



LEAN ON ME

A mentor, said the columnist John Crosby, is a brain to pick, an ear to listen and a push in the right direction.

Karen Higginbottom explains how a trusted advisor can be invaluable to your career progression

The origin of mentoring goes back to ancient Greece and Homer's epic *Odyssey*. When Odysseus, King of Ithaca, is about to go off to fight in the Trojan War, he asks his elderly friend Mentor to watch over his diffident son Telemachus – and palace politics – while he's away. In the modern corporate world, the role of a mentor has moved on but the idea is the same: imparting expertise and knowledge to less experienced and usually junior

individuals to help them develop their careers.

David Lines, senior consultant specialising in leadership at research institute Roffey Park, says having a mentor within an organisation can open doors and help people progress in their career. 'Internal mentoring can show people the importance of working across functions and outside their silos,' he says. 'Without that type of bridge-building, people can flounder in an organisation. That can be important career-wise.'

A more experienced person can identify the right people for the

junior employee to network with, says Lines, and provide constructive feedback. 'They can help the person plan their career in a thoughtful way and talk to them about the kinds of projects they take on.'

'It's someone helping you to set personal goals,' agrees Dr Andrew Hill, director of talent management at HR consultancy Chiumento. 'It's someone who acts as a critical friend, who explains how organisations work at a high level and what the politics are.'

A qualitative study of senior management and HR directors ►

Ernst & Young runs internal mentoring schemes, including mentoring circles for its women's network



◀ commissioned by the Mowgli Foundation (a not-for-profit mentoring organisation) found that organisations view mentoring as a valuable tool for staff development. The research revealed that four out of five business leaders feel that mentoring is important to the development of key staff.

Mentoring can help an individual develop a much more balanced view of issues in the workplace, explains Khalid Aziz, founder of the Aziz Corporation, a leadership development consultancy. 'A mentor can help the mentee look at the other person's point of view. They can give them a strategic outlook and give them more insight into problems.'

On a more specific level, a mentor can use their experience to show an individual how to deal with problems at work. 'Delegation skills are very hard for people to learn early on in their career,' says Aziz. 'The ability to delegate is certainly something a good mentor should be able to teach.'

Guidance on how to deal with difficult people and navigate office politics from an older head can also be very useful counsel. 'You can learn

a lot from a mentor about how to interact with the people around you,' says Chris Griffin, CEO of coaching practice One Life Partnership. 'They can help you understand that there may be lots of different agendas at play in the workplace.'

What makes a good mentor? A mentor within an organisation needs to know its inner workings, suggests Lines. 'This helps when they are listening to the mentee as they can give them appropriate guidance. They have to be really credible to the individual as well.'

EGO-FREE EXPERIENCE

Experience and the right intentions count for a lot, says Dr Patricia Bossons, head of coaching services at Henley, University of Reading. 'It's someone who has been there and done it. They must have a desire to work for the general good of the person rather than a personal need to share their worldly wisdom. If the mentor is focused on the best needs of the mentee then it will work but if it's focused on the mentor getting an ego reinforcement, then it will go wrong.'

A good mentor will often be significantly older than the mentee, says Aziz. 'They will be higher up in

the organisation than the individual and have worked their way up. They are people who make the corporation tick and know all the regulations within the company.'

Mentoring relationships can work in many different ways, says Dr Bossons. 'If you're a senior manager, you'll find your own mentor by coming across them in business, someone you respect. If you're further down the organisation or on a fast-track programme, then a mentoring scheme is often put in place by HR or they will recruit a number of senior managers and allocate people to them.'

Professional services firm Ernst & Young runs a variety of internal mentoring schemes for its employees. Its women's network runs mentoring circles, explains Fleur Bothwick, director of diversity and inclusiveness at the company. 'This involves two partners hosting a group of women and they drive their own agenda,' she says. 'We did mentoring circles as we had too many people to match as individuals.'

There are a number of benefits to running mentoring circles, says Bothwick. 'They give our women access to female partner role models,

MENTORING SHOWS PEOPLE THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING ACROSS FUNCTIONS – THAT CAN BE KEY CAREER-WISE

the partners hear about the challenges that more junior women are encountering, and the circle can share their strategies to overcome these challenges.'

The firm has also turned the traditional model on its head with its reverse mentoring scheme, run by its black employee network for senior management as part of its diversity strategy. 'This involves a different power balance,' says Bothwick. 'The mentor discusses what the challenges are of being a black or ethnic minority person in the workplace. It's an informal and safe environment and from a senior person's point of view, it's a fantastic insight into a black or ethnic minority person's world.'

The firm does run traditional mentoring schemes, she adds, but these are normally on an informal basis. 'They are usually instigated by the mentee who decides that this is an important part of their career development plan.'

EQUAL EXPECTATIONS

But how do you know if mentoring is developing along the right lines? Bothwick advises clear guidelines and a level of accountability around the mentoring relationship. 'For example,' she says, 'what are both sides expecting to achieve?' She recommends that both parties in the relationship complete a brief survey, either written or verbal, six months into the programme to assess how the relationship is progressing.

Mentoring programmes have their pitfalls. Formal schemes can fail if the mentor is too close to the mentee in the organisational structure, warns Aziz. 'The mentor has to be sufficiently removed from the mentee's activities and they shouldn't be a direct report or their boss. It's useful to have a mentor in a different department.'

But the benefits of mentoring far outweigh any potential problems. 'The people at the top are always looking for the best talent and the difficulty is spotting it,' says Aziz. 'The mentoring process will allow the mentor to act as a talent spotter. It's got to be good for organisations.' ■

CASE STUDY



BILLY GRAY DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS, S-TEC CORPORATION

In February 2004, Billy Gray, a manager at avionics manufacturing firm S-TEC, was assigned an external mentor at JARA, a leadership and management mentoring consultancy that aims to improve performance at every level of an organisation.

'My boss was always looking for opportunities for me to grow,' Billy recalls. 'I suspect that the goal was for me to achieve additional management experience.'

The mentor worked with Billy over the course of three years on how he implemented projects, helping him manage his team and their time more effectively. The most useful skill Billy acquired

from mentoring was learning how to plan.

'One of the biggest changes is how I prepare for meetings. I used to just wing it but now I plan what I have to say, walk through the meeting and think about what the purpose is, so that people will know what's expected from them.'

Billy also learnt to delegate tasks as a result of the mentoring. 'I often look for either someone I want to gain experience or if I'm in a hurry, I look for someone who can do the job the best.'

His new skills benefited both employer and employee: Billy believes the mentoring helped him make the career leap from a manufacturing manager to director of operations at the firm.



THE MAKING OF A GOOD MENTOR

It's important that you keep things at arm's length, says Dr Andrew Hill, director of talent management at HR consultancy Chiumento

- First and foremost you need to **make a commitment**. This shows that you take the development of your junior seriously. You will need to meet regularly for the relationship to develop but not so often that the person involved becomes dependent on you
- Mentoring involves **actively listening**, which many people struggle to do. It means not interrupting your mentee when they are talking, as well as picking up important cues from what they say so that you can reflect back relevant issues
- **Empathy** is also hugely important, as you need to show you understand their experience without simply saying, 'Yes, me too,' and offering solutions to their problems. Sometimes you need to let the junior find things out for themselves, even if this means letting them fail
- A good **sense of humour** helps

WORDS OF WISDOM

A selection of musings on mentoring

● 'Advice is what we ask for when we already know the answer but wish we didn't.'

Erica Jong

● 'Some people like my advice so much that they frame it upon the wall instead of using it.'

Gordon R Dickson, American author

● 'He only profits from praise who values criticism.'

Heinrich Heine, German poet

● 'When we ask advice we are usually looking for an accomplice.'

Charles Varlet de La Grange, French actor

● 'A good scare is worth more than good advice.'

Horace, Roman poet

● 'A leader must have the courage to act against an expert's advice.'

James Callaghan

● 'It is more easy to be wise for others than for ourselves.'

François Duc de La Rochefoucauld, French writer

● 'The only thing to do with good advice is pass it on. It is never any use to oneself.'

Oscar Wilde