become a master of knowledge, wisdom and delivery I would need to teach it, to coach or to mentor.

I know that to master what I have learnt, I have to create an obligation to teach it. That it's not only about understanding the content but embodying the characteristics, the values, the qualities and the abilities - to be congruent with my work, a role model. Also, to continue doing the inner work of processing and releasing my own fears, doubts and limiting beliefs towards building the world or reality in which I prefer to live.

Understanding my strengths, limitations, values and motivations have created a stable foundation for me and my business to grow and evolve further. Based upon this, confidence naturally arises. This kind of confidence doesn't need to be faked or performed. It radiates. It is a quiet unshakable energy that people sense and respond to even if they can't articulate why. The key is alignment. When your actions align with your thoughts, words and emotions (your authentic self) you begin to trust yourself implicitly. This trust is the core of confidence.

You no longer second guess or seek approval or validation from others because you know you're acting in harmony with your truth.

Your consistency and discipline will further your progress and the feedback will refine your skill. Following this process will lead to mastery.

You don't become a master because you're able to retain knowledge. You become a master when you're able to release it.

The late spiritual leader Yogi Bhanjan once said 'If you want to learn something, read about it. If you want to understand something, write about it. If you want to master something, teach it.'

For the last 7 years, I have been teaching and coaching each of the programs I have personally undertaken, and have successfully tested their efficacy on individuals, groups and in organisations.

**In the ever-evolving business landscape, how do you stay adaptable and keep up with the latest trends and innovations?**

I learn about a topic or subject that relates specifically to my focused areas of interest each day. I do this by learning from other experts, by reading, through on-line education platforms, conferences, interviews, videos, podcasts and networking events. I take time periodically to withdraw, self-reflect, journal and follow practices that tap into my higher, creative mind to determine the next perfect step to take.

We can only adjust our internal beliefs in small steps, so this is a slow and iterative process. This can work without being consciously aware of the adjustments, just by focusing on the ability to change and improve. However, by making some change, taking action and choosing to push ourselves out of our comfort zone, we can use conscious effort and practice to make larger changes in our beliefs... and catch ourselves when falling back into 'fixed mindset' thoughts. When our beliefs and will are opposed, the beliefs will always win!

When steps are taken incrementally and consistently, it can lead to huge transformation. Change doesn't have to happen all at once, we can make sure our habits are small & achievable enough to be sustainable - without the need for major sacrifice, which will deplete our willpower reserves. This is incredibly important. Small steps lead to big things over time.



## How do you foster a culture of innovation and creativity within your organization?

I believe in the Japanese Kaizen philosophy, not only for the manufacturing industry where it was born but in all areas of life. It takes time, investment and tremendous belief.

It's exceptionally rare for organisations to educate their teams on the philosophy of incremental improvement or gains; in all life zones...such as relationships, beliefs, self-awareness, human skills, change making etc.

I'm at the point in my company's evolution, of expanding and do not yet have the scale to see it's efficacy - although I do use this strategy for myself, personally. I have seen the process work in several organisations and know that to foster innovation and creativity you need to create a culture where people care enough, are motivated enough and are recognised sufficiently enough to step forward, contribute and invest their energy in the betterment of the company.

Under the Kaizen philosophy, you need lots of ideas, very often, to make meaningful progress over time. And in order to get lots of ideas, you need people to be driven by their own curiosity, motivation and care.

True innovation is always born from the sweat & determination of persistence, of individuals and great teams bound together by the right culture and philosophy, not from eureka moments, accidental fortune or intentional genius.

In all individuals or companies that have reached the summit of their industry or potential, there is no 'one' decision, invention or innovation that got them there. Steven Bartlett, *Diary of a CEO* got his teams to 'out-care the competition'. Keith Ferrazzi, American author and Entrepreneur talks about the power of team relationships and hiring the right people. He says your team has to be the highest team you sit on. You need to consider yourself the leader even though you're not the formal leader. There needs to be intimacy, generosity, candour and accountability. All cornerstones of any great relationship. In that environment, your team will flourish.

“**Every team has the wisdom of Yoda in it but NOT as one person!**”

When you create culture through recognition, celebration and evidence, the easiest and most accessible things can have the biggest of impacts. 'One percent'. Identify and encourage those 1 % gains, wherever they might arise - in the individual or the organisation.

As Charles Darwin argued, an individual's success won't be determined by a single stroke of genius. Instead, it will be the by-product of a philosophy that fosters gradual evolution, mutation and adaptation in any and every aspect of an organism, over an extended period of time.

The Kaizen philosophy isn't just about business, efficiencies or improvements; it's about continually ensuring you're on the right path and heading to the

destination that you intend to, want to and desire to visit.

Carving out time for solitude is essential. Implementing practices that help you to quieten the Default Mode Network, the ruminating, over analytical part of the brain, allows you to tap into higher states of consciousness which are essential for insight and receiving inspiration.

## What is your philosophy on leadership, and how do you inspire and lead your team to success?

I believe that Leadership isn't merely about title, rank and authority. Many leaders ascend to their positions through long service and accumulated knowledge and experience, not necessarily through a conscious choice or innate leadership skills. And many I have not chosen to follow. In contrast those who truly lead inspire others, driven by a purpose greater than themselves, rooted in service and contribution. People follow these leaders because they resonate with their cause and purpose.

We face a crisis of leadership globally, and I believe we need to look to the next generation of world leaders for inspiration. I believe inspirational leadership can be learned. To drive change we must acquire knowledge, skills and understanding that lead not only to insight and paradigm shifts but to action and expansion. Change making is an approach to leadership and accountability for positive change lies with each of us individually. Leadership demands an extensive toolkit

with open minded and open-hearted curiosity to progress solutions for the world's most complex adaptive challenges.

My own deep dive into understanding the brain and mind sciences - beliefs, mindsets, the subconscious mind, positivity quotient (mental fitness), emotional intelligence, neuroplasticity, quantum physics, behavioural sciences - spirituality and the mind-body-soul connection, has provided me a level of self-awareness, self-confidence and self-trust that is truly empowering. It has opened up my mind to increased creativity, energy and countless possibilities and connection to my intuition has increased dramatically - so much so that I have tapped into a level of inner knowing and clairvoyance that has been profoundly transformational in my life.

My PQ or Positivity Quotient has raised to a level where my mental fitness is at a consistently high level. I know this because I am able to stay centred and calm no matter what is happening around me. My level of influence and impact is growing and I am attracting more aligned people into my business and my life. There is a level of energy contagion that happens and I find people respond differently to me when I am around them. Many people have actually fallen away from my environment because there is a disconnect in frequency and alignment.

PQ measures the relative strength of your positive versus negative mental muscles - effectively the measure of your mental fitness. Raising PQ

automatically develops 17 of the 18 emotional intelligence (EQ) competencies.

I believe we need to create environments in which our teams can work at their natural best. Environment is key. Based on research carried out by Marcelo Lacerda, on happiness and high performing teams, observing interactions between the various members in low, medium and high performing teams, identified the most dramatic differentiator between high performing teams and low performing teams is positivity/negativity ratio. There is a tipping point for PQ equivalent to 75%. High performing teams equivalent score is 85%. Low performing teams are 29%.

This corresponds to Barbara Fredrickson's work which earned her the Templeton prize after completing her PhD from Stanford for positive psychology. She rates individuals as flourishing or languishing. Flourishing was determined by reviewing 33 factors. Fredrickson's results translated to 77% for flourishing individuals versus 69% for languishing individuals - validating the tipping point of 75%.



## Can you highlight any notable collaborations or partnerships that have played a significant role in your business journey?

My most recent, notable collaboration has been with the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF). The Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (ARLF) introduced a new Changemaker Workshop to their list of Leadership Programs at the start of 2024. It has been delivered by the ARLF in partnership with the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR) support for communities as part of Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative (HRCPTI), funded by the Australian Government's Drought Fund (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry). It has been selected by close to 80% of all regions (35 in total) and has been recognized internationally by the United Nations, with a specific focus on the impact by women in the regions. As one of the facilitator's delivering this program, we expect to engage a network of over 2000 participants, all committed to driving positive change in their communities. Key themes have emerged from over 1000 participants to date:

Discovering a space in their region where an unexpected group of people from different walks of life (some in positional, and some in no-positional leadership roles) can come together in a shared process to make change happen is both surprising and welcomed by participants. There is recurring emphasis on listening to diverse perspectives, involving

stakeholders early in decision-making, and fostering a collaborative environment to create inclusive and sustainable change. This message reflects a shift towards community-centred approaches that ensure initiatives are relevant, supportive and empowering for all involved.

Attracted to an approach where adopting strategic and adaptive approaches to problem-solving are encouraged. This strategic mindset helps organisations and individuals create lasting impact by understanding and addressing the complexities underlying their challenges. There is a strong focus on confidence-building, both for participants themselves and for those they work with. Many participants are working to overcome self-doubt, embrace their leadership roles, and empower others within their teams and communities. This message underscores the importance of fostering confidence, courage, and resilience to lead positive, impactful change effectively in both organisational and community contexts.

**ARLF Australian  
Women's  
Drought  
Resilience  
Efforts  
Recognised  
Internationally  
by the United  
Nations**

### **Please tell us about your organization**

In November 2023 Incremental Steps was recognised as the top leadership development services provider in Australia by global Manage HR APAC Special Magazine after being listed in the top 5.

In August 2024, as CEO and Founder I was recognised as one of the most inspirational business coaching leaders of 2024 and was on the cover of CEO Time magazine.

Whilst these accolades are gratefully and humbly received, I only conceptualised the vision and mission of my business because I had become so disillusioned by the pervasive acceptance of mediocre and uninspiring leadership, and the level of unhappy working environments and underperforming cultures in which I was working. I wanted to make a difference.

In 2018, a year before the pandemic I started my Coaching and Training business, Incremental Steps.

**Our Vision:** To nurture the next generation of inspiring global leaders and change makers.

**Our Mission:** To cultivate thriving cultures of learning, development, and empowerment through technology, mental fitness, well-being and excellence.

### **What are some key lessons you've learned from your failures or mistakes, and how have they contributed to your growth as a business leader?**

As a recovering perfectionist, I have learnt it's ok to fail and make mistakes, that in fact you learn quicker and more effectively if you take imperfect action, than no action at all.

My biggest learnings and growth, both personally and professionally have been reflected in my relationships, strategic alliances and partnerships.

I have learnt who to trust, who to align with and who to let into my world. I have learnt that actions speak louder than words. As a former people pleaser, I have learnt to value reciprocal relationships and guard my own energy.

I have learnt that the relationship you have with yourself determines the relationship you have with other people. This is the game changer. When you can be fully and unashamedly and authentically you, your life starts to shift in the most magical ways.

I no longer invest time and energy in people I like. I invest time and energy in people who invest in me, my cause, or my business!

Character can only be determined over time.

### **How do you balance your professional life with personal commitments and maintain a healthy work-life balance?**

The key is to focus on quality not quantity... to maintain a small but aligned network of people with aligned energy & values. I schedule dedicated time to spend with, or talk to, trusted friends and family or to attend uplifting gatherings.

I spend a fair amount of time in solitude and have learnt to set boundaries around my priorities aligned to my values and goals. This ensures I don't feel isolated and still feel deeply connected to others.

### **Can you share any upcoming projects or initiatives that your audience can look forward to?**

We are currently enjoying a strategic hiatus for a period of rest - to step back, reflect and refine plans for new initiatives and projects. We are refining requirements for our next aligned partnership - to expand our client reach and create greater impact in Corporate and business communities.

In early 2025, we are extending the reach of the Changemaker workshop (which is a 2 day experiential journey) to change makers in the Corporate IT and Technology industry. This is for progressive and forward thinking leaders who are open to building high performing teams and environments using the latest psychologically structured, evidence-based tools, models and frameworks for Change.

We would like to work with people and communities open to change, learning and continuous growth and improvement. People who are bold and passionate about leadership, change, technology, mental fitness, well-being and excellence.

A century after Viktor Frankl first placed the burden on each of us to determine what gives us meaning, we have more tools than ever to answer that call.

We have three primary levers we can tug -- agency, belonging, and cause. We have three principal stories we can tell -- our me story, we story, and thee story. We have three prevailing life shapes we can choose -- lines, circles & stars. And every now and then, if our life takes a swerve, we can alter these priorities as we wish. Bruce Feiler, in his book "Life is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age" calls this process shape-shifting, and it's a powerful way we make meaning in times of personal or business change or evolution.

### **What legacy do you hope to leave in your industry and for future generations of business leaders?**

We are connected to all that is possible and all that is possible is possible for each of us - there are countless possibilities.

We want to be the highest, truest expression of ourselves so that we can share our knowledge, lived experience and wisdom to educate and empower the next generation of aspiring leaders

and change makers to mobilise change in their communities and organisations - to progress solutions for the world's most complex and adaptive challenges.

To be the most powerful versions of ourselves we need to be unashamedly, authentically ourselves. We need to tap into our own internal guidance systems and be inspired to do what gives us joy so that we can create the world we prefer to live in.

“As a leader, it is crucial to understand the transformative power of progress and the ways in which it can be nurtured and catalysed”





## Driving Motivation and Achieving Milestones

My daily motivation comes from a natural curiosity and the endless tools, resources, and relationships at our disposal. The constantly evolving work landscape drives innovation and staying in close conversation with our clients ensures that we're always aligned with their needs. This customer-centric approach keeps us focused on pushing boundaries and delivering the services necessary to help our clients embrace change at the pace required today.

## EMPOWERING LEADERSHIP:

Building a Legacy Through Passion and Purpose  
Insights on Character-Based Leadership and Sustainable Business Growth from  
**Nicole Martin, Founder of HRBOOST®**

## Staying Adaptable in a Rapidly Changing Business Environment.

In today's ever-evolving business landscape, adaptability is key. We achieve this by closely aligning our HR solutions with each client's specific objectives and P&L. Our hands-on approach ensures that the metrics and deliverables of every HR plan are on track, driving the business forward. We've diversified our offerings to allow clients to engage with us on an a la carte, project, or retainer basis, providing the flexibility to meet their unique needs.

Whether working with small, growing businesses or large corporate employers, our mission is to support them wherever they are on their journey to becoming the best place to work. We focus on delivering talent, not just software, because tools are only as effective as the people behind them. This adaptability allows us to stay ahead of trends and innovations while ensuring our clients maximize their investment.



# NICOLE MARTIN

## FOUNDER OF HRBOOST



### The Outset of a Career

From a young age, I balanced part-time work with school, maintaining good grades, volunteering, and taking on leadership roles like Editor of my high school newspaper and Student Body President in my senior year. Immediately after high school, I entered the job market, prioritizing self-sufficiency over attending university. Growing up with a single mother, this was a necessity. By the time I completed my undergraduate studies while working full-time, I had accumulated five years of solid experience in my field. This led to my first HR Management role at the age of 23.

Early in my career, I realized that while education opens doors, experience is invaluable. When I was promoted to Director, I was proud to break the all-male management team's norm. After completing my graduate degrees, I pondered what could replace my academic pursuits. During the recession, I helped my former employer downsize while maintaining recognition as an employer of choice, despite pay freezes and layoffs.

Throughout these experiences, I learned much about people and workplace culture. Reflecting on my journey, I consider myself an accidental entrepreneur. I didn't plan to start a business; in 2010, I left corporate America to consult, intending to help another CEO build a company from the ground up. My first client was a high-growth business that grew from \$10M to \$26M within 36 months and sold for \$58M. My team continued to serve them for two years post-acquisition.

It was this client who first saw the potential in my business and expressed interest in investing. It took me a year to fully recognize the opportunity he saw. In 2015, I created a five-year business plan and engaged my investor on my terms. Since then, my company has experienced 50% growth year over year. In 2018, HRBoost had its biggest year yet, and we're on track to replicate that success as we close out 2019. With 16 team members, we've served nearly 600 businesses in Chicago, and we're proud to be a viable option for high-growth and transformational businesses seeking HR services.

### Fostering a Culture of Innovation and Creativity

To foster innovation and creativity, we employ a flexible approach that emphasizes continuous improvement. We start by aligning clients' HR activities with their financial goals and identifying areas for enhancement.

This mindset extends to our internal culture as well. I lead with vulnerability and transparency, conducting face-to-face one-on-ones with everyone on my team to ensure authentic exchanges. We prioritize genuine appreciation through appreciation languages rather than mere recognition. Our core values emphasize life-affirming work, and I actively engage in leadership exchanges with everyone at HRBOOST® to support their career and personal growth. This holistic approach extends to our entire team, including remote and out-of-state employees. We walk the talk and practice what we preach

### Leadership Philosophy and Inspiring Team Success

My leadership philosophy is rooted in Character-Based Capitalism, where true leadership is driven by curiosity, passion, and a willingness to take risks. I focus on creating an environment where work aligns with our shared values and goals, making it fulfilling and meaningful. By fostering a culture of shared leadership, I ensure our team is aligned with our organizational purpose, driving both profitability and excellence. I take pride in seeing my team's passion grow, which fuels our collective success. My role is to empower and guide them, ensuring we remain adaptable and forward-thinking in building high-performing organizations.

### Notable Collaborations and Partnerships

A key collaboration in my journey was co-authoring No Fear Negotiation for Women with John Tinghitella. This project combined our insights to help women navigate workplace negotiations and overcome systemic pay disparities. By sharing practical strategies, we aimed to empower women to advance in their careers and address inequalities in the business world.

## About HRBOOST®

HRBOOST® is a dynamic HR consulting firm that partners with businesses to align their HR strategies with their profit and loss (P&L) and strategic objectives. We offer a comprehensive process that includes analyzing current HR activities, identifying areas for improvement, and designing tailored solutions to help businesses attract talent, protect assets, and reduce turnover. Our team takes a hands-on approach, ensuring that our strategies drive profitability and sustainability while fostering a culture of innovation and performance excellence. With over a decade of experience, we have successfully served nearly 600 businesses, helping them grow and thrive in an ever-evolving business landscape

## Lessons Learned from Failures and Mistakes

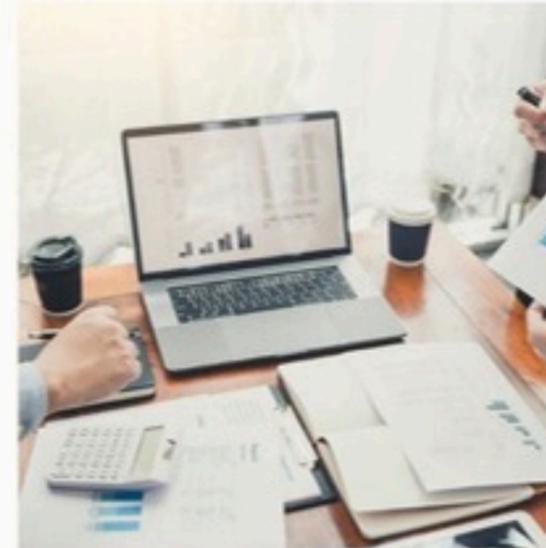
One of the key lessons I've learned is that the greatest enemy of success is fear. As my business experienced high growth, I faced numerous challenges, including securing financing, attracting skilled talent who believed in our brand promise, and most importantly, overcoming fear. Being a disruptor in the industry drew attention from big competitors and acquisition offers came before we realized we were profitable. However, staying true to my vision, upholding my values, and keeping my faith allowed me to build a solid team. Together, we've created an environment where we bring joy and purpose to people through their work. These experiences have taught me the importance of resilience and conviction, which have been crucial to my growth as a business leader.

## Balancing Professional and Personal Life

Balancing professional life with personal commitments is crucial to me as a business leader. Success comes from aligning my work with my passion, making it fulfilling rather than burdensome. I prioritize what matters, stay true to my values, and rely on a strong team to take the reins when needed, allowing me to recharge. Setting boundaries helps me stay present in all areas of life. By fostering shared leadership, I've created a purposeful work environment, supporting a balanced and sustainable lifestyle for myself and my team.



## UPCOMING PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES



HRBOOST® is thrilled to offer a new franchise opportunity available soon, allowing you to own your own HRBOOST® business and join our successful team. With rising demand for outsourced HR consulting due to reduced internal resources and increasing regulations, this opportunity provides the benefits of our proven operating history, strong brand reputation, extensive industry experience, and comprehensive education and training programs.





# CEO WORLD

LEADERS

