

# Learning from experience

A new HFMA service is offering support to senior finance staff. Seamus Ward reports

Finance staff do vital work, including supporting transformation, balancing the books, making sure everyone is paid and maintaining relationships with their stakeholders. Yet, particularly at board level, it can be lonely. Who can they speak to for career advice or need to build the skills or knowledge?

Many will have a professional network, fostered by the HFMA and others, but newly anointed finance directors or those joining the service may not. Even those with a solid network may feel some issues cannot be discussed. To support members, the HFMA has stepped in to create an executive coaching service, which uses a pool of experienced professionals to help individuals achieve their goals, whether these relate to their career or current post.

Coaching mixes challenge and support to help an individual understand and draw on their strengths so they can produce realistic and effective strategies for themselves and their organisations. While coaching does not usually involve giving advice, as is usual in mentoring, the skills needed in coaching and mentoring are similar and sometimes a mentoring approach is useful in coaching.

Launched at the 2013 annual conference, the HFMA scheme has recruited 10 coaches, and 40 senior finance staff have expressed an interest in receiving support from the service. To date, seven have been matched with coaches, with a further three in the process of being matched. While the service is confidential, two finance leaders who have used the service, and their coaches, agreed to speak to *Healthcare Finance*.

## Case study: Jo Wright

Like many senior finance managers in their first board-level finance post, Jo Wright, chief finance officer at South West Lincolnshire Clinical Commissioning Group, felt she needed support and development, so she reached out to the HFMA coaching service. 'I saw the adverts for the HFMA coaching service,' she says. 'I got in touch and we had a discussion about what I wanted from it.'

Chris Brown, an experienced NHS finance director who has been a qualified coach and mentor for more than 10 years, was appointed her coach. They have now completed their six sessions, which have proved productive, Miss Wright says. Though they agreed an agenda for each session following their initial meeting, there was some flexibility – to discuss a pressing matter, for example – she says.

Her six objectives included building her personal 'brand' – how people see her and how she wants to be seen as her organisation's finance leader. While many accountants would find it difficult to self promote, a questionnaire provided by Mr Brown helped her describe who she was and her approach to work.

'It's given me more confidence and an awareness of how to approach certain things,' she says.

'I've used quite a lot of the tools and techniques picked up in the sessions and adapted my



approach – for example, how

I prepare for meetings. I put time in my diary to prepare and have a checklist of questions I make sure I answer; read the papers; and think about my part in the meeting, the points I need to get across and information I need.'

This more formal preparation has raised her standing among board colleagues. Mr Brown has also helped her to focus on the strategic role of the CFO.

'As a finance manager in previous roles, though I was at a high grade, I was still involved in quite a lot of the detail,' she says. 'It's easy to be sucked back into the detail, but coaching has helped me develop the skills to look at the wider picture and be more strategically focused.'

Though distance made face-to-face meetings difficult, it was worth it, she says. 'We don't live near each other, so there was quite a lot of travelling, but this was beneficial for me. I am a reflective type of person and the journeys allowed me a couple of hours to think about what we'd

## The coach: Paul Assinder

With more than 25 years in financial management in the NHS and commercial organisations, most of it at board level, Paul Assinder is a highly experienced finance director who is convinced of the value of coaching.

'I am a massive supporter of the wider future-focused finance initiative to support the wider function and of HFMA's executive coaching service for its practical approach to supporting those we need to perform consistently at the top of their game,' he says.

Mr Assinder believes all finance directors and chief finance officers should have a coach or mentor at some point in their career, and that most should also act as a coach or mentor. 'Coaching is one of the most rewarding exercises I've ever undertaken in my long career. By working on others' performance attributes and perceived weaknesses you develop a much wider frame of reference against which to examine your own performance goals and objectives. I would commend the concept to all.'

Mr Assinder outlines his views on the importance of coaching in an exclusive, online-only article. For details, see [www.hfma.org.uk](http://www.hfma.org.uk) (Healthcare Finance, December 2014 issue)



talked about and get all the benefits of the session.' The insight passed on by an experienced finance director is invaluable, she adds. 'If I was worried about a situation – say if I didn't know the answer to a question – he reassured me and said that happens to everyone. He could give me extra support and the wisdom he had picked up. Also, as he had no links to my local health economy, he had no preconceptions of who I was.'

## Case study: Glyn Howells

Though an experienced finance director in the private sector, Glyn Howells felt he needed some support on the relationships within the NHS and other 'softer' skills. 'When I joined, this part of the NHS



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Glyn Howells

was going to be a social enterprise, so understanding the NHS and networking within the NHS was less important than my commercial experience,' says Mr Howells, who is finance director and deputy chief executive at Gloucestershire Care Services NHS Trust. However, rather than taking the social enterprise route, the organisation became an NHS trust in April 2013. 'I found myself in the NHS and needing to understand the wider context of the health service and how it works, as well as the interaction between the boards and the organisations that provide oversight, such as the NHS Trust Development Authority, Monitor and NHS England,' he says.

'I had no concerns about my technical skills – I have been operating at director level for more than 10 years – but I needed advice on how to operate in the NHS environment, such as what messages need to go out and what routes should be used.'

For example, within the NHS, the primacy of joint board responsibility means that all board members need to be aware of and involved in sensitive matters before they are discussed with commissioners and overseeing governance bodies, such as the Trust Development Authority.

He has attended four meetings with his coach, Paul Assinder, a highly experienced finance director, both in the NHS and the private sector, and a former HFMA president. The meetings have been informal, with no agenda. 'At the first meeting, Paul asked me what I wanted to get out of it and then came back with a list of six things that he had pulled out of our discussion that he believed I wanted to progress on. After three meetings I referred back to the list – I was really pleased to find that I could identify things in every area where I had changed my approach as a result of the coaching.'

In addition to coaching, Mr Assinder has used his extensive contacts to introduce Mr Howells to other NHS finance professionals from across the NHS. He has also provided one-to-one, peer-to-peer discussion.

'I did not believe the structure of the finance team was working as well as it could or should be, so I took a proposed structure to Paul. He reviewed it, discussed it and compared it with others that he had seen. Afterwards, I didn't change anything, but it was good to have that conversation in detail.'

Consultation on the revised structure finished recently.

Mr Howells believes a coach with no links to the local health economy is important. 'I couldn't have opened up to the degree I have with someone closer. Lots of experience also helps – you want to get advice from someone who has been through the areas you are discussing.'

Mr Assinder was a good fit for him, as he has public and private sector experience. And Mr Howells would consider making use of the coaching scheme again in a few years' time. 'It's been a benefit to me and has forced me to take time outside of the normal frenetic day to think about what I needed. It's helped and developed me, and I would recommend it to others.'

For more information, contact [claire.merrick@hfma.org.uk](mailto:claire.merrick@hfma.org.uk)