

Ambitious aims Mentoring

An orchestrated success

Many young people with little direction in life go on to achieve great things when given additional support, but what makes an ideal mentor?

Caroline Roberts

Amy Williams certainly understands the value of having a mentor. On her way to winning a gold medal at the 2010 Winter Olympics she had to draw on her own inner resources more than many athletes. In the UK, winter sports and particularly her event, the skeleton bobs, are a minority pursuit and often lacks the large support network for young athletes available in other sports.

It's one of the things that prompted her to become a judge and ambassador for the AXA Ambition awards. "Mentoring is really important and I would have loved to have had that," she says. "Once you've reached your own goal it's nice to give something back to young people who have a certain level of ambition and drive. They have it inside but you can help it come out more."

But it's not just important for Olympic hopefuls. Budding entrepreneurs, those with a special talent for art or science, or someone just trying to overcome challenging circumstances can all benefit from the expertise, friendship and inspiration a mentor can provide.

Raising aspirations

Dayana Shalal Akello, now 21, was paired with volunteer mentor Rhiannon Evans by Career Academies, an organisation working with schools and employers to raise the aspirations of 16- to 19-year-olds. The relationship played a huge part in her transformation from teenager with little direction in life to the confident young woman, now nearing the end of a marketing internship in Munich and about to start the final year of her international business degree, that she is today.

"Rhiannon was always there to push me, question my logic, and give me advice to help me make informed decisions but still let me know the final decision was in my hands. She had a way of making me see sense without being pushy or patronising," says Shalal Akello.

"Growing up, I thought nobody would do something without having an ulte-

'You need mutual respect ... It's important that mentors don't come with their own agendas'



Young composer Lloyd Coleman has benefited from a mentoring project that helps visually impaired people in the arts

rior motive. Having Rhiannon as a mentor was an experience in itself - the fact that her sole intention was to help me better myself was something that really touched me. I wish I had something I could give her back, but she says my success is enough."

After more than four years, the pair are still in touch. "I count her more as a friend than a mentee," says Evans, "and I feel a great sense of pride that Dayana still values my opinion as she progresses through university and plans her future career."

The most important factors of a mentoring pairing are the same factors that make any relationship a success, believes Richard Turner, CEO of Friendship Works, a London charity with more than 30 years' experience of providing mentors for children in need of additional adult support. "You need trust, commitment, shared interests, mutual respect and care," Turner says. "It's also important that mentors don't come with their own agendas of how they want to shape a child. The most successful mentoring relationships develop when a volunteer enables a child to build on their own interests and strengths."

This is true whatever the purpose of the mentoring relationship says Lloyd Coleman, 19, who has overcome both hearing and visual impairments to become a promising young composer. He was paired by UCAN, an organisation supporting visually impaired young people in the arts, with veteran film score composer Lawrence Ashmore, who is mentoring him through a major project - the composition of an Olympic-themed piece to be performed by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales in 2012.

Lloyd credits Larry, as he calls him, along with his tutor at the Royal Academy of Music, Gary Carpenter, with getting the balance just right and allowing his creative potential to flourish. "A good teacher or mentor will do their best to find the best in you," he says. "They're not trying to transplant their own world view or ideas on to you and turn you into a replica of them. They introduce you to new concepts but don't pressure you to adopt them."

For Marc Woods, Paralympic swimming gold medalist and AXA Ambition awards judge, the key skill of his most influential coaches, Doug Campbell and Lars Humer, was finding exactly the right way to communicate with him. "Doug was able to read me and know when I needed harsh words and when I needed support. And Lars had huge technical knowledge but was always open to learning new things himself, and finding the right way to convey them. He used to say: 'If the behaviour doesn't change, it's the communication that's at fault. I haven't communicated it in such a way that they know how important it is.' I think that's a great mindset for any coach or mentor."

Nurturing talent is vital for our society to thrive



Gill Slocombe
Comment

Young people all too often get a bad press, especially when things like this summer's riots dominate the headlines, so it's great when we can shout out about their achievements and celebrate the positive impact they have on society. We need to take every opportunity that we can to do this.

Of course, where young people are already succeeding we must continue to help them to achieve their potential. But let's not forget that all young people have something to offer.

In the 40 years that I've been involved in Girlguiding UK, I have worked with young people from a wide range of social, economic, educational

and cultural backgrounds and I know that talent comes in many different guises. It might be that a young person has creative ideas for fundraising or is fantastic when it comes to IT; perhaps they have a special rapport with younger children or are good at helping a less able member to join in with activities. They are very different skills but are vital for our society to thrive and develop so they all deserve to be recognised and nurtured.

We in guiding believe there's a huge amount of untapped talent out there. If we're going to uncover it, it's important that we provide as many opportunities as possible for young people to try out new things and challenge themselves in a supported environment. That's how they gain self-knowledge and self-confidence, and find out what it is that fulfils them.

While we offer these opportunities in a girl-only space, there are other providers within the voluntary and youth sectors who also work with hundreds of thousands of young people. However, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that support should be confined to these sectors; to guide and develop all young people is everyone's responsibility.

Gill Slocombe, Girlguiding UK's chief guide

Driven by goals Mentoring in Nottingham

Glodi Bange, 15, has just signed for Notts County football club. Growing up in one of the toughest areas of Nottingham, he credits Real United, a mentoring scheme and football club combined, with keeping him on track.

I live in St Ann's, one of the roughest areas of Nottingham. You have a lot of kids that are just crazy, really. If you're out and about you end up mixing in with that - there's really nothing else to do. There's a lack of facilities and places to go. If so many of the people out there are selling drugs, and carrying certain things, you think "why shouldn't I?" Until I met Roger Henry [Real United manager] I was into my football of course, but I had friends doing that sort of thing. Now I don't have time for that.

I'd seen Roger around before but we started talking properly when he was working at my school. All the guys [mentoring volunteers] had something about them that made you listen and want to learn something from them.

If I can't relate to what you're saying, I don't feel the need to listen to you. You don't know me, you don't know where I've come from or what I've been through. But they're from the same background as us and they've managed to stay away from what goes on in the area and achieved something. If Roger's done it, we can.

He's taken people from my school to recording studios, and we've made a video. It's made me realise if you do good at something you get rewarded for it.



Glodi Bange, left, says Roger Henry, right, has helped him progress his football career

It's always good to be recognised and have someone give you a pat on the back and say well done. You're not going to progress if you're always being put down.

I've just signed for Notts County and when I leave school I'll be there full-time. I wouldn't have got there if it wasn't for Roger. CR