Take it from
THE TOP

Mentor, guru, wise sage. When you reach the top of your business tree, who can you turn to for advice? Gillian Upton discovers mentors and coaches are the invisible business resource.

It’s lonely at the top. Those that reach the dizzy heights of chief executive officer or any of the top tiers of management in a company are revered as the ‘best for the job’, bursting with competence, with all the answers at the ready for whatever may lie ahead, plus the vision to steer the business in the right direction in the first place.

But these are uncertain times, and even captains of industry need guidance and a sounding board for their ideas and new strategies; someone with experience yet unbiased at the same time who can listen and, if necessary, offer guidance.

Mentors have helped the careers of many at the top of blue chip companies. Not that you’d know about it as precious few are willing to disclose it. A wall of silence meets anyone daring to suggest they have been mentored.

Arguably now though, more than ever, mentors are in demand. In an economic downturn, downsized companies are over-stretched and have insufficient resource in their corporate structure to cope with recovery. There is no spare brainpower internally to re-evaluate. Rather than stand still, they reach outside the company for a helping hand.

“There is a significant market out there for brainpower and relevant experience and unbiased guidance to help companies go forward,” asserts John Hooper CBE, a marketeer for more than 40 years, co-founder and chairman of Mentor Marketing & Investment and a member of Change Agency. He claims to have mentored 20 millionaires but no names, no pack drill.

“Mentors don’t run your company; we’re there as a sounding board. We get in deeper into your client relationships, get your staffing structures right and help you drive things forward,” explains Hooper.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) defines it as a partnership in which the mentor offers ongoing support and development opportunities to the mentee. More telling is CIPD research showing that mentored individuals advance more rapidly, report greater job satisfaction and express lower turnover than their non-mentored counterparts. So it’s good for the bottom line too.

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Business people need mentors at different points in their career. When the company is at a crossroads, undergoing a change of ownership, when they are new to a company and want to make their way quickly or when they have insufficient confidence or independent colleagues around them. After that, they just need to realise that calling in a mentor is not a failing and be comfortable enough to pick up the phone.

Mentoring doesn’t come cheaply. Costs vary between £1,750 to £3,000 a day - and invoices and paper trials are often ‘lost’ as consultancy sessions.
It’s surprising to learn how people become mentors. They tend to fall into the older and wiser category, for obvious reasons. You’ve got to have been there, done it and got the T-shirt, have a breadth of experience, like people, want to help them and be a damn good listener. “It’s a teaching role in many ways,” says Hooper. “But mostly, mentees want someone to talk to. Just framing their argument to an independent person helps them.”

Fellow mentor Nick Phillips, former director general of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) is now running a mentoring scheme for the IPA for today’s managing directors, and mentored by yesterday’s managing directors.

“A mentor is often just a facilitator,” he says. “In one case, the partners of an advertising agency wanted financial and commercial help; another wanted to galvanise his efforts in case he got stale; some are looking at the total work/life balance.

“The worst thing is not to reflect at all. At the top you have no-one to turn to. Where does the Pope go to Father Confessor? Who does Tony Blair open his heart to? Who can tell him tough truths?” Phillips believes that mentoring allows senior people to talk in confidence. It means that they can portray weaknesses, which they certainly couldn’t do to anyone within the company, at least not without it affecting the future of their careers with the organisation.

You need mentoring just as much when you’re starting out on the corporate ladder, like Oxford graduates Charlie Osmond and Caroline Plumb. They started their company, Fresh Minds, in 2000 and have gathered together outstanding students, MBAs and graduates to help client companies such as Unilever, Deutsche Bank and Diageo with business research. It’s a good formula as Fresh Minds has been voted fastest growing company in its sector. But back in 2000, when they had just left university, they knew nothing about running a business.

They needed advice on legal and HR issues in the main. “You don’t know what you don’t know,” says Charlie Osmond. “And without experts helping us I don’t know what would have become of us. Mentoring is a fantastic way of tapping into the people who have done it before.”

Fresh Minds benefited not from a formal mentoring arrangement but the early start-up period of what has since become a hugely popular free online service called the Shell LiveWIRE mentoring scheme. It is targeted squarely at 16-30 year olds. Ambitious youngsters who don’t want to sit down and talk to a bank manager can log on to a website and request help from a pool of 60 mentors in various categories who will respond within 48 hours. Their questions are mostly about sales, marketing, business planning and funding. Charlie Osmond is now one of those mentors and encourages others as much as possible.

This poacher-turned-gamekeeper is clear on his motivations for doing so. “I believe everyone should be encouraged to become an entrepreneur,” says Osmond. “It’s a cause we believe in and it feels wrong not to help out where we can. It was only three years ago that I left university so I am still younger than some people who use the Shell site.”

Nigel Bogle, CEO of advertising agency BBH, is at the top of his profession. His company is one of the top ten agencies by income in the UK, has been named Agency of the Year by several of the industry’s august publications, and has a Who’s Who list of accounts from Audi to Levi’s and KFC. But when he was a callow youth of 19, and just starting out in the industry as a media trainee at Leo Burnett, the picture was very different.

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“There are two people I won’t ever forget who completely shaped my career,” he recalls. “John Telford Beasley took me under his wing and hothoused my learning. I never left his side so it was conscious mentoring. He exposed me to everything they did so I went to client meetings, I wrote papers and he guided me to account management and away from media planning.”

Sadly, Beasley has since died, but as the junior in account management, on the Cadbury account, Bogle began working alongside his second mentor, Paul Lazell, now retired, during the period of iconic ads such as Milk Tray Man and Flake Girl.

“He said, ‘learn from the best, and that’s me, but not in that suit’, so I went off the same morning and bought a new one,” recalls Bogle. “On day one I had to write a speech about own label, not knowing what own label was. But I was like a sponge and took it all in.”

“He was extremely competent for his age,” remembers Lazell. “We worked closely together and developed our own attitudes as to what was good advertising. He had tremendous charisma and was tremendously talented,

“It wasn’t conscious mentoring although I did shield him from those jealous of him because he was so young and I gave him a chance when other departments wouldn’t. But we worked as a team, not a hierarchy. “Bogle rose from junior executive on Cadbury to be in charge of the entire confectionery account within five years. During that time it quadrupled in size. The rest, as they say is history.

Alongside mentoring there has also been a boom in coaching and there is a fine line between the two. One definition is that coaching cajoles the answers and solutions from the coach while mentoring involves the mentor passing on ideas to the mentee.

Britannia Building Society’s group finance director Phil Lee chose a coach and he is clear about the benefits. “It’s given me thinking time and with someone smart enough to ask the right questions. It’s been very valuable and I’ve no doubt that I’m a better manager as a consequence. Each time I take along a key issue to discuss, although the coach encourages me to come up with my own solutions. It’s not cheap but the value is far greater than the cost.”

Lee sees his coach for two hours each month and will do so indefinitely. His coach is Vicki Espin, director of Coach Development at The Coaching Academy and also a director of her own company. The Corporate & Executive Coaching Organisation. She believes the coaching process unlocks latent potential in individuals and lists her skillset as powerful communication skills, experience in large organisations, a knowledge of how people learn and develop, tenacity and robustness,

She does her job, quite simply, because she loves the buzz of the corporate environment, the dynamics and the human relationships. For Hooper, now in his sixties, it keeps his mind alive and makes getting up in the morning really worthwhile. “Semi-retirement bores me rigid but this gives you tremendous satisfaction in life,” he concludes. “I’m giving something back.” Coach or mentor, it’s a simple win-win for industry’s geniuses and those still to be born.

*For information about the Shell LiveWIRE scheme, visit www.shell-livewire.org/mentor