

Learn from the like-minded

You are never too good to grow or to take advice from the right mentor, writes **Andrew May**.

The day inevitably comes when all successful people overtake their mentors. It happened to the tennis star Rafael Nadal at age 17 when he beat his mentor Carlos Moya (Moya was 27 at the time).

But even the best in the world will spruik the benefits of a mentor. World tennis No. 1 Novak Djokovic still hasn't outgrown all his mentors despite his dominant ranking. He maintains a surprisingly strong relationship with the retired Serbian women's handball and tennis player Jelena Gencic, who used to prescribe classical music and Pushkin poetry to the fiery Serbian prodigy to help him calm down and "be a better human being".

I like that definition of the mentoring relationship – an exchange that can make someone a "better human being".

Of course mentoring isn't just about classical music or studying Russian poets, but it is a reminder to even the most senior executives that you are never too good to grow or to learn from the right mentor. In fact, if you ever think you know it all, it's generally a sign to pack your bags and get out before the rot sets in.

The trick however is finding Mentor Right, not Mentor Wrong.

A highly competent chief executive I know signed up for a state government-funded mentoring program that offered him a business mentor for several months.

He thought it might sharpen his skills but there was a slight problem when the mentor turned up. The mentor was way out of his depth with my client who was a market leader in his field.

The "expert" mentor couldn't help at all, so they had a couple of coffees and called it a day.

While that particular mentoring relationship didn't work out, I advised him to do a bit more homework about the type of mentor, the qualities and skills he was looking for in a mentor and explicit outcomes he wanted to achieve.

This means finding the best in your business and thinking laterally about how you would like to develop. Look at the leaders in your field and ask yourself: "Who can really help me become a better leader, sales person, manager, speaker or designer?"

A lot of people confuse mentor with coach. The difference is simple – mentor comes from the Latin word "mentore", which means "to be like". A great mentor imparts wisdom and shares knowledge with a less experienced colleague, while a coach doesn't have to be a master in their area of expertise.

Five-time Tour de France winner



Words of wisdom ... Venus Williams chose Pam Shriver to be her mentor. Photos: Rob Taggart/Getty Images; Sebastian Costanzo

What to look for in a mentor

- ▶ Great experience and know-how, has achieved high levels of success in their field;
- ▶ The skills and abilities you are looking for;
- ▶ A good listener and conversationalist;
- ▶ Trustworthy (ensuring you feel comfortable disclosing personal information and even any insecurities);
- ▶ A sharp observer who will challenge and stretch you;
- ▶ Shows genuine interest in you;
- ▶ Has strong problem-solving abilities;
- ▶ Offers a fresh perspective;
- ▶ Believes in your potential.

Eddy "The Cannibal" Merckx mentored Lance Armstrong to go two better and was a vital factor in helping Armstrong win seven titles. David Beckham was mentored by Bobby Charlton. And the actor Laurence Olivier mentored Anthony Hopkins.

While elite sport has embraced the mentoring concept for decades,

many business leaders incorrectly assume it is a developmental activity primarily for emerging leaders.

There's a risk once corporate leaders reach the top of their game that, without accountability and constant growth, they will begin to stagnate and their performance will plateau.

Mentoring is also valuable in the

succession process. The outgoing Commonwealth Bank managing director and chief executive, Ralph Norris, mentored the incumbent chief executive Ian Narev (a former management consultant) for 18 months before the handover in December 2011.

Some of the most business-savvy executives swap their mentors over time as their needs change.

Firstly, once your mentor has imparted all of the knowledge and skills you were searching for, it makes sense to finish/wind back this business relationship.

Secondly, learning different skills from a range of different people over time will stretch you further as a leader.

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