

SISTER ACT

Female entrepreneurs are finding that mentors can reinvigorate their business

Unlike coaching, mentoring tends to be an ongoing relationship that can last for a long period. Paula Wynne, founder of recruitment site Remote Employment, decided to apply for a mentor to help grow her company under a female mentoring scheme operated by Business Link.

‘When I saw the mentors involved, I thought, wow, these women are exceptional. For example, Karen Darby, founder of comparison website SimplySwitch, whom I was eventually partnered with, had grown her company from scratch and then sold it for £22 million to the *Daily Mail*.’

Wynne says that Darby gave her inspiration and support with the business. ‘She had lots of ideas to improve traffic to the site, such as launching our own awards – which we’ve had a fantastic response to.’

‘The idea of having a female mentor appealed to me because it gave me someone to relate to – in terms of having to juggle family life, children and running a business. But the outcome was that it gave me lots of confidence to know that someone like Karen could believe in what I was doing. She made me realise that I could turn the business into a global concept.’

SELF-BELIEF

Emily Shenton, director at social enterprise Arrival Education, signed up for a mentor to improve her knowledge of finances and learn how to grow a scalable business. ‘The process helped me to develop confidence and it was really useful to have someone there outside of my friends and family to show me some of the shortcuts to creating a successful business.’

Shenton believes that the key to making a mentoring partnership work goes beyond gender. ‘It’s all about being teamed up with the right person and having the right attitude. In a mentor you need someone who has a willingness to share themselves and not be afraid to interrupt or direct

your line of thinking,’ she says.

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Michelle Peers, founder of networking site Socialite, agrees: ‘The key to making the partnership work is being open to ideas. It is easy to be over-protective of your business or myopic when you’re so totally immersed and involved in the day-to-day.’

Peers adds that structure is vital to making the most of the relationship. ‘I strongly recommend a written brief before any mentor session followed up by a written action list following it.’

Importantly, your mentor should be seen as a sounding board as opposed to someone who can solve your problems. Says Peers: ‘The responsibility for your business ultimately lies with you, so you always need to apply judgement and your specific business knowledge to your mentor’s suggestions.’ ■