

Women and Spinouts: Coaching Conversations and Self-Efficacy

This section focuses on the development of **coaching conversations** and is based on the accounts of successful women spinout founders.

KEY MESSAGES

1. Undertaking spinout is a personal learning journey, unique to each founder.
2. Increased performance and personal development can be provided in many different ways.
3. Mentoring is important to women founders but the availability and suitability of mentors is limited.
4. Coaching conversations are an important element of high quality mentoring.
5. Spinout is a continuous learning journey requiring ongoing personal development.
6. Since each founder's journey is unique, peer coaching and self-reflection provide important development opportunities.

CONTENTS

- Commentary – perceptions, research findings, and reality
- Reflection points for further discussion
- Actions for researchers, research leaders, TTOs and researcher developers
- Development activities and group discussion

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Increased awareness of:

Coaching approach to deepen personal insight, resilience and experiential learning.

Benefits of co-coaching and peer coaching support for women founders.

Increased self-reliance, resilience and confidence through taking responsibility by using reflective and experiential learning.

SUPPORTING RESOURCES:

- ✓ [Becoming, Building, Bridging: The 3Bs Framework](#)
- ✓ [Development Discussion Cards](#)



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COMMENTARY – PERCEPTIONS, RESEARCH FINDINGS AND REALITY

In our research, there is a strong appetite amongst early stage women founders for support from others through, for example, mentoring, but opportunities are limited by the availability of suitable mentors and suitable networking opportunities. Ideally, women founders are looking for relatable mentors who can offer both practical and emotional support. However, by mentoring others, women founders compromise time and energy building their own companies. Therefore, it is useful to explore other ways to provide support to women founders on their personal learning journey.

In the research, experiences of mentor/mentee relationships were mixed but there was a consensus that finding the right mentor for the individual is key; someone they can relate to and call upon for help and advice when needed. Although formal mentors acquired through funding programmes or incubators knew a lot about commercialising science, they were not always the best fit for the founders themselves. Some women wanted support with practical, business related challenges whereas others wanted someone they could call upon for more general advice, as this woman founder explained:

'The person I referred to as my mentor earlier, is not in any kind of formalised way. She's someone that, we click as human beings and I know I can call her up on a Sunday afternoon and say, 'Hi. Help [S], I don't know what I'm doing.' [Interviewee 4, woman founder].

Women founders suggested their institution or incubator could create better networks for academic spinout founders so that those with less experience could more easily find suitable mentors. Another suggestion was to develop more women-only spaces for training, networking and knowledge sharing. However, feelings toward women-only initiatives were mixed.

Despite feeling relatively new to the world of commercialisation, several women founders had become mentors themselves and were sought out informally by younger researchers. While making women founders more visible is a measure that universities can easily adopt, it also places additional responsibility onto the limited number of women founders, compounding the time challenges they face when already juggling their spinout with other commitments, potentially disadvantaging themselves.

REFLECTION POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Mentoring tends to describe a relationship in which a more experienced colleague shares their greater knowledge to support the development of an inexperienced person. It calls on the skills of questioning, listening, clarifying and reframing that are associated with coaching. Mentoring relationships work best when they move beyond the directive approach of a senior colleague 'telling it how it is', to one where they both learn from each other.

Coaching is essentially a non-directive form of development, focusing on improving performance and the individual, providing people with the opportunity to better assess their strengths and as well as development areas. An effective mentoring relationship is a learning opportunity for both parties, encouraging sharing and learning between roles.¹



¹ <https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/people/development/coaching-mentoring-factsheet#6995>



COACHING CONVERSATIONS **ACTIONS FOR ALL**

Researchers

The spinout journey has many twists and turns and is unique to each individual. Being able to self-manage your own development can complement programmes and mentorship. Consider establishing your own peer coaching or action learning sets with colleagues in your network. Self-coaching through reflective learning is important to build resilience, confidence and esteem.

Research Leaders

Consider setting up action learning sets within your group or with other groups to promote academic entrepreneurship and support founders within your area.

Technology Transfer Office

With an overview across the organisation, consider how you might be able to bring academic entrepreneurs together in action learning sets or peer coaching, liaising with researcher developers to provide facilitation.

Researcher Developers

Spinout is a journey of continuous learning and founders can benefit from support for continuous development and self-efficacy as they progress through the phases of spinout. Consider sustainable development options such as action learning sets, peer coaching and self-reflection in the context of programmes for academic entrepreneurs during spinout. These approaches have the added benefit of building the foundations for inclusive leadership in the longer term.

ACTIVITY 1

Establishing Action Learning Sets (ALS) or peer coaching for women founders

Whilst mentors and networks are important learning opportunities, women founders may not have equal access to these channels of support. Establishing Action Learning Sets (ALS) or peer coaching for women founders provide opportunities for more inclusive support.

ACTION LEARNING SETS (ALS)

ALS strengthen leadership capabilities through experiential learning and are not only more cost effective and efficient than 1:1 coaching but also provide a different channel of support through peer learning. ALS have the added value of collaborative problem-solving, providing different perspectives whilst creating and strengthening networks, potentially across different disciplines or institutions. A successful ALS environment recognises symbiosis between work and learning, trusts individuals to take responsibility for their learning and gives founders time and freedom to find solutions within or amongst themselves and act upon them, enabling participants to apply new capabilities in practice.

ALS are small group-based learning and development

opportunities. Founders come together to co-develop themselves through addressing their real-life spinout challenges. Each person in turn brings a personal challenge and with the group explores ideas of how to resolve it. They then report progress and gain further feedback from the group. Learning is constructed collaboratively, and is an excellent foundation for working in spinout teams. Groups come together as equals rather than forced into a formal group. Competitive or judgemental behaviours can sabotage the process and so ‘ground rules’ of behaviour and purpose need to be agreed from the start.

ALS can be ‘stand-alone’, or a component of longer learning and development programmes. Supporting ALS can be a strong signal to individuals that they are valued by the organisation. ALS are suitable for individuals and organisations who are willing to commit time, take risks in sharing challenges with colleagues and be prepared to act on outcomes. A group can come together formally or informally but all must contract to confidentiality, meet regularly, and ensure that everyone is included equally. The process can benefit from a facilitator or adviser but this is not essential.

Here is an example of how individuals work together as a group in the table below:

| Individual presenting the challenge | Other group members |
|--|--|
| Identifies a challenge they want to explore | Abide by the ground rules agreed by the group |
| Provides the context of the challenge | Focus exclusively on the challenge |
| Open to discussion and input from others | Listen actively, show interest, do not interrupt |
| Develops an action plan | Seek clarification with specific questions |
| Takes action | Non-judgemental, honest and open |
| Undertakes reflection, reports back to group | Give feedback with sensitivity |

PEER COACHING

Peer or co-coaching opportunities are organised in a similar way to Action Learning Sets, with goals to:

- Build the skills for inclusive leadership
- Provide additional long-term benefits to women founders
- Achieve high levels of individual and group learning

There are several benefits² for individuals involved in to peer or co-coaching, for example:

- Experience of real-time group dynamics with other researchers and founders
- Insight into diverse perspectives and better understanding of commonalities and differences.
- Opportunities to practice new skills for inclusive leadership in a safe space, including listening, being vulnerable, getting comfortable with different perspectives and emotions, asking insightful questions, giving and getting direct feedback, and helping people find their own solutions.
- Goal accountability by openly sharing goals and action plans and having regular check-ins, accountable to other group members.
- Continuing support network with a foundation of openness and trust, providing a source of psychological safety, support and valuable insight.
- Collaborative attitude to helping others improve by being curious, listening actively, asking relevant questions, providing constructive feedback and advice without being cynical or judgemental.

Peer group coaching can be face-to-face or online, local or networked with others across institutions, which can be helpful in institutions with small numbers of women founders. The principles of coaching conversations can be used by individuals for self-directed reflection and learning. A group can self-organise or be brought together via an institutional/organisational initiative, and can form a bridge between founders in different organisations.

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Here are some broad thematic areas for you to consider, which have been found to be important for women in spinout which can help start your

group or peer coaching conversations:

- Starting a spinout company
- Understanding investment
- Finding support
- Building a team
- Managing time and work-life balance
- Addressing discrimination and bias
- Overcoming challenges

GROUP MENTORING ACCORDING TO SPINOUT PHASE

Groups may be formed of individuals at roughly the same phase in their spinout journey, which works best for Action Learning Sets or peer coaching where power of experience is equally balanced within the group. Where individuals are at different phases of their spinout journey and have different levels of experience then the sessions may become a group mentoring session, where those with more experience establish coaching conversations.

Phases of spinout:

PHASE 1 – OPPORTUNITY RECOGNITION

First steps to being enterprising – e.g. knowing oneself, overlap with research development (being enterprising) followed by focus on the spinout and development of appropriate spinout competencies.

PHASE 2 – ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMITMENT

Getting real – e.g. moving from research to spinout, convincing others, gaining support, understanding the business and finance of spinout.

PHASE 3 – VENTURE CREDIBILITY

Creating the spinout – e.g. investment, operations, appointment of key staff, infrastructure, production.

PHASE 4 – VENTURE SUSTAINABILITY

Company leadership – e.g. for sustainability, diversification, staff growth and long term company growth.

It is likely that your path through spinout phases will not be linear, and you will revisit these stages with greater knowledge and insight as the spinout process evolves, so you can revisit coaching conversations as many times as you wish.

² Adapted from Steinberg and Watkins (2021) The Surprising Power of Peer Coaching' Harvard Business Review April 14, 2021. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2021/04/the-surprising-power-of-peer-coaching>

ACTIVITY 2

Personal development goals

A coaching approach is empowering. It helps you feel in control and find your own solutions to achieve your goals as part of your learning throughout the spinout journey. This activity will help you undertake your own experiential learning through self-reflection although you might decide you need advice and input from someone else, or it could become team activity. This process helps you clarify what you need, generate ideas or options and focus clearly on what to do about

it. It also helps you to be more effective and efficient in how you use your time and effort. Spinout is a cyclical process moving through different phases. You can revisit this guide as many times as you like, during any phase as you might start a different conversation with yourself, ask yourself different questions and arrive at different outcomes. This activity sets out the Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes (KSAs) that you and your team will need during your spinout journey.

WHAT IS YOUR GOAL?



In the tables on the following pages, choose the ones you want to work on and ask yourself **'what is the goal I want to achieve?'** and note it in the table. Knowing your own preferences for development is an important part of this reflection process. Remember in this process that you personally may not want, need or be interested in achieving all of these goals, so think about how you can enrol others in your team to achieve these goals instead.

In thinking about what you want to achieve, ask yourself

Is this a goal for me or for others in the team?

What results do I want to achieve?

Imagine I achieved my goal – what would be different?

What are the positive changes for me?

How do I benefit from achieving my goal?

What results do I want to achieve?

What impact will this have on people around me?

Is this goal ambitious enough?

**OVERARCHING GOAL****B1 Becoming Entrepreneurial: Developing awareness and understanding oneself**

| B1 Become Entrepreneurial: Developing awareness and understanding about oneself | What is the goal or outcome you want to achieve? |
|--|---|
| B1.1 Identify personal values and motivations for spinout and opportunities for creating value | |
| B1.2 Develop creative and innovative thinking to respond to challenges | |
| B1.3 Build an inspiring vision that engages others, and guides strategic decision making | |
| B1.4 Appreciate and assess the value of different ideas to create best value for the spinout | |
| B1.5 Recognise and maintain ethical stance, and act to ensure ethical and sustainable goals are met | |
| B1.6 Undertake entrepreneurial career planning, challenge assumptions, maintain work-life balance | |
| B1.7 Recognise and use transferrable research skills in the spinout process | |
| B1.8 Maintain self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-efficacy through experiential learning and reflection, make the most of strengths | |
| B1.9 Sustain motivation, perseverance and resilience, follow passion to create social and economic value | |



OVERARCHING GOAL

B2 Building Relationships: networks, connections and links

| B2 Build Relationships: networks, connections and links | What is the goal or outcome you want to achieve? |
|--|--|
| B2.1 Prepare research with an entrepreneurial focus and identify key stakeholders | |
| B2.2 Work effectively in teams to create value, collaborate in a coalition of diverse people | |
| B2.3 Prepare for spinout activity, persuade and involve other people | |
| B2.4 Communicate, engage and influence stakeholders effectively | |
| B2.5 Develop social and managerial skills to work with different stakeholders | |
| B2.6 Collaborate and work effectively with others, initiate value-creating activities | |



OVERARCHING GOAL

B3 Bridging Research to Business: developing business knowledge, skills and attitudes

| B3 Bridging Research to Business: developing business knowledge, skills and attitudes | What is the goal or outcome you want to achieve? |
|--|--|
| B 3.1 Acquire business knowledge, skills and attitudes, create and deliver business plans | |
| B3.2 Understand and manage ambiguity, uncertainty and risk, evaluate benefits and risks, and make business choices | |
| B3.3 Attain commercial, financial, legal, funding and investment literacy | |

DESCRIBE YOUR CURRENT REALITY?

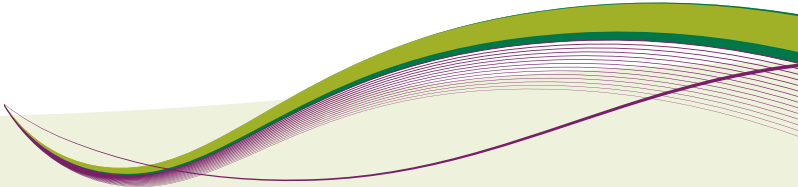


Choose one of your goals to work on now. You can work on other goals by repeating this cycle with them. Write down your chosen goal below then answer the questions.

I will work on this goal now:

.....

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>What is your current situation?</p> | |
| <p>What has prevented you from achieving this goal so far?</p> | |
| <p>How does this situation make you feel?</p> | |
| <p>What have you done already to reach this goal?</p> | |
| <p>What has worked?</p> | |
| <p>What has not worked?</p> | |
| <p>On scale 1 to 10 what is your level of motivation?</p> | |
| <p>If your motivation score is low what is holding you back, and how can you address this to achieve your goals?</p> | |



EXPLORE YOUR OPTIONS TO ACHIEVE YOUR GOAL



Answer the following questions in relation to the goal you have chosen:

| | |
|---|--|
| What are your strengths? | |
| What knowledge and insights can you build on? | |
| What other talents can you use? | |
| What do you need to be successful? | |
| Who is your role model? | |
| Who can offer support or guidance? | |
| What types of obstacles might be there? | |
| What do you need to learn to achieve your goal? | |
| What could make you fail? | |

What 3 options have you identified?

Which option will you choose?

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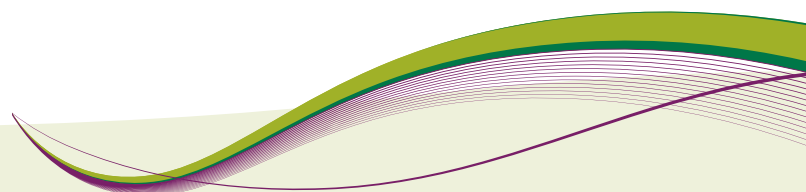
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PLAN YOUR ACTIONS



Answer the following questions for the option you have chosen:

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>How will you organise yourself?</p> | |
| <p>What is the first step you will take?</p> | |
| <p>What are the next 5 steps you will take?</p> | |
| <p>By when will you have taken these steps?</p> | |
| <p>What will you do to increase your chances of success?</p> | |
| <p>On scale 1 to 10 what is your level of commitment?</p> | |
| <p>If your score is not 10, what is holding you back?</p> | |
| <p>What can you do to make your commitment score 10?</p> | |
| <p>What other commitments will you make to increase your chances of success?</p> | |

