



# Why Leaders Need Mentors

An effective mentor will know when to listen and when to provide a fresh perspective. **CriticalEye** explores why mentors have a vital role to play in leadership development



Executives in high-octane roles can easily suffer from tunnel vision. That's why good mentors can be priceless – they can draw on years of business experience to make suggestions and impart advice that is untarnished by hidden bias or personal agendas. Indeed, executives that use a mentor to free up their thinking rarely regret doing so.

"It's not about passing judgement or even giving directives, it's more about being a sounding board in an open and trusted manner, so that the mentee feels completely comfortable in discussing any of the challenges he or she may be facing," says **Stephen Chu**, Philanthropist and former CEO of the Hong Kong-based Hui Xian Real Estate Investment Trust.

"I find it very useful when a mentor gives me feedback with a number of options, not just: 'Do this or do that.' Rather, it's more about asking: 'Have you considered this, or have you tried thinking about it from another perspective?'"

"Nobody knows a particular challenge or situation better than the mentee, so it's ultimately up to oneself to make the final decision... [but] simply having a chance to look at things from different angles is what I've always found very useful and enlightening from a mentor, and very helpful in making a decision."

**Vanda Murray**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and Non-executive Director at Bunzl, comments: "Most people will need different mentors at different stages in their career. At a senior level, it's more likely to be a conversation to talk through key issues and get advice from those who have been through similar circumstances."

That broader perspective is invaluable. **Hermnia Ibarra**, Criticaleye Thought

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Leader and Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD, says: "[One trait of mentors] that nobody talks about is the ability to articulate a point of view – what's important in leadership and why. This helps the mentee not just emulate the behaviour of the mentor but instead work to assimilate the thinking behind it."

**Charlie Wagstaff**, Managing Director at Criticaleye, comments: "Your input as a mentor needs to be thought-provoking and attached to current reality."

"I'm in the fortunate position of being able to have 24/7 dialogues on business leadership issues, so what I try to do is bring those different lenses to a mentee's situation, enabling them to go away and think about where they sit in the organisation, the potential consequences and what additional relationships they might need to build."

"You also need to be brutally honest with your observations, as it's this clarity that will enable them to overcome a barrier that perhaps nobody else has been able to help them with."

For **Neil Stephens**, Managing Director for the Beverage Division at Nestlé UK&I,

being assigned a mentor was pivotal in his transition to becoming an MD: "[My mentor] focused on leadership qualities, how to manage in a matrix organisation, and what skills and competencies are required to go from functional leadership to general management leadership."

"It was brilliant for me, because I was able to have that conversation in a confidential way, communicate hopes and fears, and he was able to either confirm them or, more importantly, give tips and techniques to actually manage that change, and what to do beyond the job to help me get there."

A similar point is made by **Tim Kiy**, MD of Operations for Marketing, Communications, Citizenship and Public Affairs at Barclays Africa Group: "About five years ago, I had an opportunity to work with a mentor who helped me tremendously in terms of career management."

"[He] was able to bring objectivity... [and] that was incredibly helpful because all too often you get lost in your own thoughts, so it's important to get perspectives from other people."

## Wise Counsel

**Rebecca Lythe**, Vice President of Business Transformation at retailer Asda, comments: "When I moved into my current role it was a big change and required an adjustment in terms of my style."

"I could have spoken to somebody else on the team, but it wasn't the same as asking somebody independent. I needed someone objective, who didn't know any of the other characters to bounce my questions off: 'What is it like being a junior member around the board table? How do I tackle certain things? How do I react to certain things? How can >



I do things differently?’ It has really helped to stretch me and has given me greater confidence.”

Trust plays a big part in the relationship between mentor and mentee. **Ian Ryder**, Chairman of information services provider Datacenter Dynamics, says: “I want a mentee who not only wants to contribute but [someone] who can be open with their thoughts.

“If they have a point of view and they feel they can express it, you can actually have [a] constructive conversation.”

**Jane Furniss**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and Deputy Chair of homeless charity Crisis, comments: “When I was CEO of the IPCC [Independent Police Complaints Commission], I remember telling my mentor about things that were happening that I would not have told anyone... I knew that I had to be able to tell her things that, if repeated, even to another trustworthy person, would have been extremely damaging to me personally.

“That’s why I always remind my mentees of the trustworthy nature of our relationship when we are talking about sensitive issues, so that they feel confident in talking to me... You have to establish it and re-establish it on a number of occasions.”

## Sense of Purpose

The structure and frequency of meetings will vary, but the rule of thumb is to have an agenda of sorts to frame those two-way exchanges. **Tim** says: “The important thing when working with a mentor is, right at the outset, to understand what the relationship is there to do.

“As you would do with any other activity, set goals for that and understand whether that is a six-month horizon or

a lifetime co-relationship. The point is, what are you trying to achieve and over what period? You can all too quickly fall into: ‘Well, let’s get together once a month and just chew the cud.’”

**Jane** comments: “It helps if someone comes along and says; ‘I’ve got a problem that I really want to work through with you and here’s the definition of the problem’. It can make for a very active session, which is useful for the mentee.

“But quite often, and I know I was the same, you don’t actually think about the mentoring session until two minutes before the person arrives because you’re just too busy. In those circumstances, what I find is that getting someone to talk about what’s front of mind actually gets to the problem anyway.”

As for mentors, if the relationship is to work they need to enjoy getting to the bottom of what their mentees need.

**Herminia** notes that mentors must have the ability to empathise and connect with people who are different, and demonstrate they are able “to remember what it was like when one was younger, less successful and less clear about one’s leadership, so they can identify with the person going through all the challenges of transitioning from a much more clear-cut technical or functional role to leading”.

**Angus Fraser**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and co-founder and Director at QuickVox, says: “I’ve never had a problem being enthused about other people’s challenges and I get a big kick out of actually getting under the skin of things and relating them to my own experiences.”

There isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach to mentoring and it’s

easy to overcomplicate it. But, increasingly, executives are realising that having a mentor is a vital part of their toolkit for leadership development. ■

Featuring Commentary From:



**Stephen Chu**  
Former CEO  
Hui Xian Real Estate  
Investment Trust



**Angus Fraser**  
Criticaleye Board Mentor /  
co-founder & Director  
QuickVox



**Jane Furniss**  
Criticaleye Board Mentor /  
Deputy Chair  
Crisis



**Herminia Ibarra**  
Professor of Organisational  
Behaviour  
INSEAD



**Tim Kiy**  
MD – Operations, Marketing,  
Communications, Citizenship  
& Public Affairs, Barclays



**Rebecca Lythe**  
VP  
Business Transformation  
Asda



**Vanda Murray**  
Criticaleye Board Mentor /  
NED  
Bunzl



**Ian Ryder**  
Chairman  
Datacenter Dynamics



**Neil Stephens**  
MD  
Beverage Division  
Nestlé UK&I



**Charlie Wagstaff**  
MD  
Criticaleye

Contact the contributors through:

[www.criticaleye.com](http://www.criticaleye.com)