

Fast track to the future

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*Mentoring is a two-way street but it can improve your chances of success, writes **Nikki Davies**.*

Having a mentor has been touted as one way to accelerate your career - but what makes a good mentor? Academic, management consultant and public affairs advocate Wendy McCarthy, who is also director of McCarthy Mentoring, recommends that both parties to a mentoring relationship are clear from the outset about what they expect, including how much time they intend to devote and how they should contact each other.

If the relationship is not part of a formal program, she says, it's a good idea to impose a time limit - a few months or a year.

McCarthy says the ideal mentor is someone who listens, encourages, inspires, shares their time and provides constructive criticism. He or she should guide and help build the self-confidence of the person being mentored. "Many people also have informal relationships that are productive," she says.

It can be exciting for the more junior people to have such a resource at their fingertips but mentoring is a two-way street. People being mentored need to be committed and take responsibility for their own growth and development, McCarthy says. And, although it might sound like the perfect way to ensure your future success, mentor-protege relationships aren't always perfect.

"If the chemistry is wrong, the diaries don't synchronise and confidentiality isn't respected, problems can be encountered," McCarthy warns.

All of that almost sounds like a full-time job in itself but if a mentor is committed, the rewards for the protegee can be life-changing.

For Daniel Odman, general sales manager of Lexus of Chatswood, having a mentor has increased his productivity to the point that he has more time for "life".

"On a professional level ... I'd be contributing an extra two hours of productive work to my day, every day," he says. "On a personal level, the benefit of reducing the amount of time I'm required to be at work has had a far-reaching, positive impact."

For such a relationship to work, the protegee has to make considerable efforts. "As a mentee, you're responsible for the planning and preparation of your sessions, and you need to have your aims and goals clear and consistent," Odman says.

Odman's mentor, John Chapman, NSW regional manager of Siemens Australia, believes it's important that mutually agreed ground rules be set at the first session. "The key to the relationship is mutual respect," he says. "It's critical that time is spent on getting to know each other, to develop a mutual trust and therefore an open relationship."

Odman's mentor was organised through the Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce, which has had a mentoring program in place for more than six years.

Anthony Hollis, the CEO of the NSW branch of the chamber, says that while mentoring is a big commitment, the relationship between mentor and protege is mutually beneficial.

"Mentors and mentees gain immeasurably - to their own advantage and, ultimately, for the betterment of Australia as an internationally competitive country," he says.

So what should you do if you'd like a mentor? First, you must be clear about what it is you expect from the relationship. "Ensure your attitude towards the program is correct," Odman warns.

"A mentor-mentee relationship is not a teacher-pupil relationship. Your mentor ... can be a great catalyst for change but that change needs to be driven by you."

One thing is clear, however: it's a rewarding experience when it works.

Odman says: "Having time dedicated to thinking about specific goals and challenges provides the necessary clarity to create an effective framework for change, action and results."

McCarthy Mentoring: www.mccarthymentoring.com

Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce: www.aicc.org.au