



entrepreneurs soraya jones

Keith Turner



Play nicely

Soraya Jones talks to **Keith Turner**, co-founder of Springboard, about how to get the best out of people – staff, clients, and himself

WAS very lucky early on in my career to have met generous and kind people who gave their time to coach and mentor me. I don't think I would have been where I am today if not for these nice and kind folk, most of whom are now my closest friends. Also, when I was CEO of the renowned membership organisation CW (Cambridge Wireless), I was equally fortunate to be mentored by the CW board members and the leading lights such as David Cleevely, Jack Lang, Stirling Essex, William Webb, Peter Whale, Raj Gawera and many more.

It is so important to have multiple mentors in your career as they are the fallback when things get rough and a go-to point when key decisions are to be made which may significantly impact the business you are building. At times like this, having a good, neutral and experienced board is crucial – the mentors enrich your perspective on problems and broaden your horizon on the possible solutions available. Ask any successful entrepreneur if he or she had mentors who helped them on their journey to success, and you will always get a big, fat 'yes'.

Entrepreneurs who are mentors to their own teams have also been known to have a better retention rate of staff within their companies. This is especially important when it comes to small but growing businesses where there are not that many incentives to stick around apart from the sheer excitement of building something together, being part of something shared and 'cool', and being involved in a culture created by an inspired team and a great boss.

Nick Woodman, the CEO and founder of GoPro, has recently given an unusual piece of advice on mentorship. During the entrepreneurship panel at this year's CES, he said that what really helped him when he was starting out, was to imagine 'having a relationship with somebody who you want to model yourself after'. In his case it was Dietrich Mateschitz, the founder of Red Bull, who inspired him to shape his business idea in a similar way.

I think he's right. Mentorship is about a relationship, an exchange of knowledge and experience but also sharing the same vision in designing your business model. It is now good practice for any new start-ups or entrepreneurs to find one or two mentors among the people they know – each mentor brings different

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strengths based on their own expertise and background. Sometimes they can be members of your board but also your line managers, or simply those who are willing to be more than just managers and genuinely believe in strengthening the skills and confidence of the people they manage, and actually believe in mentoring the younger generation.

With this in mind, I met Keith Turner, one of the co-founders of Springboard, a company specialising in designing, and developing, devices and solving difficult engineering and science problems in short timescales for multinational clients who want to introduce innovative technology to markets.

When I asked Keith how his business competes with major consultancies in Cambridge, he acknowledged that the market itself proves there's business to be had, but he does not invest in 'product development' as a company, he is providing services to the multinationals only to produce innovative products for them.

What intrigues me about Keith – who holds a PhD from Oxford in experimental laser and semiconductor physics, spent some time in Germany in a research-based institute, and was also part of TTP in the early days – is the way he describes his business. "Naturally we describe our offering and point out our speciality in the sector, but the really powerful distinction comes when you meet our people and learn about our company culture. In consultancy, you're buying an attitude, and that is most effectively conveyed through personal interaction."

When I asked him how he would introduce his company, he laughed and said: "We have developed medical devices that killed cancer". I thought that was surely an unforgettable way to remember Springboard!

This is my interview with the man who 'buys an attitude' and has created a very successful business through mentoring his team and genuinely engaging with customers . . .

What does your average work day consist of?

Mentoring staff, doing technical work, speaking to clients, selling new work, recruiting new people, dealing with suppliers, making coffee . . . you do everything when you run your own business.

How much importance do you place on mentoring?

Mentoring is the primary method by which we develop the skills of our staff. My ideal is that everyone in the organisation is learning from those more experienced and passing on their knowledge to those less experienced. That's how you turn individual knowledge into a true capability of the organisation.

Keith Turner at the summit of Mount Kazbek in Georgia



As a company grows, which is where we are currently, not all can be done by the founders. Customers need to also learn to trust the new staff. You know you have had success in mentoring when your customers approach the staff you have mentored for the new business.

It is also about empowering staff, valuing them and believing in them so that they can be 'autonomous' one day, but if they fall or make mistakes, you are always there to help and support them. It is a delicate balance between 'advising' and 'delivering work that customers are happy with'. I believe with the right support and mentoring, you can help younger colleagues

become 'autonomous' rapidly, meaning that they set their own high standards and hold themselves accountable for meeting them.

People want to do something that is satisfying in their lives. If employees are happy and engaged, the business will be better.

How do you deal with challenges in business?

Have a strong set of principles. When faced with a dilemma, come back to the basic things you believe in and use those as the basis on which to gain consensus with others. One such principle could, for example, be a belief in fairness. If someone then wants you to treat them more favourably than others, you are in



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a strong position to argue otherwise because they have seen you act consistently in the past. I like to look at the discussion not from my own point of view, but as if I was standing at the side and seeing the two-way dialogue and trying to mediate the most overall balanced outcome. This approach nearly always works, because at heart most people are reasonable.

Have you ever turned down an opportunity/client?

Yes. We have an ethical policy and have turned down several projects which we would not feel comfortable working on, such as electronic cigarettes. When you look back on your life or

talk to friends about your work, you want to describe something you have done that is good for the world.

How do you make your clients happy?

Most of our customers are repeat/returning clients who have been happy with the small project they originally contracted us to do. As they gained more trust, they started giving us bigger jobs to do.

I believe that once the customers trust you and they have an 'enjoyable experience' with you, they become more engaged with you.

Who inspires you and why?

Bob Geldof's Live Aid, because he used his

influence over others to turn talk into real global action. He was just a middle-ranking musician, but realised that it was within his power to mobilise other musicians and create something truly remarkable and so much beyond what a lone person could achieve. It's the same in innovative engineering: talk is only of limited value. What really makes clients happy is seeing the real prototype working in front of their eyes and that requires a team to be mobilised.

What characteristics do you see as important for success?

Listening and empathising with others, coupled with a gentle self-confidence that is rooted in moral principles.

As I said before, there are two types of engagement that are important and this is based on my deep belief in the following: engage with the customers so that they trust you; engage with your staff and help them to grow. I see the above as two sides of the same coin.

How do you maintain a work/life balance?

I work long hours in the office but home and holiday are uninterrupted by emails or phone calls. You can train up other capable people (especially if you have been active in mentoring them) so that when you're away they are perfectly capable of dealing with problems. In personal time I love exercising in The Great Outdoors – things like mountaineering, walking, skiing and diving. It keeps me fit and reminds me of my humble place in the world.

How does your business benefit from an innovation centre location?


I see two major benefits: the innovation centre enables us to present a professional face to the outside world. The excellent reception welcomes our visitors. We have access to meeting rooms and a canteen. There are facilities like scanning, printing, incoming and outgoing post. The flexible tenancy agreements with one-month notice are critical to our ability to grow. We've had six units in 2.5 years and are now 15 times larger than when we started. This would not be possible with a long-term lease in a standard business building.

If you could offer an entrepreneur one piece of business advice, what would it be? What drew you to the sector you currently work in?

Be sure that you can articulate in a few words why your business offering is valuable; care for your staff to the very best of your abilities and give them the opportunities to grow their career in your company.

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