



Words: Amy Duff Illustration: Nick Lowndes

Helping hands

With women half as likely as men to start a business, the popularity of mentoring for aspiring female entrepreneurs is growing. But what are the lessons they hope to learn?

In late October, the Prowess National Policy Centre (PNPC) opened its doors for business. The first of its kind in Europe, the centre provides a focal point for women's enterprise-related research and policy best practice. Funded by BERR, the PNPC is one of numerous government measures to promote women entrepreneurs and foster female-owned business start-up growth.

This is not special treatment. The fact remains that women are half as likely as men to start a business and this figure has barely changed in five years. With just 16 per cent of UK businesses owned by

women, the government feels that a wealth of talent remains untapped.

One of the PNPC's first reports focuses on mentoring for women. The culmination of research by a steering group—the National Women's Enterprise Mentoring Network—it reveals that of 79 mentoring schemes operating in England, nearly 40,000 participants (49 per cent) are women. Of those programmes, 25 are aimed specifically at females. "Research and experience suggests gender differences in take-up of support services," noted the authors.

That's perhaps no surprise. If a mentor is someone to share ideas with, to listen to

your problems and help your business wherever possible, then women will seek out that more transformational, holistic form of support, the report continued.

Given that there are fewer women in business, says PNPC director Jackie Brierton, there is a fairly high level of women already seeking out mentoring. "The evidence seems to suggest and certainly anecdotally, that they're more prepared to ask for help than some of their male counterparts," she says. "Women tend to naturally ask other women for help and advice. That's one of the reasons why there are so many women's networks. They value

getting advice from other women who have gone through it. Mentoring is just a slightly more formal, organised version of that."

A mentoring competition run by Jackie Brennan taps into that inclination for women to help one another. The founder of FreshIdeas Events decided to launch the scheme because she'd heard how female business owners could do with extra help, and she works with women who are already successful entrepreneurs.

The competition matches 10 successful businesswomen with 10 "aspiring female entrepreneurs" for six months. "All of the women have run successful businesses, they've been through the experience, are experts in their sector and are in a good position to help start-ups or those who want to grow," explains Brennan. She hopes that the mentors will be able to offer a fresh perspective and open up a whole new network of contacts for mentees.

"You may be struggling with something but talking it over with a mentor can give it a fresh pair of eyes. They can shorten the learning curve," she says.

Sumerah Ahmad and Jo Haigh, two of Brennan's panellists, have both found having a mentor to be invaluable. Ahmad, co-founder and managing director of commercial radio station Club Asia, says her family had always been her support system, "egging her on", until Cass Business School teamed her with a professional mentor as part of her MBA.

"I wasn't looking for a coach, someone to stand by the sidelines and cheer me on," she says. "I've got enough confidence and I often phone people (funnily enough, all men) for their recommendations or advice. What I wanted was someone to challenge me, to bounce ideas off, and discuss where I'm taking my business; plan for the future and the strategic, long-term issues."

She says her mentor, who started his own business and took it to IPO, has given her great encouragement to think about every decision she makes. "He'd sit there and drive me insane with his questions. Just having one hour away from my desk with him helped me distinguish between whether I was making the obvious and easy

"WHAT I WANTED WAS SOMEONE TO CHALLENGE ME, TO BOUNCE IDEAS OFF AND DISCUSS WHERE I'M TAKING MY BUSINESS PLAN"

decision but not necessarily the best. It's like that person is an initiator. A personal trainer for your business."

Haigh says she has been mentored formally and informally over the years and believes the value is difficult to quantify "until you've been lucky enough to have that opportunity yourself".

The partner and head of corporate

finance for MGR among numerous other executive- and non-executive roles, she says she feels her role in this competition is to develop a relationship with her mentee and "just be there". But Haigh, author of *Tales from the Glass Ceiling—A Survival Guide for Women in Business*, also hopes her specific skills—helping people raise finance, grooming businesses for sale and getting corporate governance practices right—will be brought to bear.

"Sometimes it's very lonely, especially if you're a woman in a man's world. You've got to be big and brave and sometimes you're not. You need someone who's empathetic and who's been there," says Haigh.

She feels that women are more prepared to open up, especially to other women, but worrying whether it's a sin to ask for help is ubiquitous across the sexes.

"I'm not sure whether that's a female trait, or a trait that anybody in business has, particularly as you travel higher up the ladder," she says. "People worry that if they're admitting their concerns, they're admitting defeat. Although I've always been a confident player, it's nice to be told by somebody that they respect you, and that you can do it."

As long as people don't become overly dependent on their mentor, says Jonathan Jay, reaching towards someone else for help and advice shouldn't be rejected. Jay sold his own coaching and mentoring business to a private equity group last year and has recently founded Success Track, a for-profit mentoring programme. He naturally feels that everyone, male or female, should have a mentor and that he's never stopped learning from more experienced people.

Why reinvent the wheel, he says. "When you stand on the shoulders of giants you can see further. If you let people who are more successful and experienced than you lift you up, it gives you that head start. Business and life move so fast, we haven't got time to learn everything ourselves."

So many of us have the solution and potential already, he adds. What we need is the confidence that a mentor inspires to help us make the right decisions. ■



Copyright of Director (00123242) is the property of Director Publications Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.