



Leadership

The value of C-level mentoring

By TOM BURSEY

We often hear an exceptional leader thanking a mentor for their success. It's sometimes surprising. These people are already successful — why would they need a mentor? Mentoring often is viewed in the context of early-career professionals who serve as protégé to an internal organizational mentor (not their immediate boss), to help progress up the corporate ladder.

Why would having a mentor be of value to C-level executives, or to early-career corporate directors? Apart from the clear wisdom of the old saying, “never stop learning,” it is smarter and more fun to learn from the sage advice of a mentor, based on their successes and mistakes, to help deliver positive organizational results or outcomes.

“But why do I need a mentor?” asks the CEO. “I have the board chair, and we have good board chair-CEO relationship.”

“But why do I need a mentor?” asks the CFO. “I have my boss, the CEO, and we have a good relationship.”

What is the business case for having a mentor? It's all about the learning.

Picture this scenario: You have a graduate degree. You have all the high-level professional certifications you could ever need. You attended the finishing school of an in-residence executive leadership program. You stay current with leading authors such as Henry Mintzberg or Craig Dowden. You may even have had executive coaches from time to time to work on this or that, such as how to speak as a leader, or be fortunate enough to have the special wisdom of a parent to influence your thinking, style and values.

So why consider having a mentor? Some of the lifelong benefits are outlined on the Gray Stone Advisors' blog:

- Develop greater clarity and determine precisely who you are and what you want to achieve and when;
- Leverage existing strengths and unlock your potential;
- Sharpen your strategic and critical thinking skills;
- Gain valuable business acumen and hone interpersonal communication skills;
- Improve your leadership styles and competencies by providing regular, ongoing feedback;
- Stretch your performance beyond what you think you can achieve;
- Help you create actionable goals to ensure your advancement.



Mentoring is not the same as executive coaching. Executive coaching is more inward-focused on personal development, providing feedback, and closing gaps in specific skills.

Tom Bursey, Council of Canadian Academies

Equally as important as determining the support a mentor can provide is determining what a mentor is not. According to former Apple CEO John Sculley, a mentor is “a trusted pair of eyes [who] should never be making decisions for your company; he or she is not a ‘co-decider’ but a sounding board, someone who can provide much needed outside advice or perspective.”

Sculley also says a mentor is not a competitor, and there should never be an ulterior motive or agenda.

“They're not there to get your job,” says Sculley, who instead suggests mentors are people who “you've built a friendship with and admiration for.”

Mentoring is not the same as executive coaching. Executive coaching is more inward-focused on personal development, providing feedback, and closing gaps in specific skills. Few executive coaches have actually worked in equivalent roles themselves, whereas mentors are role models who have “been there, done that.” Mentors provide “war stories” — genuine advice based on true-life experience. This allows a mentor to become a coach and move back and forth between mentoring and coaching.

How do you find an executive mentor? The Gray Stone Advisors' blog outlines seven tips and goals:



BURSEY

- Know what you are looking for;
- Get help on the principles and the techniques (Mentors teach principles and strategy, then work with you on technique and tactics);
- Ask yourself: are you really committed? (Am I truly prepared to excel?);
- Letting go of distractions and getting real (Mentors will help you get clarity on priorities);
- Find a mentor that fits your geography, industry and personality (Perhaps there's someone in your profession who has the job you'd like to grow into? Or maybe it's someone who's achieved suc-

cess in another field, but he or she is admirable and a gifted teacher?);

- Consider working with more than one mentor (for different aspects of your life, such as a C-level executive and a corporate director mentor);
- Know how to expend your energy.

But what's in it for the mentor? According to authors Suzanne de Janasz and Maury Peiperl in the *Harvard Business Review*, there are two main reasons mentors take on a protégé: “Sense of impact (they have wisdom to share, and they don't want to waste it on people who won't put it to use) and personal learning (they appreciate industry, career, cultural, geographical, and generational experiences that are different from their own and enjoy connecting with the next generation of leaders).”

What do you look for in a match? Again according to Janasz and Peiperl, individuals seeking a mentor must look for someone with a variety of key criteria including relevant experience, an outside perspective to help determine how the organization is regarded externally, and someone who can be completely trusted.

“Mentors try to evaluate openness to learning and potential for success,” they say. “Mentors also

consider whether a mentee has knowledge, skills, and abilities from which they can learn.”

During the mentoring process, here are some steps to take:

- Make the right match;
- Commit to total confidentiality;
- Commit to the aim (e.g., helping a C-level executive accelerate the learning and perform the role more effectively);
- Structure regular sessions to deliver intended benefits (formal agenda defined by the problems currently confronting the C-level executive), shared in advance so that the mentor can reflect on it;
- Prioritize the process so it doesn't become overwhelmed by other demands.

When preparing for the first meeting, according to Larry Ambrose, author of *A Mentor's Companion*, individuals should consider the following questions:

- What should your mentor know about you in order to work most successfully with you?
- How do you learn best — by reading, observing, doing, or listening?
- What are your desired outcomes for the mentoring relationship?
- What do you expect from your mentor?
- How will you know if the relationship is working?

Ambrose also suggests individuals ask their mentor to be prepared to answer questions including:

- What do you expect from me as your mentee?
- What do you think will be able to help me most?
- How do you like to work with people you are teaching and developing?
- What do you want to gain from this partnership?

Ultimately, mentoring can be invaluable to the mentor and to the protégé. After all, who wouldn't benefit from the perspective of a seasoned executive who has walked in the same shoes and dealt with the same experiences? And as a seasoned executive, who wouldn't want to impart their wisdom and develop a strong professional bond by sharing their stories about past successes and failures?

Tom Bursey (FCPA, FCMA, C. Dir., ICD.D) has served as board chair and chair of multiple committees, including audit & finance, HR and compensation, and governance. He is vice-president and chief financial officer of the Council of Canadian Academies.