

Mentor programs help you follow the leader to success

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Image: Sue Andrews, CEO of Gurriny Yealamucka Health Service.

Mentors can offer advice about working with peers, management issues, work-life balance and relationships, but McCarthy Mentoring chief Sophie McCarthy says they are often there just to offer a fresh perspective.

McCarthy, who took over the business from her mother Wendy three years ago, has opened her 2016 scholarship program and is looking for a senior person in a not-for-profit organisation to take part in a 12-month pairing.

Many not-for-profits cannot afford to pay for mentoring, and the scholarship will allow a senior manager to learn from an experienced mentor to help their career and organisation progress.

The career benefits of having a mentor can be enormous, she says, even if you are already running a large organisation and have managerial experience.

“Once you commit the time to auditing yourself and listening to advice it boosts your confidence and your capacity to do your job well,” McCarthy says.

“Having someone with that energy and inspiration gives you the confidence to make changes.”

When looking for a formal mentor 20 years ago while on a scholarship, she approached former Liberal MP and Australian Red Cross secretary-general Jim Carlton. He also mentored Malcolm Turnbull, among others. “He used to ask me a lot of questions and I couldn’t answer a lot of them in the beginning,” she says. “I was moving, changing jobs, changing boyfriends, he gave me a lot of advice and he came to my wedding two years later.” The pair stayed in touch for 20 years until Carlton’s death, aged 80, in December.

McCarthy says mentoring can be difficult, particularly while establishing a relationship.

“A lot of mentors say they don’t know if they’re making a difference, but it’s not often what happens in the first six months, it’s a cumulative process and you’re opening doors,” she says. “You’re not meant to solve all of their questions and provide answers.”

Sue Andrews had never had a mentor until being offered the McCarthy Mentoring scholarship last year.

As chief executive of Gurriny Yealamucka Health Service, based an hour south of Cairns, she has spent the past a year working with mentor and former Queensland government director-general Marg O’Donnell.

Andrews moved from being a finance manager to the top job at the largest indigenous health service in Queensland two years earlier. She oversees 70 staff.

“When I was first appointed to the position of CEO one of the guys on the executive said: ‘You probably need to assert your authority,’ ” Andrews says. “He said I was probably related to about half of the staff, I was friends with the other half, and I’m local and people know me as the finance person. He asked how I was going to assert myself.”

During the past year Andrews has worked with O’Donnell to position herself as a leader, particularly while overseeing the health service’s transition from being a government-controlled service to community control.

With community management and control, Andrews has had to make sure the health service meets its strategic goals and the Queensland government’s strict performance indicators.

“It was also about being able to take my staff on the journey and listening to them about how they wanted to be involved in the changes,” she says.

“Leading was one of my biggest learning curves and that’s one way that Marg helped me, with different ways of leading and learning other people’s ways of listening. ”

Andrews says O'Donnell also helped her improve her work-life balance.

“She helped me know there’s a time and a place to work and a time and a place to go home.”

Mentor tells her charges: you can call me anytime

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Marg O'Donnell listens and encourages her charges to find a solution, 'rather than me pontificating'. Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen

Marg O'Donnell has an important piece of advice for mentors: don't offer advice.

She says those she mentors don't want to know how she handled something.

"It's not you going in there giving out the wisdom of your experience; that's very boring and probably not needed," O'Donnell says. "I usually ask them what they think the options are and try and encourage them to find a solution. Everyone has ideas about what they do, rather than me pontificating."

O'Donnell has been a director-general of three Queensland government departments, was the first Victorian Legal Ombudsman, and chairs the Breast Cancer Network of Australia and the law school visiting committee at Griffith University.

Often she has been the only woman sitting at a board table, and has battled discrimination while being a mother to two young children.

O'Donnell has been a mentor for close to 15 years, including helping senior workers in the public service, female engineers in senior management, and heads of arts and health organisations.

While she may not be an expert in every industry, O'Donnell's social worker background shines when she listens and learns.

"There are issues about relationships with board members, furthering business relationships with other companies," she says.

"We talk about work-life balance, how are the kids going, how is your partner, is the marriage surviving, we talk about health, losing weight: these issues straddle everyone in every situation."

O'Donnell, who is Brisbane-based, mentors eight people, mostly women. She meets them once a month for lunch or dinner and spends about two hours talking with them about their life and workplace issues.

She makes herself available at other times but, as she says, high-powered executives are highly competent and rarely need daily advice.

"I say if there's a crisis or if there's something you want me to look at, or a document, you can call me anytime."