ARE YOU MENTOR MATERIAL?

At about the age of 46, something happens to successful executives. They feel compelled to give back. They're comfortable with where they are in life and want to pass on the flame by sharing their insights and experience with an up-and-comer.

It's part of the human condition to mentor, says Peter Wilson, a Melbourne executive and author of the recently published Make Mentoring Work.

"You get to the stage where you want to give back outside the circle of parents and children; to help those struggling to go forward in life," Wilson says.

"Everybody needs mentors. All the top leaders have mentors, even at the height of their powers. It's part of what you need, whatever your age and position, to take that next step."

Formalised mentoring, now used widely in Australian organisations and companies, has proven highly beneficial, says Wilson, who heads the mentor programs for the federal and Victorian parliaments. Only one in six connections fails.

"The primary customer is the mentee, but surveys have shown that 67 per cent of mentors found they learnt a lot from the mentees," he says.

"Someone in their 50s mentoring someone in their 20s who is IT business savvy is going to learn a lot about the new age of business."

And despite the Gen Y stereotype, young people do still want to learn from someone who's experienced. "At some stage they hit the fence and realise they need advice," Wilson says.

Marketing executive Murray Chenery is in his fifties and relishes the role of mentor. "To inspire and motivate is critical. It's work with a higher purpose. There's a richness to building confidence, getting them to dare to dream. Having that belief in yourself is absolutely critical," he says.

"One of the greatest things from a boss's point of view is seeing people grow to take on other opportunities." Chenery says people need to be counselled to prepare to fail, and to take the lessons learnt on to the next part of their career. "Failure is a great teacher. People who rise to leadership roles have been prepared to be different."

He has a handful of mentors he uses as sounding boards, including people outside business. But how do the rest of us go about finding a mentor?

Wilson suggests finding a role model and having the gumption to approach them in a low-level way.

"Don't ask blankly 'will you be my mentor?', say that you're looking for a path similar to theirs and would love their advice; can we get a coffee and have a chat," Wilson says. "It takes two to three meetings in any mentoring relationship to decide if it's someone you can trust and whose values are aligned. If the connection's there, ask if they'd mind meeting every month or so for a chat."

One condition kills mentoring relationships - rivalry. "The mentor's got to disclose themselves as they really are. Mentoring is about preparing the person for society and life and showing them how to go about it."

Traits of a great mentor

- Recognises the fundamental business nature of the mentoring relationship and the standards and conduct required.
- Works hard to make themselves be and appear to be honest, friendly, open, trustworthy, confidential, accessible and encouraging, particularly during a crisis.
- Resists the temptation to fix the mentee's problems through direct interventions. » Sets written objectives for the relationship with the mentee and monitors progress.
- Willingly discloses themselves and their experiences - including failures - in a way that enhances mutual trust.
- Draws out and explores the mentee's career dream and celebrates achievements as and when they are reached.
- Brokers useful relationships, expanded networks and shadowing experiences for the mentee.
- Knows when the major potential of the relationship has been reached and transforms that as a positive opportunity for the mentee to move forward on his or her own or with a different form of advice of assistance.

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