

## Tom Hadfield

A generation of mentees



Tom Hadfield started a sports internet company, Soccernet.com, in his bedroom when he was 12 years old, and then went on to set up an online education company, Schoolsnet.com, when he was 17. He is a patron of the National Youth Agency and has been honoured as a Global Leader of Tomorrow by the World Economic Forum in Davos. Tom is currently studying at Harvard.

Great leaders have great mentors. Richard Branson attributes Virgin Atlantic's success to his business mentor and aviation expert Sir Freddie Laker. Dr Martin Luther King Jr praised Benjamin Elijah Mays as his spiritual mentor. Alexander the Great owes much to his mentor, Aristotle, who himself had been mentored by Plato. And where would Luke Skywalker be without Obi-Wan Kenobi?

Imagine a world where all young people are equipped with the confidence and the ability to ask anyone about anything at anytime. With all the focus on training adults to be effective mentors, we often forget to train young people how to be good mentees. With so much importance placed on cramming facts into brains for them to be regurgitated in exams, schools have little time to nurture the skills necessary for developing successful mentoring relationships. Our education system provides mentoring support only for under-achievers and over-achievers, with everyone in-between left to figure it out for themselves. Few schools have mentoring programmes to connect

students with artists, scientists and entrepreneurs in the community, and even fewer schools have classes that help young people learn to be good mentees.

The art of how to ask for advice from mentors, how to distil the key lessons and how to apply them to our own lives is one of the best-kept secrets in education. Our exam-orientated school system teaches us that knowing the right answer is more important than knowing the right question. We quickly learn that asking others for help is a sign of weakness. As a result, 'learning' or 'personal development' rarely motivates our interactions with those around us.

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My mentors have played a more significant role in my personal development than my school teachers. I figured out pretty early on that I didn't fit in the classroom. I didn't learn much about entrepreneurship in my Business Studies class. I didn't learn much about computer programming in my Information Technology class. I had so many unanswered questions, and so I decided to look elsewhere for help.

Every month, I set myself the target of approaching a few people that I admired. My goal was to meet them, get to know them, learn from them and ask them for guidance. Along the way, I learnt that being an effective mentee follows four distinct stages: identifying leading experts, initiating the relationship, asking the right questions and reflecting on their advice.

When I was 15, I started a spreadsheet to track entrepreneurs, technologists and other interesting people I wanted to meet. Later on, I expanded the list to include CEOs, philanthropists, university provosts and local

politicians. I invested hours in crafting articulate letters to each of them – especially after noticing that the response rate for personalised letters was much higher than template letters. I'd always end the letter by suggesting three meeting times, and I'd follow-up with a telephone call one week later. Regardless of their seniority, about half the letters would result in an initial meeting – usually a lunch, or a coffee if they were busy.

In 1999, I read a chapter in a book by Charles Handy about the future of education, which really resonated with me. Six weeks later, after exchanging letters, Charles kindly invited me for breakfast at his house in Putney. As always, I read as much as possible beforehand and prepared some questions for discussion. Over a bowl of cereal, I asked Charles questions about his 70-plus years on the planet and I explained a dilemma I was facing at the time (whether to go to university, as it happens). I took copious notes as Charles shared his wisdom, and I discussed his advice with my friends and family.

There is so much to be gained by seeking counsel from mentors when facing an important life challenge or a big decision. People love to talk about their experiences, and everyone enjoys offering advice. Young people can find mentors among their friends, their families, in their communities and – with the rise of the Internet – around the world. Anyone with an email address is no more than a few clicks away.

Imagine the power of a global mentoring platform that connects young people with mentors around their field of interest, life experiences and geographic location. Technology plays an important role in bringing people closer together, and web-based tools can help facilitate and track mentoring relationships. The emergence of e-mentoring programmes are already helping mentees identify their own strengths, determine goals for mentoring relationships, keep track of progress

and facilitate communication by email and video conferencing. Forget the breadth of knowledge in Wikipedia; imagine the breadth of wisdom that young people could tap into using a global mentoring platform. The classic model of mentoring designates one person as mentor and one person as mentee, but the most successful mentoring relationships are learning experiences for both parties. Mastering how to be a good mentee is the first step towards being an effective mentor and, as mentors play an increasingly important role in people's lives, there is a natural inclination to pass that wisdom on to others. The dream, of course, is a world of six billion mentors and six billion mentees where each of us can effortlessly switch between these dual roles.

There is a new culture of mentorship emerging in the United Kingdom and around the world that places the personal development of mentees

front and centre. We must prepare young people with the confidence to identify and approach mentors, but the greatest challenge for young people is mastering how to unlock the value of those relationships. Imagine what we could learn from each other, if only we knew how.

Luke Skywalker knew how to be a good mentee and, as a result, the whole universe was at his fingertips.