

Small Business Resource Centre

Presented by
GET GROWING
FOR **BUSINESS**

Why you may need a mentor

Mary Teresa Bitti, Financial Post Published: Monday, May 31, 2010



Getty Creative Image

You don't know what you don't know. And as an entrepreneur starting a business, what you don't know can stop you before you get going

You don't know what you don't know. And as an entrepreneur starting a business, what you don't know can stop you before you get going. That, says David Simpson, a teacher in the entrepreneurship program at the Richard Ivey School of Business, is why mentors are critical to getting a business going and growing.

Brad Cherniak, partner, Sapien Capital Partners equates the benefits of a mentor to those of an effective advisory board. "They end up being a resource the CEO otherwise wouldn't have," says Mr. Cherniak. "Entrepreneurs tend to deal with a sense of isolation. They don't necessarily confide in their employees, especially when they are nervous and things are bad. The notion of a mentor is enticing because they have your best interest at heart and they want to help you."

Mr. Simpson calls mentors "truth tellers." "Entrepreneurs inherently have poor self-awareness. They think they can do everything and they are pretty confident in their idea and that's why they need someone who

has been there and done that to tell them the truth about a situation. For example, you don't have the skill-set for that, or your business is not ready for this. A mentor can do that."

A mentor, says Mr. Simpson, can also bring a sense of calm to situations because they understand bad things happen all the time, especially in the start-up phase and it's not the end of the world. They can also help stop some of those bad things from happening by looking for potential traps. "For all your business relationships/arrangements with landlords, suppliers, banks and general negotiations having a seasoned mentor is absolutely critical because otherwise, it's easy to put your business in an untenable position for a long time," says Mr. Simpson. "That extends to customers, too. Young entrepreneurs typically think the customer is always right. A mentor who has been there will advise you that is not correct. The right customer is always right. Some customers are business killers, taking way too much of your time."

Perhaps most important, a mentor can provide a source of contacts and help you expand your circle of trust. "Mentors can open doors," says Mr. Simpson. "This is especially true for younger entrepreneurs. For example, there are some high-growth medical companies where young people have really great ideas but one of the biggest problems is access. Getting in to see a hospital board as a 21-year-old with a really good idea is tough. You have to find some grey hair, somebody who can make that first call."

So how do you find a mentor? Mr. Simpson offers the following advice:

Ask. "I heard about a young entrepreneur who has billionaire Jim Pattison as his mentor/advisor. How did he manage that? He asked him. Most successful entrepreneurs love to help young people."

Identify what you want to look like when you grow up. "Who today represents the kind of business you want to be like in 20 years? If you want to look like IBM, talk to a senior executive or a retired executive from there."

Reach out to successful entrepreneurs who have started and sold a business. "They will know the good and bad and can take you right along."

Go to your industry association. Take a look at the list of its member companies and call up CEOs you admire. "Tell them you are a new entrant to the industry and would like to talk. Most will."