

MENTORING YOUR SMALL BUSINESS

Marion Lau is well equipped to be a mentor. She is a registered nurse and midwife and was awarded Order of Australia in 1996 and the Centenary Medal for her services to multiculturalism.

Her vast experience includes Matron/Manager - Avenue Hospital; Administrator and Advisor for the Commonwealth Department of Health & Aged Care; Member - Ministerial Small Business Advisory Council; President - Chinese Health Foundation and the Chinese Community Society of Victoria. Marion has just been appointed as an Ambassador for Australia Day 2011

Marion was the first woman to be elected as Chair of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and Chinese Community Society of Victoria. She travels widely advising and presenting for a number of community and Government

My role as a mentor is to share my experiences. If I know more than others, then I can help them, especially with rules and legislation. Small ethnic business operators find their communication skills a challenge and need someone who can speak their language as well as English. Because of their culture they are more likely to look completely outside of their culture for advice because they are concerned with their privacy; they do not want others from their culture to know about their business.

A mentor must be able to provide support, assistance and give direction; but most importantly, they must listen. Sometimes you can point the mentee in a different direction and encourage them to take alternative action.

There really is no difference between a coach and a mentor; both can charge a fee. But many mentors give their time voluntarily. Marion works with the State Government for a mentoring service that is voluntary. It is quite regulated and has measurement tools in place. We must have success stories and the mentees have to complete a questionnaire.

It can be a challenge to ensure that the mentee does not become too dependent; it may be necessary to wean them off the mentor or find them an alternative mentor. Some mentees have a very fixed view on what they want; they are not flexible. There is often a misconception in their mind as to what a mentor is – they sometimes expect an overnight change in their business.

A mentor can assist in unexpected ways. One of Marion's mentees had a well researched business and just needed a mentor as a sounding board. His business progressed very well and when he was ready to launch it, Marion was able to get the Minister to officiate for him.