

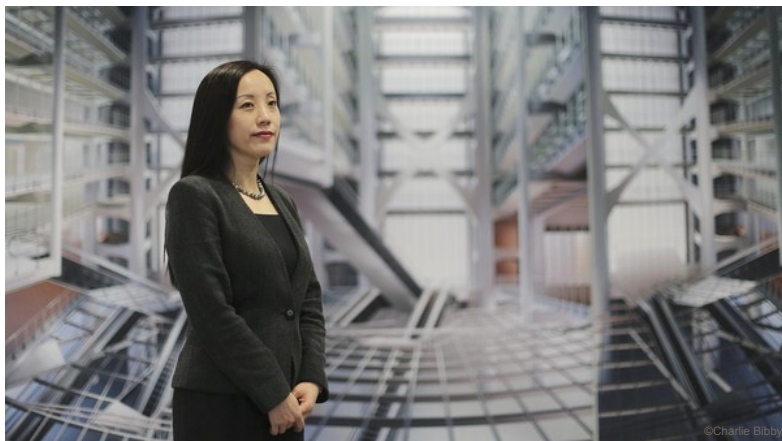
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The kindness of strangers

By Elaine Moore



Outside help: Louisa Cheang of HSBC is mentored by Jan du Plessis, Rio Tinto chairman

Jan du Plessis, chairman of [Rio Tinto](#), keeps a statue of a bucking horse in his London office to remind him that decisions do not always go to plan.

The small bronze figure is an apt symbol for the mining industry right now. The slowdown in China's economy has hit commodity prices and [Rio Tinto](#) has undergone big changes including significant cost cuts.

Mr du Plessis has a disarming way of talking openly about challenges that the company, and he himself, have faced in the past. He is, he says, more than happy to share his experiences, particularly with younger executives at the company, if they think it can help.

Now Mr du Plessis is extending these confidences to an executive outside Rio Tinto – Louisa Cheang, group head of retail banking at [HSBC](#).

Although they share neither an employer nor even an industry, they were matched by the FTSE 100 Cross-Company Mentoring Executive programme, run by the London-based Mentoring Foundation, an organisation that aims to get more women on executive boards.

Since they began meeting over the course of a year, Ms Cheang has moved from a job as regional head of retail banking and wealth management in Asia-Pacific to become head of retail banking for the whole HSBC group, based in London.

Mr du Plessis was instrumental in her success, she says. "It was easier to bounce new ideas off him about myself and how I see things because he's not a part of my company. He encouraged me to go beyond my comfort zone and think about opportunities outside Asia."

A guide to making the most of outside mentoring

To ensure time spent with an external mentor is fruitful, Peninah Thompson, head of the Mentoring Foundation, offers these tips:

- **Be as clear as possible** about what you are seeking from the mentoring relationship. Are you hoping to benefit from insights and wise counsel relating to your current executive role; or do you maybe hope to position yourself as a candidate for a future role?

- **Be frank with your mentor** about what you would value from them. Establish what you want their role to be. As a

Mentoring is a staple of management training schemes but organisations that offer to pair clients with an external mentor are rare and tend to work only with big companies. After all, why would senior executives choose to give up their time to nurture the career of someone outside their organisation?

Peninah Thompson, founder of the Mentoring Foundation, says senior executives who mentor people from other organisations find it results in interesting, and useful, conversations. "As senior executives rise through the ranks, fewer and fewer people are willing to be frank with them," she says. "Participating in a mentoring programme means that, as well as feeling that they are helping another person, they have a source of contemporary information about life in the lower ranks that has not been sanitised because it has not come from within their company."

Both Mr du Plessis and Ms Cheang say their different experiences of working life have not been a barrier to a useful relationship. "I can't teach Louisa to be a better banker but I respond to the way she thinks about the problems in her organisation . . . I am outspoken but she knows that I mean well," says Mr du Plessis.

"I think the way mentors like me can help is by giving people confidence and one effective way is to confess to things you have done in your own life that were, on reflection, a mistake.

The FT is keen to hear from readers who want to find an external mentor or become one

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sounding board? Providing active sponsorship? A trusting relationship in which your career strategy can be explored? Frank, even uncomfortable, feedback from someone you respect? The more information the mentor has, the more helpful they can be.

• **Remember this is a two-way process.** The best mentoring relationships are characterised by trust and a spirit of reciprocity. The value to the mentor may be the insights they glean into how a new generation of executives generally thinks.

“People gain confidence by seeing that you may be the chairman of Rio Tinto but you are a human being,” he adds.

Participants in the Mentoring Foundation programme usually agree to meet every few months, in person, for about two years. Meetings are confidential and the programme has a strict “no poaching mentees” policy.

Mentors involved in the scheme, who give their time pro bono, include Sir John Parker, chairman of Anglo American, and Alison Carnwath, chairman of Land Securities.

In spite of the impressive list of proponents mustered by the Mentoring Foundation, external mentoring remains relatively unusual.

Nigel Rich, chairman of Segro, the industrial property developer, believes more executives would be willing to help if asked. “People like me, that are involved in the [programme], probably have the same view, that we aren’t hard to persuade. We get a lot of satisfaction knowing that people have progressed.”



Jan du Plessis

The challenge, he says, is how to broaden the access. The FTSE 100 Cross-Company programme is limited to executives put forward for mentoring by their company, which must also provide its own chairman or chief executive to mentor a candidate.

Finding an outside mentor can be difficult for employees unless their company is one of the minority that participates in a similar programme. Paying an executive coach is one alternative but coaches may not have the same level of experience as the person hiring them.

Encouraging employees to seek out mentors internally, let alone externally, poses another challenge. Tara Davies, head of infrastructure mergers and acquisitions at Australian investment bank Macquarie Group, says she had not considered herself a mentoring candidate until the company suggested it and she began meeting Mr Rich. “I had quite low expectations about how beneficial it would be and it has really surprised me,” she says. “You have very different conversations to the ones you would have internally with someone who is assessing you at the end of the year.”

One subject they discussed at length was promotion. Mr Rich was extremely helpful, she says, by encouraging her to consider the way that she planned to position herself internally ahead of an application.

Meeting an external mentor from a different sector means the process is focused on you, rather than your organisation, says Pauline Willis, director of the Coaching & Mentoring Network. The fact that a formal, external mentor will set aside a specific time for meetings means the process can be more useful than ad hoc arrangements with internal senior executives.

Inevitably, personality clashes can arise. The Mentoring Foundation, for instance, says it has had to encourage quiet participants to speak up if they find their mentor is more extrovert than they are, and vice versa.

At Board Mentoring, which matches external mentors and mentees for a fee, a “chemistry meeting” early on is part of the matchmaking process. “It’s a close relationship . . . chemistry is more important than working in the same sector,” says founder Gillian Wilmot.

Until more executives seek a mentor outside their workplace, the sector is likely to remain niche. “The message we are always trying to get across is: it’s OK to ask for help. It’s not cheating,” says Ms Wilmot. “You need people to give you a leg-up and really well-run organisations will recognise this and engage with mentoring schemes, whether internal or external.”

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