



Mentoring for SMEs

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Imagine working with someone committed to your personal success. Someone who understands you, your job, your company, your strengths and weaknesses and your goals. Someone who provides clear thinking space, challenges your assumptions and helps you 'raise the bar' in terms of realising your potential. That 'someone' is your mentor.

Mentoring is no longer restricted to the older, wiser manager sharing their experiences with the young high-flyer. Reflecting today's flatter company structures, growing numbers of SMEs and increasing career mobility, mentoring has taken new forms. These days, mentoring relationships come in all shapes and sizes: mentors may be senior or peers and may or may not work in the same company as the mentee.

In most cases, a mentor objectively facilitates development of an individual's own ideas without offering the 'answers' or telling them what to do. This is a powerful approach, particularly as it explores and acts on what's happening 'right now' whilst also looking ahead to the future.

Increasingly, organisations of all sizes are adopting mentoring as an effective way of developing staff and leaders in the 'real world'. Training has its place in the acquisition of new skills but is less suited to exploring specific individual situations or behaviours in anything close to 'real time'.

The organisational benefits manifest themselves in many and varied ways - often through increased productivity and profitability but particularly in improved communication, morale, two-way loyalty and reduced staff turnover.

For company leaders

Employing a professional mentor or 'executive coach' can counter the loneliness of being 'peerless' by offering an experienced, confidential and unbiased sounding-board to explore matters of professional or personal importance.

Alternatively, establishing an informal two-way mentoring relationship with a fellow business manager can achieve similar results. Many people enjoy such informal mentoring, perhaps through professional networking bodies, without ever recognising it as such.

For staff

Mentoring can be a useful approach to supporting career development at all levels. To achieve this companies may use professional external mentors (perhaps where the in-house HR function is minimal) or train internal staff as mentors. Where a company is too small to achieve this alone, reciprocal mentoring arrangements may be made with business partners or external (non-competitive!) companies.

To successfully manage any mentoring relationship the following guidelines are important:

1. Agree the parameters of the relationship - what may / may not be discussed?
2. Agree the logistics and format for mentoring conversations - how frequently will you meet or speak, over what time period?
3. Agree measurable actions and monitor progress.
4. Be open to new ideas and change
5. Maintain confidentiality



In exploring the diversity of mentoring available, it is clear that mentoring has a role to play for many of us in supporting and developing our careers.

When the above criteria are met, both mentors and mentees can embark together on a journey towards achieving their potential - whatever that potential might be.