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Maximising the value of the mentoring process

Three Chartered Accountants discuss the career-long benefits of mentoring. By Kerry Little



Too often, mentoring is thought of as an activity to guide junior mentees through the early years at their first 'real job', or to tick the box in their professional development. However, the mentoring relationship can deliver benefits for all parties involved, not just through the early stages, but over the course of their careers – when the right environment, skills and attitudes are brought to the table.

When Peter Woodley CA recounts his experience of being mentored, he is grateful for the toughness his mentor showed. "I would often come into his office with a certain issue or technical problem and he wouldn't give me the answer. He would tell me where to look, to do the research myself and then come back and present it to him. As much as I hated it, it really helped me build my technical skills."

Woodley, a partner in the audit and assurance division of Grant Thornton Australia, is now on the other side of the table, mentoring candidates who are completing the Chartered Accountants Program. He believes it is extremely important that candidates find the right mentor, and cites the key characteristics of a rewarding mentor-mentee relationship being first, to establish rapport, and second, for the parties to have different skills.

Rapport is important, says Woodley. "Mentees need somebody who is going to take the time and interest in their career to not only drive development through the Program, but also at the firm or company where they are working."

Diverse skills between the mentor and mentee will advantage both people in the relationship. When Woodley was choosing his mentor, he considered what he perceived

to be his weaknesses and chose a mentor with different skills who could help him improve in those areas. "There is no point having a mentor and mentee with exactly the same skill set. Rather, the mentee can bring skills to the mentor, and vice-versa. Both parties should get a lot out of the relationship," says Woodley.

Nicole Gamerov CA, client manager, government and globals at Swiss Reinsurance Australia recalls one of her mentees who was very capable technically, but who needed assistance to develop her confidence. "We focused on those issues. She already ticked all the boxes relating to technical capability, so we didn't need to go into that. We worked more around communication and interpersonal skills."

Mentoring people with skills different to his has been beneficial to Ziggi Lejins CA, a director with the NSW Treasury and a mentor for candidates in the Chartered Accountants Program. Lejins says the Program has given him a chance to learn from his mentees, and connect with people he would not otherwise work closely with, particularly young people. "Talking to candidates forces me to rethink how I can define my own medium- and long-term objectives and put in place a plan to achieve those objectives."

The reverse mentoring that occurs as part of the relationship is often an unexpected but welcome outcome for mentors. A survey into mentoring conducted last year by the Australian Human Resources Institute found that 66 per cent of mentors reported reverse mentoring benefits.

Although the benefits in the mentoring relationship will vary according to the mix of skills and personalities involved, there is no doubt that both parties can learn from each other.



As a mentor, Gamerov recognises the benefits that flow back to her. "Mentoring provides mentors with an opportunity to reflect on their own behaviours as I think it is difficult to give meaningful advice when you are not taking it yourself. I'll find that while providing advice or suggestions, the other part of my brain will be asking 'when did I last do that, why am I not doing it?' It offers an opportunity for self-reflection and allows mentors to raise the bar," she says.

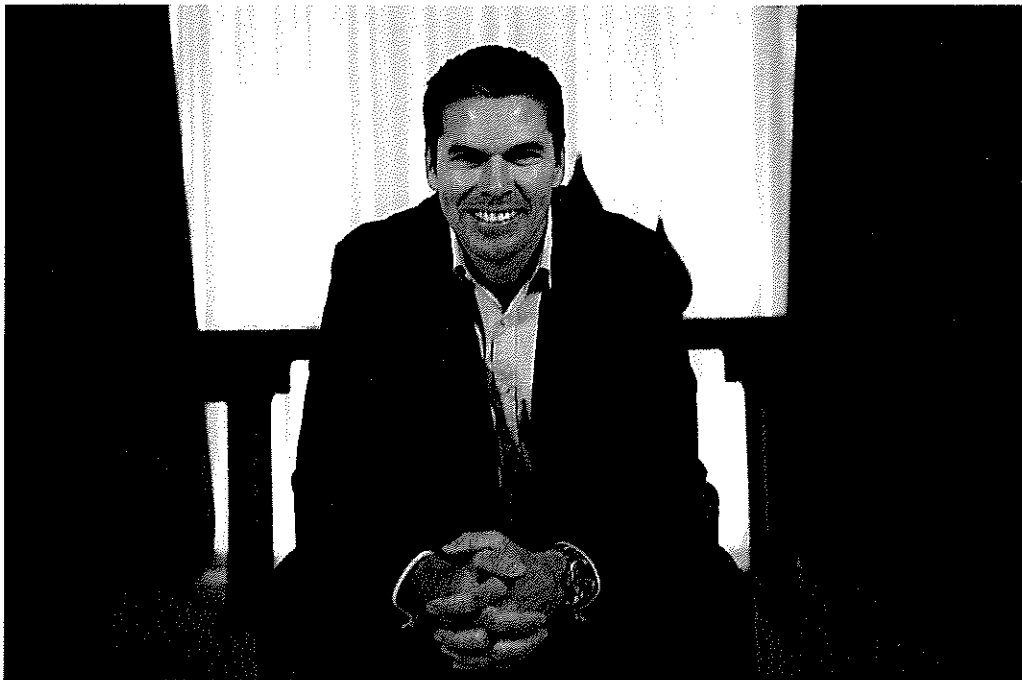
The benefits to both parties may also be the reason why many mentoring relationships endure long after the expected period of time. Mentors at Grant Thornton are encouraged to continue the relationship with mentees throughout their career. Woodley says the key to a long-term relationship is one that is appreciated by both parties: "If you can find value and rapport in what they are doing, the mentoring can continue for the whole career of that person."

Woodley also cites reciprocity as a success factor of a long-term relationship, and advises mentees to be open with their mentors about perceived shortcomings. "If they identify any perceived weaknesses with their mentor, they should discuss them openly and the mentor ought to take on that criticism and use it to build on their own characteristics," he says.

Reciprocity also extends to how the mentoring relationship is most effectively managed. Woodley advises mentees to drive the process and ensure they are regularly

Far left: Kate Boorer CA in conversation with Ziggi Lejins CA, a director with the NSW Treasury. Above: Nicole Gamerov CA, client manager, government and globals at Swiss Reinsurance Australia.





Above: Peter Woodley CA, partner – audit and assurance division of Grant Thornton Australia.

initiating contact with their mentor: "Putting things in calendars, catching up for informal breakfasts or lunch and really tracking down the mentor to make sure the contact is there is absolutely key to getting the benefit out of the relationship."

An energy

Chemistry, or rapport, between the parties is often crucial for a mutually beneficial mentoring experience. Gamerov talks about the need for "a certain kind of energy between the mentor and the mentee" and places importance on the relationship being one where there is natural rapport between the parties. She says understanding her own expectations is as important as understanding those of her mentee. "I think all relationships are two-way and the mentoring relationship is no different. What you put into that relationship is effectively what both parties will get out of it," she says.

Gamerov still applies skills gained from a mentor whose advice and expectations had a significant impact on her early career. She has taken many of the principles that he lived by into other jobs, and often thinks about the advice he gave her. "He raised the bar far higher than I probably would have set for myself and taught me a lesson I have taken into other environments – that it is important to be out of your comfort zone. We need to take risks, we need to put ourselves out there and sometimes this means being out of our comfort zone."

Lejins extends his mentoring beyond a formal structure to include informal conversations that help him to better

understand his mentees. "You get to relate to people and know how they are going to the point where they will tell you exactly what they are concerned about. It is beyond what you might discuss in a formal, stiff review meeting."

Variety of programs

Acceptance of the business benefits of mentoring is reflected in the heightened profile of mentoring in development programs for high-potential and high-performing employees, including executives at the pointy end of the organisational pyramid. The CEO Institute offers a peer

support network for business leaders where each month CEOs and senior executives from non-competing organisations meet for a half-day to share knowledge and offer support to each other.

The Australian Institute of Company Directors recognises the role of mentoring in closing the gap between male and female representation on boards. It offers a structured Chairmen's Mentoring Program that involves leading chairmen and directors working with talented and qualified women for 12 months.

A similar initiative, Boardlinks, was launched late last year to encourage the number of female mentees for Australian government boards. Boardlinks will operate mentoring, training and networking programs to further directorship careers for mentees.

Gamerov believes it is important that businesses acknowledge the real and tangible benefits of mentoring. "Mentoring leverages the profile of the managers and the leaders and allows them to connect with people in the business who may not necessarily be in their teams. It also allows mentors to identify up-and-coming talent and understand other parts of the business."

Many businesses have integrated mentoring as a core component of their talent development programs. The large accounting firms and many smaller firms, have mentoring programs for people at all levels of seniority, as well as initiatives that pair senior leaders with external parties. For example, KPMG has partnered with Monash University to provide career mentoring and



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real-world problem solving opportunities to Monash Masters students. Rob Bazzani, KPMG chairman of Victoria, says "mentoring is extremely important in terms of greater engagement of our people and for them to be able to share their wider business and commercial experiences."

Lejins sees how mentoring contributes to Treasury's ability to attract and attain the best graduates, best thinkers and most-motivated young people. "The ability to undertake professional education, including active mentoring, adds to the attractiveness of Treasury as a workplace both for people who are wanting to join Treasury and those who may want to remain here and continue their development."

He advises mentors to develop an ongoing relationship with mentees that engenders personal rather than just institutional trust. He has similar advice for mentees. "Don't hold back. The mentor is not just there as a compliance exercise. The objective is to make sure the candidate succeeds professionally and beyond."

Woodley advises mentors to make time for the mentees, as they will also benefit from driving their mentee's development. "It's really important to invest that time in your people because it will pay you back tenfold."

Gamerov wants mentors to set the bar high: "If it's simply business as usual the mentee will walk away thinking 'so what?' It's important to take the person out of their comfort zone, within limits, and help them to achieve things they would not have achieved otherwise." 

FORMAL MENTORING PROGRAMS

Formal mentoring programs can be a valuable consideration for organisations looking to strike the balance between the personal and organisational benefits.

These programs follow a structured approach to the relationship between the mentor and mentee however the parameters of a formal program will vary between organisations and the people involved. The effectiveness of a formal mentoring program is often dependent on how it is initially structured and most will have goals and outcomes clearly stated and agreed, with a mechanism for measuring the success of the program. There will also be clarity around the roles and responsibilities of the parties.

Effective mentoring programs include:

- ▶ Compatible pairing of mentor and mentee where skills, personalities and values are considered
- ▶ Properly trained mentors, who understand how to work with a mentee while respecting professional boundaries
- ▶ Clearly defined goals and expectations of the mentoring program, agreed by both parties
- ▶ Acknowledgement that the relationship will benefit both the mentor and the mentee
- ▶ Understanding from both parties that mentoring is a two-way relationship that requires shared responsibility for its success
- ▶ An agreed timeframe for achieving progress
- ▶ Commitment by both parties to devote sufficient time to the program

- ▶ A safe and confidential learning environment
- ▶ Some may have a written, signed mentoring agreement where topics and milestones are agreed.

The underlying goal of mentoring is to help both parties to reach their full potential. However ineffective mentoring programs, where expectations are unclear, goals aren't agreed and the approach is overly casual will not meet the goals of any of the parties. The mentors must show an active interest in their mentee's challenges, achievements and career aspirations. Conversely the mentee must respect their mentor's time and be properly prepared for discussions. The impact of an ineffective mentoring relationship, where one or both parties aren't respecting the process and sharing responsibility for the outcome, can be devastating and long lasting for the mentee and may adversely impact their confidence, motivation and promotional opportunities.

On the other hand, an effective mentoring program can nurture a mentee and help him or her to achieve professional and personal goals. It is also a learning environment for the mentor and may be a foundation stone for a delivering strong personal, business and organisational culture benefits.

Reference

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