



# When Experience Counts

A new CEO or senior executive can face enormous pressure when they're new to the role. **Mary-Anne Baldwin** explores how a good mentor can make a difference

**W**hile solutions may not be easy to come by, it can be difficult for a leader to openly admit they don't have the answers. That's where a mentor can make a big difference.

A mentor can be particularly useful when starting a new role, says **Matthew Wright**, CEO of utility company Southern Water: "The value of a mentor is that you can draw on their experience in times of change. You might be entering a dysfunctional team, or the board might not be as supportive as you thought it would be.

"There are myriad issues that you can't anticipate until you're in the role.

By speaking to someone who has been there, you can prepare yourself for what's to come."

**Tom Taylor**, Chair of the Consumer Council for Water in Wales and former Chief Executive of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, says: "My mentor got me to realise that as a new CEO, it was not my job to solve every problem as I had first thought.

"She got me to understand there's a huge difference between leadership and management, which I think is one of the most common issues facing a first-time CEO. You can manage a team but you need to lead an organisation."

**Tony Cowling**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and former CEO and Chairman of market research company TNS, agrees that mentoring helps new CEOs develop essential skills for the role. "Chief executives are often anxious when they're new because there's nearly always a part of the business they know little, or less, about," he says.

He explains that one of his mentees soon realised they required a wider skillset for the role: "They'd come up through finance... suddenly they were CEO and had responsibility for the company's marketing, sales and online presence. They thought: 'The company needs to change in >



these areas, so I need someone with experience that's different to mine."

While some mentees have come to **Tony** for his specific expertise, which in his case includes marketing and international expansion, he says much of it is about having the freedom to speak openly to someone, which often you can't do within the company.

Agreeing with this sentiment, **Julia Robertson**, Group CEO of outsourced HR services provider Impellam, explains: "I worked with a mentor when I was first promoted from Divisional to Group CEO. The job is lonely. You're unsure of what you don't know until you're there, and sometimes you won't want to explore that with your chairman."

**Sir Michael Lyons**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and Chairman of the English Cities Fund and former Chairman of the BBC Trust, says that "it's critical that the chairman does not get so close to the CEO that they're unable to identify a failure or act upon it".

The mentoring role is quite separate, says **Sir Michael**: "It gives the mentee a chance to explore things that could be difficult to discuss with immediate colleagues, or board members."

## Mentoring in Action

While mentoring can provide considerable support in managing these relationships, its benefits extend beyond the boardroom to cover other issues including shareholder expectations, performance, remuneration or change management.

**Penny Hamer**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and former Group Human Resources

*"The value of a mentor is that you can draw on their experience in times of change"*

Director of telecommunications company Energis, explains how she has provided mentoring through the restructure of an executive team and encouraged a female MD to put herself forward as Group CEO. "Her appointment has been a great success," she adds.

The issues will vary with each CEO, which is why the mentoring relationship should follow a pathway defined by the mentee.

"This is not a place for blueprints," says **Michael**. "In some meetings people might want to discuss the challenges immediately in front of them, on other occasions they might want to look further forward, or may even discuss something completely outside their working life. Addressing the whole person is very important but doing that in a way that doesn't feel artificial or pre-programmed is key."

Another pivotal aspect is the relationship dynamic. "Finding the right match between mentor and mentee is essential," says **Tom Beedham**, Director of Programme Management at Criticaleye.

"There needs to be the right chemistry and respect so that conversations can be open. Also, mentoring sessions need to

be prioritised during what is inevitably a busy time for a new CEO."

Mentoring relationships should evolve with the mentee's needs and it's important to be fluid. For this reason, a mentee should not be reticent to move on, indeed their mentor will have benefited too.

What does the mentor gain? Penny explains: "Exposure to different business sectors, which helps keep me up-to-date with current business challenges. Plus there's the buzz of seeing someone develop in a challenging role." ■

### Featuring Commentary From:



**Tom Beedham**  
Director  
Programme Management  
Criticaleye



**Tony Cowling**  
Former CEO & Chairman  
TNS



**Penny Hamer**  
Former Group HRD  
Energis



**Sir Michael Lyons**  
Chairman  
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**Julia Robertson**  
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**Tom Taylor**  
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