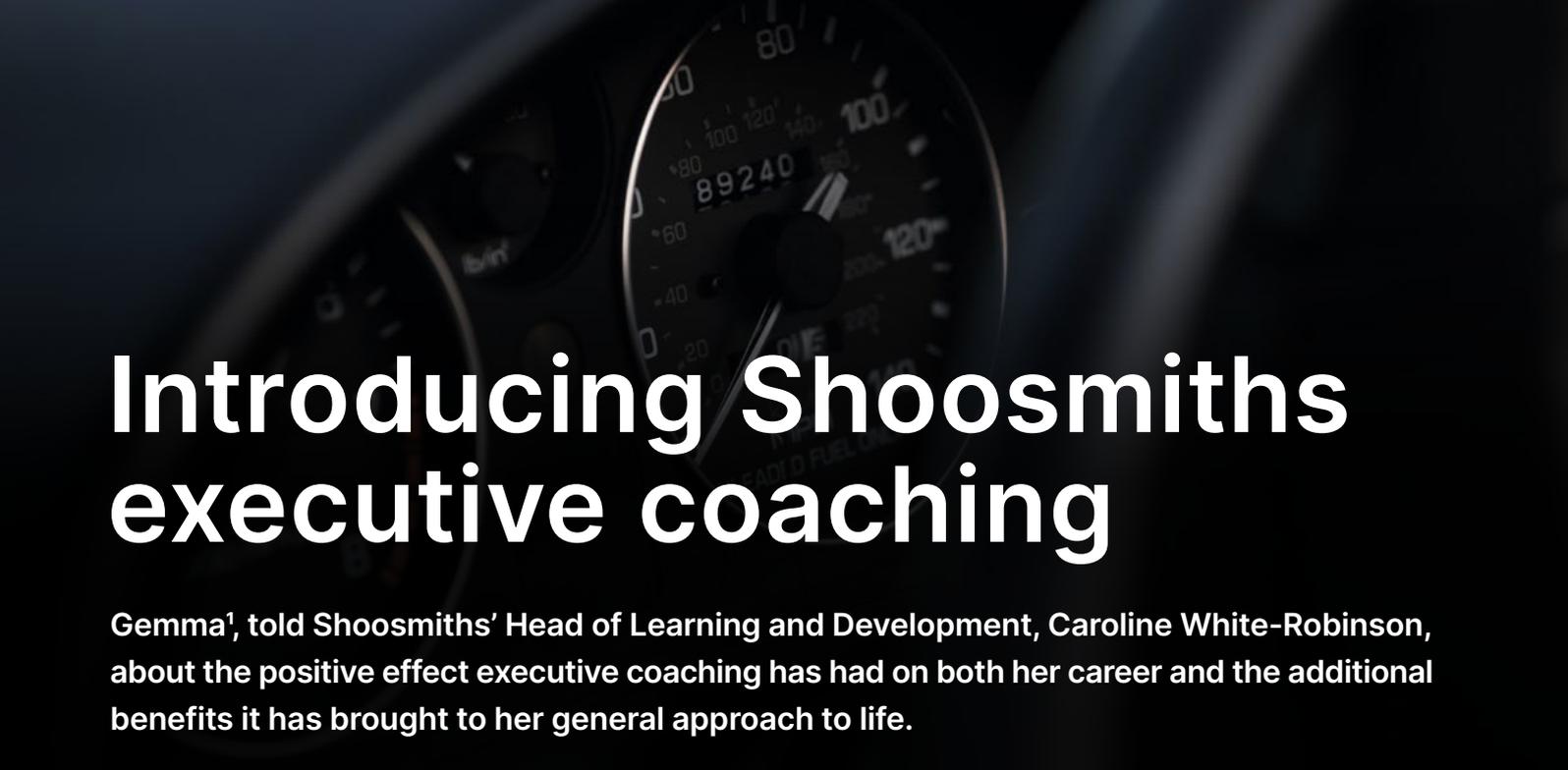


Developing a growth mindset, through coaching

How Shoosmiths' Executive Coaching supported a senior member of an international in-house legal team through a variety of challenges.



Introducing Shoosmiths executive coaching

Gemma¹, told Shoosmiths' Head of Learning and Development, Caroline White-Robinson, about the positive effect executive coaching has had on both her career and the additional benefits it has brought to her general approach to life.

CWR: Talk me through the challenging circumstances you were going through when we first met.

Where to begin. My business is a household name. As one of the most senior members of their legal team, I am at the forefront of their latest developments and colleagues turn to me, often at their most stressed points. Just before we met and started coaching, my business and my team were experiencing a lot of unsettling change. I know this is something every GC or in-house counsel will have to deal with from time to time, but the way in which we were set up internally did create problems.

To give a few examples of that, I suppose we could look at both upward and downward management. On the downward side, my team (the in-house legal team) needed lots of my time and this meant that I was often required to prioritise their work over my own. Again, this is something likely felt across the industry, but if I were to say it was quite acute, that might give some indication of the pressures. I mentioned that people often come to me at stressed moments, so it almost becomes like you are absorbing that person's stress – they come to you to offload and feel better. When you have numerous people doing this, often in the same day, it can really take its toll. To compound matters, now looking upward, I had tried to speak to my line manager about these issues and balance in general. My line manager was absent a lot of the time and I can distinctly remember being disappointed in their ability to support, defend and advocate on my behalf. It never really felt as if we were all pulling in the same direction and I know I was just struggling under the weight of it all, with no support.

CWR: Reflecting back, how did this impact you at the time?

I knew that this was having a detrimental effect on my well-being. I was struggling, but trying to soldier on for the good of the business and for my own career. I suppose we lawyers are hard-wired to default to that – go problem solve and all that. Professionally though, I'm not sure it was the best thing for my team or my business to let those pressures go unresolved. I recall that my ability to interact with my team was being impacted and they really needed me (and still do!). What's worse, I took those pressures home and I know it was impacting my enjoyment outside of work. When things are tough at work it tends to dominate your mindset which is not healthy. I knew that I needed to make some changes to help address the situation and not just accept that this was just the way it was and 'get on with it'.

Ultimately, I needed to be saved from myself a little and that's when a colleague of yours and a client of mine put us in touch. I couldn't be more grateful for that, which is why I wanted to chat to you today. I really want to share my experiences so that if there is anyone in a similar situation, they can be assured that it is not a permanent situation. So, Caroline, time for me to ask the questions!

¹We have anonymised Gemma's name and her business for client confidentiality reasons.

GEMMA: I know I've been through it, but talk me through how you got our coaching started.

Well, when we first spoke and you were candid about your situations and structures, two things happened. Firstly, I empathised! We are all human and despite my training and coaching background, I knew how hard the pressures of someone in your role and at your seniority are. Secondly, my executive coaching background and training kicked in – how do we solve those issues?

We agreed that we would put aside time for six one-hourly sessions each to fit flexibly around your diary. Flexibility is key as the sessions need to take place when you have the space and time to focus solely on yourself. The first session was a trial session where you could get a flavour of what executive coaching is and how it might be able to support your development, as well as how you might be able to use it day-to-day to ease the pressures.

In our first session, we set out the boundaries of the coaching relationship. You needed to trust that the coaching sessions would be confidential – and this is something that is constantly upheld – even as far as to this discussion. The first session was about getting comfortable with me as your coach and also the process of coaching. We touched on the areas which were most challenging and I asked you to go away and think about which were causing you the most negative reaction.

GEMMA: I know, I felt so reassured after breaking the ice. For the benefit of others in a similar situation, talk me through how coaching worked in more detail?

Sure. The first step is to accept the amount of time the coaching process can take, and make a positive decision to invest the time you need. The fact you were keen to do this was a really significant sign to me that you were fully engaged with the coaching sessions. We were also able to easily move through our agreed schedule of sessions too which was great. Obviously, each session is completely confidential so I won't be talking about them in any detail here – but when I looked at tailoring your sessions to you, the following core principles came into play:

1. We needed to use various techniques to evaluate further your “reality” of where you were at that time, your emotions, your behaviours and your thinking practices.
2. Coaching aims to work towards a growth mindset where anything is possible, but often when faced with challenges and pressure we adapt a fixed mindset and a feeling that the world is out to get us. I needed to tailor the sessions to explore and explode some of those fixed mindsets. We did this collaboratively, through conversation and the safe exploration of issues in reassuring, confidential and constructive conversation.
3. We referenced a few times in our sessions was the proverb, “Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day, teach someone how to fish and you feed them for their lifetime”. As we progressed through the sessions, the onus and intention was to develop tangible and meaningful strategies, action points and outlooks that would enable you to handle your challenges more effectively. These strategies helped to compartmentalise the pressures you were facing, enabling you to deal with them, one at a time in a measured and effective way.



I suppose we lawyers are hard-wired to default to solider on – go problem solve and all that...”



CWR: We've touched on the importance of our first session establishing an element of trust and communication between us and I certainly feel this is something that needs to begin right from the very first contact we have. Why did you come to us and trust in what we could offer?

I had never been offered such support from any of my legal advisers previously or by my line management. The fact that Shoosmiths had accredited coaches who were easy to talk to in complete confidentiality (due not only to the coaching ethics of the coach, but also the legal client relationship) meant that I felt safe discussing my challenges, which was my paramount concern.

Also, to be honest, I had no idea law firms could offer this kind, or indeed this quality, of support. I was referred by a mutual acquaintance, but the decision to engage was mine. Once I had spoken with you, understood what we could look to achieve and how we could do it, it was a no-brainer.

“

To be honest, I had no idea law firms could offer this kind, or indeed this quality, of support...”

CWR: What impact has the executive coaching had on you, professionally and personally?

It's been... holistic. I've gained so much. Whilst our coaching sessions focused on professional challenges, as we spoke about earlier, I found myself sharing other challenges with you. The coaching, in my opinion, developed my thinking and mindset which I could then apply to all aspects of my life.

The changes were significant and, as I say, the benefits were holistic. I feel now that I have the strategies, outlook and tactics to be able to navigate any professional situation – despite the systems and resources I had at the outset at my business remaining the same. The pressures are still there, but I feel like now I know how to deal with them, much more effectively. Professionally, it's meant I feel much calmer, more measured and more proactive. When issues land, I know how to compartmentalise the issues, think through them and make rational, prudent judgments. Better yet, I'm taking much less emotional baggage home.

CWR: A potentially odd question, given it's such a bespoke and personal solution – but do you think executive coaching has benefitted your clients.

Without doubt yes. My clients are primarily my colleagues and, to a smaller extent, my suppliers. I think the best results in professional life come from working with people who are in the right frame of mind and have the bandwidth – whether that is from a time perspective, an emotional perspective, or just from a clear mind perspective – to deal with the issues calmly, one at a time. Our sessions really improved things for me on that front and I know my clients benefitted.





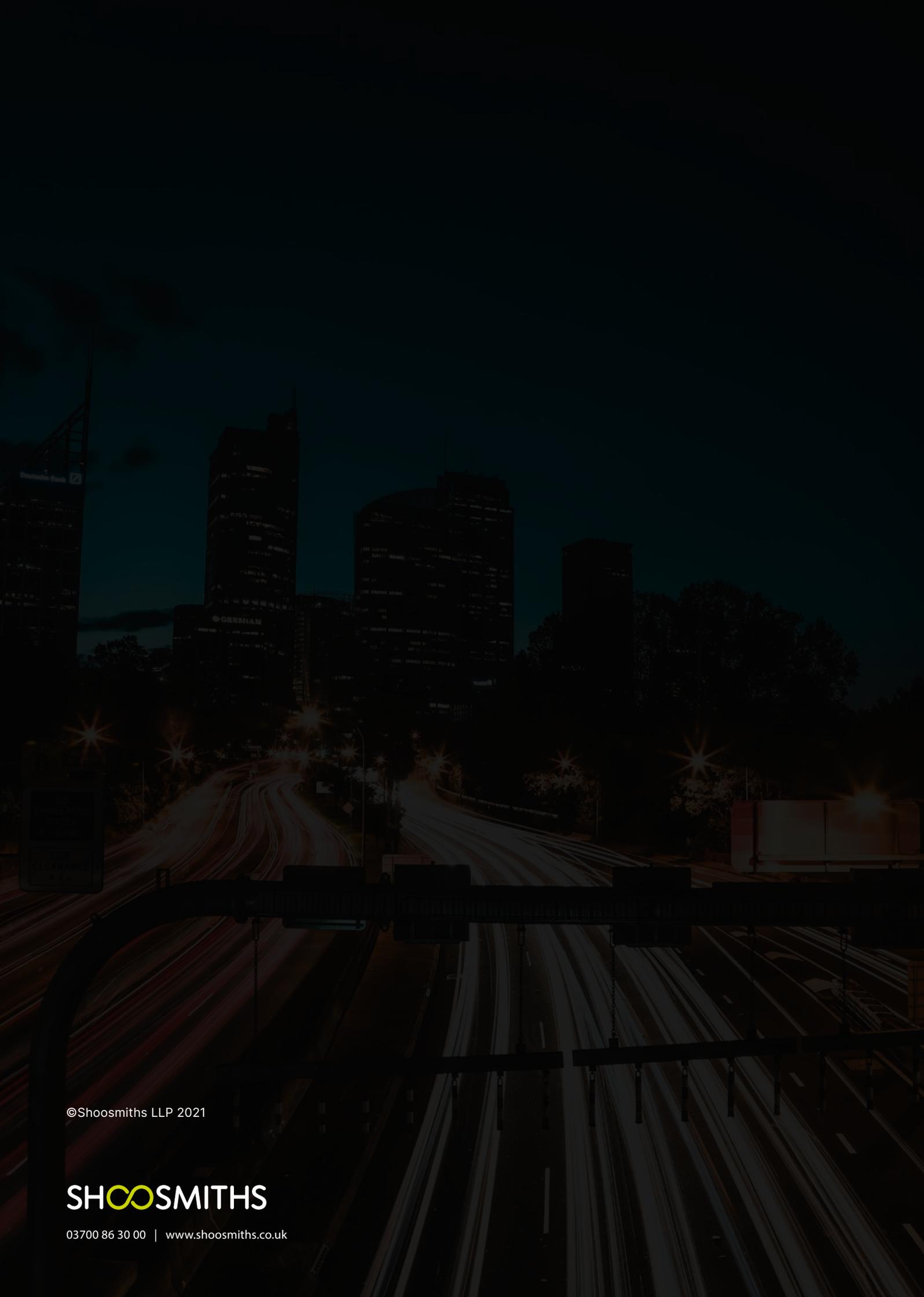
CWR: Final question from me – has our executive coaching experience been worth it?

Absolutely! I can thoroughly recommend this to anyone who is experiencing significant pressures in the context of busy in-house teams.



Contact us

To discuss how Shoosmiths' Executive Coaching can help and support you or your colleagues, or for a detailed introductory discussion with one of our in-house coaches, please contact Caroline at Caroline.White-Robinson@shoosmiths.co.uk



©Shoosmiths LLP 2021

SHOOSMITHS

03700 86 30 00 | www.shoosmiths.co.uk