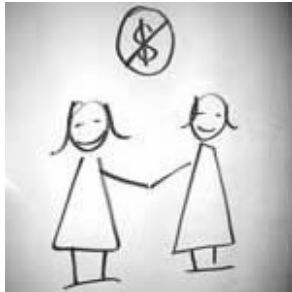


FEATURE: Time to Get Ahead: Get a mentor

By [Ellie Stevenson](#) Arts Hub

Wednesday, July 09, 2008

- [Print this page](#)



(Photo courtesy Flickr/ leighblackall)

Mentoring. You've heard the word, you've even heard it's a good thing, but is it really worth it? And more to the point, if you work in the creative sector, how do you get one?

There seems little doubt that being mentored can have enormous advantages. As the AMA (<http://www.a-m-a.org.uk/>) (Arts Marketing Association), whose own scheme for members is in its eighth year explains, 'Having a mentor will build your self-confidence and increase your motivation through sharing experiences and getting one-to-one feedback.' And there's more. 'Mentoring contributes to the professional development of both parties. Mentees in the AMA scheme have benefited from the support and guidance offered by their mentors, and mentors have commented on how much the skills they use and practice with their mentees have improved their relationships with colleagues, and positively affected their management style. Everyone's a winner.'

So far so good...

But what exactly is mentoring?

Authors David Kay and Roger Hinds define it like this, 'Mentoring is a relationship between two parties, who are not connected within a line management structure, in which one party (the mentor) guides the other (the mentee) through a period of change and towards an agreed objective.'

Mentors support people in developing, professionally and sometimes personally, and assist them in achieving their potential. Mentoring might be traditional, ie, the experienced supporting the less experienced, or alternatively, peer to peer. Sometimes the mentor and mentee might be equally experienced, but in different areas. But whatever the dynamic, in an ideal situation there should be benefits for both parties, mutual learning and development.

So why should you think seriously about getting a mentor?

Charity Green, director of development for Commissions East, a visual arts development agency, has this to

say about artists and mentoring: ‘Being an artist can be a lonely profession, it can be hard to find support or get a professional dialogue going about your work, the kind of dialogue that can encourage you to think differently about your practice. This is what a mentor can provide, they can ask searching questions, provide feedback in a non-critical way, one that doesn’t undermine you. In addition, working with someone more experienced enables a person to expand their networks and think about other income and employment generating opportunities. Mentoring can help you reach people you wouldn’t have known otherwise.’

Many of the above benefits also apply to other professions in the creative sector.

Working with a mentor can:

- Provide you with support and guidance to assist you in developing your career.
- Assist you in enhancing your professional expertise.
- Help you to meet key people/gain access to and develop your networks.
- Increase your self-reflection, personal insight and efforts towards learning and development.
- Develop your communication, management and leadership skills.
- Enhance your self-confidence.
- Give you insight into another person’s job, sector and/or challenges.

But it’s not just a one-way street. For a mentoring relationship to be effective, you have to be prepared to make it work. As Sarah Palmer, co-director of the www.palmerhamilton.co.uk, which has acted as broker in a number of mentoring relationships, says: ‘Trust and respect are crucial on both sides Do not expect your mentor to sort out your life! Take responsibility for the relationship with your mentor and be prepared to listen without judgement to another professional.’

As a mentee you need to be:

Reliable, flexible and willing to learn. You also need to be open and receptive to feedback and guidance. **If not, think carefully about whether mentoring is really for you.** You need to be prepared to put in the hard work – to discuss your weaknesses as well as your strengths, and maybe to change – so long as it doesn’t compromise your authenticity.

So how do you find a suitable mentor?

In the creative industries it isn’t easy. In a sector where over two fifths of workers are self-employed and the majority of businesses employ nine people or less (Diane Parker, 2007), the obvious route of a workplace mentoring scheme is not always viable. Such schemes exist in some sub-sectors and are sometimes coordinated through professional bodies: Libraries and Information are one example. But what if you’re not part of a large company that runs its own scheme? Here you have to be more creative and seek out your own mentor, either through a formal mentoring scheme run by another organisation (such as a networking body) or by approaching people yourself. Sarah Palmer advises, ‘Get out there and get linked in. Find out what’s being supported in this regard and if necessary get linked in to newsletters and email subscriptions which can alert you to possibilities. There are national and regional mentoring schemes being run in pockets around the country.’

‘Prioritise for yourself why you want a mentor, list the support needs you have and try to think of a person or persons who could support you. Find out if local enterprise agencies, arts organisations or networking forums

offer professional development training and mentoring. Become linked to relevant organisations, local studio networks, peer critique groups and forums and regional organisations and hubs that provide resources, both virtual and live. Find out what's on offer locally and when opportunities may arise.'

A formal scheme, whether workplace-based or not, has definite advantages. There are more likely to be aspects such as training, matching of mentor and mentee, evaluation, and so on. And the coordinator of the scheme sometimes acts as a broker, performing a valuable intermediary role between mentor and mentee in cases of conflict. In an informal scheme these are issues you will have to deal with yourself.

Be selective in your choice of a mentor – remember, this is an ongoing relationship. As Sarah Palmer says, 'It's a very valuable opportunity and should not be wasted, so preparation for the relationship is key.' And Sarita Godber, head of human resources for the <http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/> emphasises: 'Choose your mentor carefully – not everyone will be a suitable match and sometimes personalities simply don't fit together. It's important that you see the mentor as a credible mentor with skills that you feel you can learn from. Trust is really important as you need to be able to talk openly and honestly with your mentor.'

When selecting a mentor there are key things you should look out for. Your mentor should:

- Have a good track record in the area in which you are seeking to develop your expertise.
- Be an effective communicator (not all high achievers or those in senior positions are good communicators!) – experience of developing people would be useful.
- Be professional and be able to set clear boundaries and goals.
- Respect you, and be able to maintain confidentiality, ie, can you trust them?
- Have a good understanding of self and others, and be someone who wants to support people in developing and becoming empowered.
- Be willing to use their networks to help you, and to encourage you to develop your own
- Be willing to listen, to challenge you and to feed back.
- Be willing to commit time to the relationship.

Remember

- Your mentor doesn't have to work where you do, and he/she may even work in a different sector, if they have relevant expertise you want to tap into, eg, a business into arts perspective.
- He/she shouldn't be your line manager, part of your line management structure or someone who works in your department – some distance is essential, otherwise there could be a conflict of interest.

So you've identified a potential mentor or mentors. What now?

Sarah Palmer says, 'I would always recommend an initial meeting between mentee and mentor before any commitment is made to continue. It's vital that the mentor knows clearly what the mentee wants to get from the mentoring so the setting of short and long term goals within the mentoring are achievable.' And an initial meeting or meetings can also enable both parties to judge whether they are likely to get on, whether there is a rapport.

There are other crucial factors to address, to ensure the success of the mentoring relationship:

- Formalisation of the process, through an agreement or contract – this is important for reasons of ethics and propriety, and also to ensure both parties are clear about goals, objectives and practicalities such as meeting arrangements. Also, again for reasons of ethics and propriety, it's important that others are aware the

mentoring is taking place.

- Agreement on goals and objectives.
- Setting of ground rules and boundaries, eg, frequency and location of meetings, how parties contact each other between meetings.
- Written documentation, eg, agendas, summaries of meetings, and when these are to be provided.
- How often the relationship and its objectives will be reviewed.
- How conflicts or disagreements will be dealt with.
- To what extent you will become involved in your mentor's networks.
- When the relationship will end – agreeing this in advance may make things easier if conflict or problems arise in the future.

And as regards the meetings themselves, Sarita Godber advises: 'Come prepared and keep focused – ultimately you will set the agenda for your mentoring sessions. Establish some clear objectives from the start and know what you want to get from the mentoring. As mentoring can be time consuming as well as costly, make sure you use your sessions wisely. Bring live business issues to your sessions and don't just meet for the sake of it.'

It's clear from all this, that if you're really serious about becoming a mentee, that there's a lot to think about. There are schemes and resources available, but, particularly if you're freelance, or running a very small company, it takes time and determination to get things organised. But the benefits can be worth it. As Sarah Palmer says, 'Mentoring is very much a two-way process, it provides benefits for both the mentor and mentee, and the relationships are all different. They can be very rewarding, highly constructive in terms of personal, creative and business growth... Have fun, be prepared to be challenged and be open to learning.'

Websites

www.apd

www.artquest.org.uk

www.creativepeople.org.uk/

Sources

Brooks, Tessa (2006) Coaching and Mentoring Report, Cultural Leadership Programme

CIPD (2008) Mentoring Factsheet, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

Kay, David and Hinds, Roger. (2005) A Practical Guide to Mentoring, 2nd Ed., How to Books Ltd

Parker, Diane (2007) Coaching, Mentoring and Facilitation for Creative and Cultural Leadership, Cultural Leadership Programme

