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Helen
Elliott
talks with
Damien
Foster
CULTURAL
MENTOR

Picture: Colin Murty

WE'RE at the Windsor Hotel on a cold Melbourne day. Damien Foster is wearing his cashmere socks and is sipping a posh drink. The Windsor is his choice. When he's talking he likes a quiet place and he doesn't like to be overheard by people at tables close by. Besides, there are not too many places you can wear cashmere socks and feel you've got the dress code down pat.

So Damien, what is it you do again? Are you really the Henry Higgins to the Eliza Doolittles of the sporting world? Life coach? That "I" word makes him blanch. For a full second those candid blue eyes shut against the horror of the concept. Cultural mentor is better, although please, don't think ballet.

OK. But please explain. What does your very successful company, called Beyond Soap Water and Comb, actually do?

"Well, 60 per cent of my clientele are corporate, the rest football. Corporate at the very pointy end of the field, and elite sport — people whose payroll is in a different hemisphere to your average player and appropriate levels of sponsorship to go with it. Corporate at that level and elite sport have similar lifestyles, and how they handle themselves often gives them extraordinary leverage to negotiate a better contract."

And handling is what Foster is all about. By this he doesn't mean plain media skills or the finer points of cashmere socks. His unique business teaches people — men only — to flourish as the best possible version of themselves in every conceivable situation, seen from any angle. Most Australians grow up in fairly ordinary circumstances, he says — so what happens when a person's sporting talent elevates them into a world they'd never have imagined? And they find they have the money to match their new imagination?

"If you've grown up on TV dinners and cordial [and you become famous] you're in a very vulnerable position from the moment you get out of bed to the moment you go to bed. We live in a culture where men are not supposed to put up their hand and say they don't know how to do something. And often their partner has even less skills than they have. So they'll seek out somebody who's not in their immediate peer group. They need to know how to handle themselves in a whole gamut of situations."

What, for instance, does a man do if a woman puts her card in his lapel at a function? He doesn't want to respond, he loves his partner, but he feels the masculine imperative rising. He's confused. Foster teaches the man how to

say, "Sweetheart, buzz off." There are times, he says, when it is appropriate to be rude. But in the nicest possible way.

Foster is sharply aware of the new thing, today's people, the freshest trend. He has always known things before other people. It's in his bones. It hasn't always made for a comfortable life. It has taken him some time to settle into his own skin so he's unusually sensitive about how uncomfortable people can feel about themselves.

Empathy and understanding come naturally to him but the problem with such intuitive skills is that they have to work in the real world. So, about 14 years ago, when he happened to come across a profile in a magazine, something resonated with him and the idea of Beyond Soap Water and Comb began to emerge. The

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profile was about a man who lives in the Lake District in England. "He's got ducks and sheep and geese and wears rubber boots around, but he's actually an adviser to 10 of the biggest corporations in America," says Foster. "They were always asking him to come to New York permanently and help, and his reply was that as soon as he comes to their world he's of no use to them because he becomes part of them. I'm the same. If I started going to first nights and all the football games and so on I would miss the nuances of life that I see now. I'd not see with my peculiarity and individual detail."

Foster was born on a modest farm near Camperdown in Victoria on April 18, 1961. His mother was 41 when he was born and died 13 years ago. He speaks of her with warmth and says he has quite a similar temperament — highly strung, nervous and a bit shy. But he also has something from his father who, he says, is very personable, a man everyone likes. And Foster, despite his studied urbanity, still has the unruffled air of the man from the country. It suggests a certain vulnerability, which is always attractive.

He chooses to remain mysterious about where he went to school, because he doesn't want to be typecast into that boarding school product, which still means a great deal to provincial Melbourne. What he will say is that

he was "a product of the Catholic education system since prep".

He insists he always knew that he was going to be either a bum who slept in a cardboard box under a bridge or be very successful. He has managed success, along the way clearing tables at restaurants, arranging lunches for Giorgio Armani and acting as personal assistant to a Japanese billionaire businessman.

It never occurred to him that he might work in an office, walk over to the water cooler and chat about the footy scores and whether he got laid or not. So he has ended up on strange ground that appears to have been selected and fenced just for him. "It isn't exactly choice," he says. "It's just who I am."

Who he is includes remaining unmarried but having four "wives", four very close girlfriends to whom he speaks once a day if he can. The common thread between these women is that they are women who would never expect or want to be looked after by a man. They are the opposite of trophy women and he adores them for it. But he isn't prepared to take on female clients. He just doesn't feel qualified, despite that cultivated interest in clothes.

He still doesn't know left from right and says he's numerically hopeless. Money doesn't interest him and he's known for his generosity. What interests him is having what he calls a "lovely life", which he does. When people ask him how his weekend was he is puzzled, because the seven days in the week are all pleasure to him, despite working hard running up to 24 clients at once, although not all at full throttle.

"I'm not aspirational, I'm more about making peace with my own identity. I've never played sport but my clients and I click like best friends click. I click more with sportspeople than corporate, perhaps because of the contrast between myself and them. We have such freedom just to be with one another."

The object of the Foster-client relationship is to produce permanent changes in lives rather than just the quick fix of a weekend workshop. So is he talking about having a talent for intimacy? Emotional intelligence? Yes, he says, thinking it over, but within parameters of formality because that's where the oxygen lies.

Now he's turning his attentions to the possibilities of public speaking. He'd like to "engage people's hearts without needing to be a comedian". Lecture-circuit agencies tell him this is impossible. Foster thinks they're wrong. Want to bet who'll win?