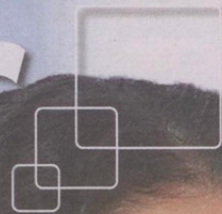


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MENTORS MATTER

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Your guide to greatness

Feeling uninspired at work? A good mentor could give you just the push you need, writes **Sue White**.

When small-business owner Julia Nekich started public relations firm The Ideas Suite, she figured it couldn't hurt to learn from those who had "been there, done that."

Two years later, Nekich says her decision to seek out mentors has helped her build a business she's proud of. "I've had two mentors to date," she says. "Initially, I needed knowledge about running a business, so I joined the mentoring program of the Australian Businesswomen's Network. More recently, I joined the mentoring program of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, to help me build the type of business I was interested in."

While her first mentoring experience was quite tightly structured, Nekich is enjoying the more informal arrangement of her current program. She and her mentor, a retired public relations executive, meet monthly to talk. Prioritising the relationship has paid off for Nekich, although she admits it's sometimes tempting to push the appointment off her schedule. "Although you might be busy and initially think, 'It's taking time away from business just to sit and talk about it,' I've learnt that this thinking time is essential. You're strategising, then you come back and start implementing. I've really begun to enjoy that."

Australia's mentoring tradition is making a comeback, according to organisational psychologist and mentoring expert Jenny Morris. "When we had apprenticeships, people more commonly took other employees under their wing. With baby boomers retiring, there's a big experience gap and organisations

are realising how critical it is to retain the people they've got. Mentoring is seen as a way of creating human bonds and loyalty and supporting new graduates by saying, 'How can we help you navigate our organisation?'"

While many large organisations have in-house mentoring programs for employees, mentees should expect to build a relationship quite different to the one they have with a manager, according to Gilly Johnson of the Australian Mentor Centre. "The mentee sets the objectives and the mentor is simply a sounding board, rather than a manager giving direct advice that needs to be followed," she says. Johnson emphasises that

'The focus is really tailored to what the employee wants.'

Heath Martin, human resources director

willingness from both parties is the first essential ingredient in any successful mentoring relationship: "This shouldn't be a forced activity," would no doubt agree. Now in its fifth year, its voluntary mentoring program is growing rapidly, with staff getting some say in who their mentor will be. "They select their top three choices and we match them," says human resources director Heath Martin.

"The focus is really tailored to what the employee wants. This could be strategy, leadership, or anything but it's not just connecting people for a good chat."

Martin notes that while their mentees are required to set a 12-month plan and report on their progress, confidentiality between mentor and mentee is part and parcel of the program. "I'm sure there are very fertile discussions about how to relate to colleagues or peers and that's all fair game as far as I'm concerned. As long as everyone is comfortable and they follow the objectives of their plan."

Government regulator WorkCover NSW has also found its employees respond well to being mentored. "I think it does make you feel more valued and it demonstrates to your employer that you are serious about career development," says WorkCover mentee Jean Willson.

It's not only mentees who benefit. WorkCover mentor Dot McDonald says: "I saw it as my own next level of development and an opportunity to help others. I feel a real sense of pride when my mentee completes one of her goals. It's a win for both of us."

If the wins aren't forthcoming, many in mentoring relationships are tempted to let the project quietly disappear. According to Johnson, this can be a costly mistake. "Falling out of contact with each other isn't a good strategy for your professional reputation. You should have an exit clause that allows you to leave with grace and professionalism."

Mentoring isn't only for newcomers or high fliers, with many professional bodies using the tool to help their members through career highs and lows. Australia's CPAs are required to be mentored by a full member before becoming one themselves and the PRA recently introduced a mentoring

program to support members feeling the effects of the economic downturn. In the current climate, mentoring has one other advantage over alternatives like business coaching: it's usually voluntary and therefore either free or run at a nominal cost to mentees.

As Nekich has discovered, the generosity of a mentor in sharing knowledge often extends beyond the official program time frame.

"I'm still friends with my first mentor; he is genuinely interested in how I'm doing," she says.

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Have you had any experience of mentoring? Tell us at mycareer.com.au/vote.



Guru... mentoring bridges the experience gap. Photo: iStock