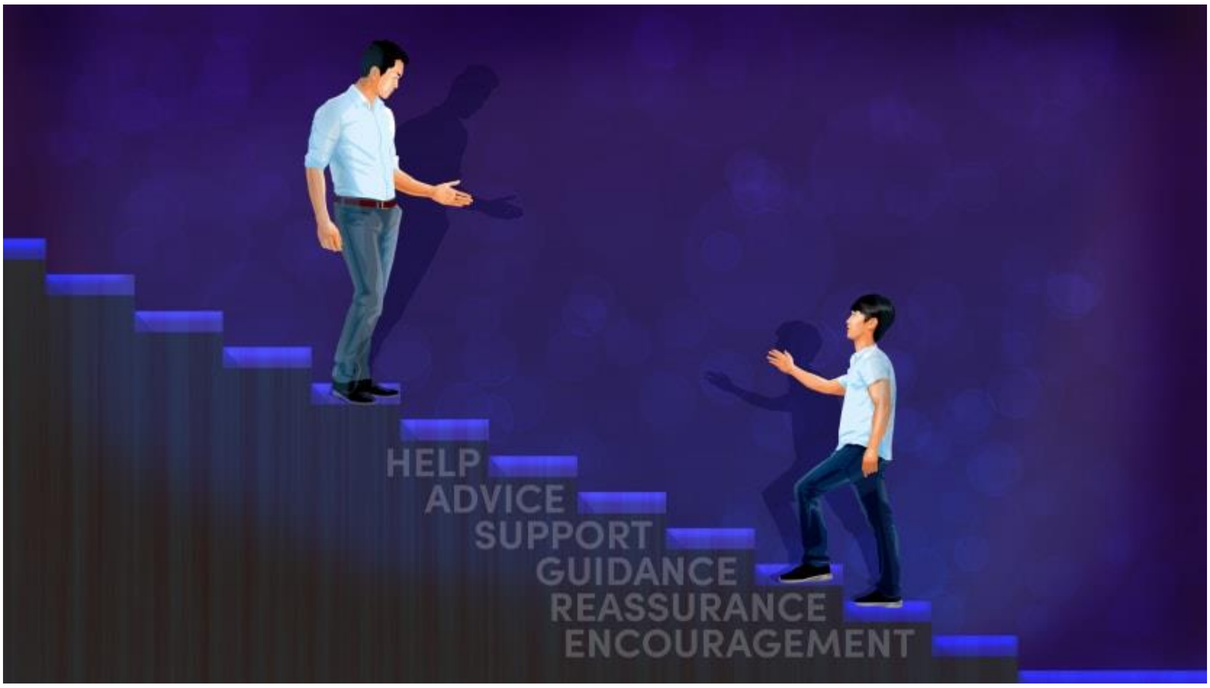
Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?



If he had a mentor at a younger age, Mr Cheng Chai Hong believes he wouldn't have embarked on his undergraduate studies with the belief that obtaining a degree was the only way to enter the working world with a competitive edge.

The 31-year-old filmmaker "doesn't necessarily regret" his decision, but he thinks a professional mentor would have "near instantly" dispelled myths or clarified his fears.

"(The benefits of obtaining a degree) may still be true for certain industries. But this piece of wisdom handed down from my parents holds little water whenever I look around at myself and my peers, who are often either working in jobs that have little to do with their fields of study, or in fields that care little for your paper qualifications and more about your work ethic," he told CNA.

"I felt that I didn’t know how wide the world could be, and I had to make a decision on my direction in life with very little information available. So I want to provide the next generation with the opportunities I didn’t have."

Mr Cheng has been a volunteer mentor with non-profit organisation The Astronauts Collective (TAC) for about five years to help young people who feel as lost as he did.

The organisation works mainly with secondary and tertiary schools to encourage their students to think beyond grades and courses, and to start reflecting on their definitions of success and what makes a job meaningful.

"A lack of mentoring meant that the mistakes I made and experience gained were all my own. I didn’t have the opportunity to learn through someone else’s experience, avoid mistakes that had already been made before, and forge ahead faster," he added.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

“Essentially, I had to plough my own path in a lot of aspects of my life and career, which might not have been necessary with the help of a relevant mentor."

But while mentoring isn’t a novel concept, and it would have benefited people like Mr Cheng, it has never quite become mainstream practice.

WHY THE LACK OF MENTORSHIP?
In a Youth Mentoring Sentiment Poll conducted by the National Youth Council in February, only 11 per cent of 1,500 youth respondents aged 16 to 34 indicated that they have participated in formal mentoring programmes.

However, more than 60 per cent of the respondents who hadn’t participated in such a programme said they would be open to one.

Despite an appetite for mentoring programmes, there are several possible reasons why mentorship hasn’t taken off here.

First, a lack of awareness about how to begin a mentoring relationship impedes both potential mentors and mentees.

“You want to help promote a culture of mentoring. A lot of mentoring is quite informal. For those who are more forward, they might ask if you can be a mentor to them. But for those who are not, and I think that’s the majority of youth, then they don’t even know about these channels,” said Mr Alvin Tan, the Minister of State for the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

As the adviser to the Mentoring Alliance for Action that was launched in March, he aims to create a culture of mentoring in Singapore together with the alliance.

One of the problems Mr Tan has observed is the lack of awareness about what mentoring entails in the first place, which places like the alliance and digital platform Youthopia try to solve.

“Mentees don’t even know what mentoring is about. So you have to go really upstream to say, this is what mentoring is about. It is not about counselling. Rather, (these channels are) where you can get mentoring resources and look for mentors,” he added.

“On the mentor side, we assure you that you have a lot to offer in terms of your career and life choices, and (these are some places) where you can go to offer your time and energy, and we can pair you up with mentees.”

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

Second, the “extra work”, especially juggled alongside full-time jobs, can detract potential mentors from committing. There is also no guaranteed return on investment.

“If you took (up mentorship) in your own time, or you decided to do it because you want to help, that’s something else. But if someone assigned (mentoring) to you, you have to take time off. You already have daily targets and things you have to deliver. And then now you have to babysit this person,” said Dr Paul Lim, a lecturer of organisational behaviour and human resources at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Dr Lim added that it’s “hard to measure the ROI (return on investment)” for mentorship.

“I think companies and organisations don’t have a mechanism in place. They may take too much work, or they may not even know how to measure. So if you want mentorship to be mainstream, then you need to see metrics.”

Third, there is the mentor’s “very real” fear of being replaced.

“The mentor, sometimes, fears being replaced, especially if they’re in the same organisation (as their mentee). They may think, if I teach you everything, one day you will use it against me. It’s a very real thing. I’ve heard a lot of Singaporeans talk about this,” said Dr Lim.

Finally, the target market for mentoring programmes can be self-selecting, suggested Mr Wong Yi Fong, the co-founder of The Astronauts Collective.

“Many mentoring programmes tend to focus on youth who already want guidance and are proactively looking for mentors. However, youth who would benefit the most from having a mentoring relationship are those who don’t understand the value of having mentors, hence they’re not looking out for such opportunities for themselves,” said Mr Wong.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

"These might be students who are unmotivated or uninspired. They might find that they have no trusted adult figures in their lives they can turn to. These are the ones who would stand to gain the most out of a mentorship."

MENTORING MORE CRUCIAL IN THE PANDEMIC
Regardless of the hurdles and blindspots of mentoring in Singapore, there is no better time to "rehash the topic" with work-from-home being the norm for the last one-and-a-half years, noted Dr Lim.

"People are just so inundated with a lot of things about COVID and working from home. I have students who graduate and have never been to the office, which gives a good context why (mentoring) is important," he said.

"We're going to get a whole cohort of graduates who really might not know how to deal with how things work in the organisation."

At marketing agency MediaMonks, its managing director for Southeast Asia, Mr Joris Knetsch, agreed that the pandemic has made mentorship particularly challenging but also more important.

"With people working from home, not to mention the past year being particularly busy for a digital partner, it's been tough to create those connections or carve out the time to be a mentor amid increased levels of stress," he said.

"But that also reinforces the very need for these programmes and why they're so important. Making space for people to be there for each other and learn from one another precisely when new ways of thinking are so sorely needed."

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

To illustrate the significant role that career mentorship can play in the pandemic, Dr Lim pointed to the concept of “organisational socialisation”.

According to the Oxford Handbook of Organisational Psychology, the concept is defined as “a learning and adjustment process that enables an individual to assume an organisational role that fits both organisational and individual needs”.

In the workplace, this translates into greater productivity.

“Organisational socialisation is a long word that means getting up to speed and getting to understand how the company works. The faster the inexperienced hire gets up to speed, the more valuable they are. So your ROI (return on investment) is definitely faster,” said Dr Lim.

“You can make a person do work and contribute rather than, you know, the person needs to be taught and guided. So definitely mentoring helps with that.”

Research has also shown that mentoring leads to increased job satisfaction, he added.

“This shows there is lower intention to leave the company. (Employees) tend to be more committed to the organisation.”

While these benefits of mentorship aren’t unique to life under COVID-19, they could combat the impending “resignation tsunami” due to the pandemic – a term mentioned by senior lecturer from the National University of Singapore’s Business School, Ms Wu Pei Chuan, in a CNA commentary.

In a separate commentary, she wrote that “four in 10 employees say they will leave their current roles in the next three to six months”, according to a McKinsey report published in September surveying five countries, including Singapore.

Reasons for this include “boreout”, which Ms Wu described as a situation “when employees feel disengaged and no longer see the point in what they are doing anymore”.

A culture of mentorship may address this, as it helps to keep employees engaged at work, according to experts and companies with formal and informal mentorship initiatives.

EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP BENEFITS BOTH PARTIES

Dr Lim, whose research interests include mentorship, realised about five years ago that fresh graduates were beginning to “demand” mentoring in their career.

As a result, he noticed companies pitching their employer value proposition as the fact that they provide mentoring to “hook” candidates.

This demand for mentorship even presented itself when he gave talks pre-pandemic. Occasionally, he would have a young person boldly come up from the audience to ask him to be their mentor.

In the workplace, new hires can see that the company “genuinely cares” for their growth through the existence of formal and informal mentoring initiatives.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

“Care for employees is very important, especially for the younger millennials and older Gen Z. Mentorship signals that … (the company) really wants you to succeed,” said Dr Lim.

Mentorship helps the company in terms of learning, and people “move faster” when they learn fast, allowing the mentee to feel that they’re learning much more, he added.

But experiencing the benefits of career mentoring can start much earlier in life, such as in secondary school when students begin to reflect on what their careers could look like, with the help of organisations like TAC.

Three years ago, 17-year-old Arnav Yadur took part in one of TAC’s mentoring programmes on journalism.

For six consecutive weekends, he and about 10 other schoolmates were mentored by a journalist to learn about her profession. It was his first taste of what a career in journalism could be, and it piqued his interest.

Arnav kept in touch with his mentor, who wrote him a recommendation letter two years later that landed him a place in a mass communication diploma course through the Early Admissions Exercise.

“I learnt how to interact with other people while interviewing, and how to finetune my word choices, as some may be sensitive to certain topics and have totally contrasting views,” he told CNA.

“I thought mentorship was just people giving you guidance into the aspects of what a certain career entails and it just stops there. But mentorship can be lifelong, as I am still in contact with my mentor till this date.”

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

For Arnav, having a mentor in the field of one’s interest is “necessary” as it helps “mould your opinions and carve the right mindset to know exactly what you’d be putting yourself in moving forward”. But to him, this only helps if you already “have a certain grasp of yourself”.

“If you are confused (about what you want to do), a mentor may be redundant. Mentorship must be at the right time and with the right person fit, in order to benefit you,” he said.

On the other hand, Mr Cheng doesn't need his mentees to have life figured out – not even a little bit – to benefit from mentorship. To him, the very point of mentorship is to pass a blueprint of mistakes, experience, knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next.

“Effective mentoring takes the burden of making the same mistakes over and over again off of the shoulders of the next generation, which allows us to make new mistakes, and society moves forward as a whole more efficiently,” he said.

Mr Cheng has reaped the benefits of being a mentor, namely that it has made him a more effective and empathetic communicator.

“Having to explain your experiences and technical knowledge to young people who aren’t equipped to digest what you’re saying forces you to rethink and understand the basics of communication,” he said.

“Most children at the schooling age haven’t gone through the experiences mentors have, and thus might not easily see the importance of what we have to impart. The challenge for mentors is to figure out how to connect the wisdom we’re trying to impart with the students’ own lived experiences.”

Being curious and having a healthy respect for what they’re going through in their own lives is a good place to start, he added.

As a mentor himself, TAC’s co-founder Mr Wong also appreciates having to reflect on his own career when he helps mentees work through their concerns and challenges.

“When I ask questions such as, ‘Why is this important to you? What do you find meaningful?’, I also have to attempt to answer these questions myself,” he said.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

REVERSE MENTORING: INFORMAL BUT ‘WORKS PERFECTLY’
While more “traditional” models of mentorship are readily available if one knew where to look, the opposite mostly happens through informal initiatives.

Known as “reverse mentoring”, the Harvard Business Review defined it as extending “far beyond just sharing knowledge about technology”. It added that today’s reverse mentoring programmes focus on “how senior executives think about strategic issues, leadership, and the mindset with which they approach their work”.

In Singapore, the various companies CNA spoke to said reverse mentoring has helped their employees understand their voice is valued regardless of their age or years of experience.

“Our approach to learning offers benefits on both sides of the equation. Older colleagues benefit by gaining perspective from those who are younger or newer to the industry, which is important in an ever evolving industry,” said Mr Knetsch from MediaMonks.

“Reverse mentorship provides an opportunity for younger and newer colleagues to be recognised by bringing a fresh perspective to the table.”

Over at Wise, a financial technology firm, whether an employee is younger or older is “really irrelevant”, as they ensure their customers come first.

“The benefit in having an open culture, where anyone can challenge and have a voice, no matter their age, means we can identify problems and opportunities quicker and work on getting the best solution,” said Ms Bianca Burke, the company’s head of people operations for Asia Pacific.

“We believe our ego needs to come third after our customers first, and team second, so having a culture where people feel comfortable asking challenging questions is core to this principle.”

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

Ms Burke challenges the “traditional notion” that newbies or younger colleagues need to "do their time".

“That notion is moot. We want everyone to have the opportunity to contribute without being held back by fear or hierarchy,” she said.

It's not just talk. Reverse mentoring results in "a win-win situation" in practice too.

“One perfect example (of reverse mentoring in action) is when we have new sales hires. They are usually non-technical and sometimes have limited cybersecurity knowledge,” said Mr Geoff Leeming, co-founder of cybersecurity firm Pragma.

“I have witnessed senior sales staff with more than 20 years of working experience sitting in with our security testing consultant, who happened to be more junior with only over five years of experience learning about the process and what goes behind the scenes during a project.

“It's a win-win situation because the senior sales staff gets to learn some technical details to enable their sales process, while the junior staff gets to reinforce their knowledge and learn how to explain in non-technical terms, which is helpful when dealing with clients.”

Younger employees in Pragma benefit from reverse mentoring by learning leadership skills from someone more senior. Having the responsibility of being a mentor also boosts their self-confidence, while senior employees get to see things from new perspectives and learn to be more open-minded.

“We are in the cybersecurity industry, so there are always changes and new things coming up. Self-development and learning are important to keep up with the changes. So, reverse mentorship works perfectly,” added Mr Leeming.

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

At Kith & Kin Law Corporation, the team unwittingly started reverse mentoring the day its 35-year-old founder Tan Shen Kiat hired a stay-at-home mother 15 years older than him as his first employee in 2019.

The employee, Ms Angela Teo, then 48, had been called to the bar before she became a full-time homemaker for 16 years, but never got to practise.

When she returned to the legal field, she also obtained a graduate diploma in professional counselling so she could better walk alongside individuals facing difficult situations.

The average law firm would look to law graduates, but Mr Tan wasn't keen. For Kith & Kin's area of specialty in estate planning and mental capacity law practice, he said Ms Teo's background "made sense" – and her vast life experience was largely possible because of her age.

"We only deal with estate planning and mental capacity related matters. That includes (working with) people with special needs and additional needs. Additional needs will be people who can function like a healthy able-bodied human being if special arrangements are made for them. Like people in wheelchairs, who have ramps, for example," said Mr Tan.

"This area of work requires a lot more ability to connect with people, a bit more empathy. You need the technical knowledge, but I think technical knowledge can be picked up."

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

Mr Tan, who is also a practising lawyer, added that practice areas for law tend to be “quite strait-laced”, such as litigation, corporate, commercial or family law.

“Our practice area isn’t something many people would know or treat as a specialised area. But I thought of her life experience, like Angela has kids, she’s a caregiver, future care recipient ... and she has a niece with special needs,” he said.

“It’s very difficult to find someone who has all these things and who also has a practising certificate, who got called to the bar. So I thought maybe we could give her a chance.”

Ms Teo is the oldest employee on the five-person team today; aside from Mr Tan, the other team members in the team range from mid-20s to early 30s in age.

LESSONS BEYOND THE WORKPLACE

In the end, whether it’s traditional or reverse mentoring, those who have been mentor or mentee argued that a good career mentorship will end up imparting life lessons too.

After more than five years, Mr Alvin Tan still holds the words of a former boss and mentor about humility close to his heart.

The MP for Tanjong Pagar GRC was working at Goldman Sachs when his boss at that time – Mr David Adelman, a former US ambassador to Singapore – taught him a lesson for life.

“He told me: 'When I leave this post, I’m just going to be David. When you’re an ambassador, minister, or whatever, people are going to (look at you) because of the office that you have the privilege to serve in. But don’t conflate that with who you are',” Mr Tan told CNA.

“'Ultimately, one day when you leave that office, you will just be Alvin, and I’ll just be David'," Mr Tan recounted. "'Don’t be beholden to all of that.'”

These words were “very releasing” for Mr Tan, who felt “free” after hearing that.

“It’s a privilege to helm a particular office for a particular time, but I don’t confuse it as ‘this is me’. (My former boss) showed me how to do it, and that it’s possible,” he said.

In his current role as a politician, Mr Tan says he has benefited from the generosity of another person he considers a mentor: Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam.

“Occasionally, I’m in the Treasury Building. I’ll ask him if I can tap his brains. It’s quite informal, but then I'll just ask. He has decades of experience whereas I’m new to this. I don’t think there’s a downside to asking. He’s always been very open, and very generous with his time,” said Mr Tan.

“I don’t tell him that he’s now my mentor, but more like, he gives that time and I ask sometimes for that time. He always takes the extra effort to say, 'How are you doing? Tell me more.' And I thought that was very generous of him.”

Publication: CNA Online
Date: 2 October 2021
Headline: IN FOCUS: Can good mentorship at work lead to a more fulfilling career - and life?

Even though he has benefited from the wisdom of more than one mentor throughout his career, Mr Tan admitted he isn't sure whether the mentor figures in his life realise he considers them mentors. Still, he has seen how mentorship has touched him and wants others to experience the same.

To find a mentor, SMU's Dr Lim recommended that people look for "a good role model" instead.

"I did a study, and I realised almost all mentors would talk to their mentees about life issues. … Sure, you look for mentors for their competencies, what they're good at, whether they're famous (in their field), if they're a rainmaker for their company. But beyond that, are their practices ethical?" he said.

"How they teach you to perform in the workplace has a huge impact on personal life ... on life decisions: Counselling (mentees) on family problems, should I marry this guy, how do I get my first home, how do I plan my finances, how do you survive (having kids). These are very real issues that go beyond the workplace."

More than impacting individual lives, mentorship also provides the opportunity to reframe the "larger narrative of a self-sufficient, independent Singaporean", said Mr Cheng, who volunteers with TAC (The Astronauts Collective).

This narrative stems from people's "hang-ups over spoon-feeding" and letting the next generation become "soft", which naturally "hardens the relationships between would-be mentors and mentees".

The mindset of "I had to learn this the hard way, why do you get the easy way out?" also conditions people to be "reluctant to share knowledge" with each other and the next generation, he added.

"We believe letting younger people make mistakes and 'learn things the hard way' is the only way to learn. I understand the appeal of such an approach, and can see how people often ignore the advice of elders in favour of making mistakes themselves so that they can absorb learnings more effectively," he said.

"But there are entire realms of knowledge that can be handed down more efficiently than simply letting people 'go and make mistakes'. Sometimes, it's simply about taking a more humane and empathetic approach."

Based on what Mr Cheng has learnt as a mentor over the last five years, however, getting Singaporeans to buy into mentorship might not be a walk in the park.

"Genuinely effective mentorship requires a healthy community and a welcoming and non-judgmental space. And this sense of community is something that's often lacking, especially in the Singaporean workplace and in professional environments."

Source: CNA/gy