

Everybody needs a role model - for every part of life

Role models are important in so many walks of life – family, sport and, of course, business.

With the Olympics just around the corner, how many youngsters in the West Midlands will be hitching their wagon to a star and identifying new heroes who they, in turn, will hope to emulate in 2012?

Aspiration and perspiration are no bad thing – and neither is having a mentor.

A mentor can be described as a wise and trusted counsellor. It is crucial in business to have someone with wisdom, knowledge and experience to ensure we take the most productive route in whatever we are embarking on.

I recommend having more than one mentor, as there are areas in one's life that it would be beneficial to have some expert advice on.

I have been married for seven years and asked a friend of mine what was the secret of his marriage, which had lasted almost a quarter of a century. His answer was simple: "Yes dear".

Becoming a mentor to other people serves to make you a better person, is fulfilling and – most importantly – allows you to give back to society.

The Press has recently been quoting presidential candidate Barack Obama and, closer to home, David Cameron, in respect of the role of black men in a society with an increasingly fractured family structure.

To add to this, the Government has recently launched a high-profile campaign to carry out one of the five recommendations of the Reach Report. Reach is a key communities and local government project aimed at raising the aspirations, attainment and achievement of black boys and young black men, enabling them to reach their full potential.

Black boys and young black men face serious challenges in every sector of society. Statistics show they are less likely to do well at school, more likely to be unemployed and much more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system than their peers.

The first recommendation around creating role models is a sound base in terms of strategy for



KARL GEORGE

responding to the challenges that we face in our communities. I was instrumental in establishing the first international arm of an American mentoring organisation some 10 years ago, and one of the sayings that they used to promote the mentoring role is: "What they see is what they'll be."

This gets to the core of what we do in that organisation and why we do it. Role models are a significant part of the solution.

It is clear that young people, among others, aspire to the heights of models of success that they see around them and in the media.

However, I also have a slight "health warning". The function of role models cannot be the whole solution. Role models are part of the process, and the best become mentors.

Let us nurture and develop those mentors – people with the experience to counsel others, the knowledge to share, the commitment to stay the course and the ability to inspire.

I speak from experience about the fulfilment received from seeing those you've supported in some small way experiencing the growth and breakthrough they deserve.

My call to action is simple: get a mentor and become a mentor – it makes complete sense.

■ Karl George is managing director of KGISS and head of third sector clients at Bloomer Heaven Chartered Accountants.



Cadet schemes do not make up for bad adults

When Philip Parkin, general secretary of teaching union Voice, told its annual conference that the typical response from children in the classroom was 'you can't tell me what to do', there would have been very little surprise from delegates.

But this point should send a chill down the backbone of everyone involved with education in this country.

If all sense of deference has disappeared from classrooms, then how can the education system function as it is supposed to?

Although many children at school behave in a way that enables them to learn subjects which will give them a better chance in life and extracurricular values help them develop into a valuable member of society, many don't.

In fact, the picture painted by Mr Parkin of modern day classrooms would leave most people wondering how anyone can learn at school.

He talks of "low level disruption" a "lack of respect" and behaviour which can "disturb the education of other pupils".

Peter Morris, a former secondary school teacher from south Wales, describes even more disturbing scenarios that he has encountered in the classroom.

He has experienced unruly jobs barring classroom doors, "refusing to allow fellow pupils and the teacher to leave at the end of the day", and also a pupil lifting a computer monitor above his head to throw it at a teacher.

The conference heard concerns about the breakdown of moral values within homes, laying the blame squarely at the door of parents who are too busy, or too selfish, to meet their responsibilities.

There was talk of "changing relationships of the modern era" the creation of more "step families" and the emphasis on parents going out to work.

Behind all this social jargon is an underlying fear from the teaching profession that the role of the full-time parent is being undervalued, and they are the ones suffering. Or to put it another way, a *Little Britain* generation is neglecting its responsibilities to its children.

So military cadet forces in state schools are back on the agenda.

Anyone would welcome instilling responsibility and discipline in children and because of this a Government-backed scheme which goes some way to transferring these values from the military to the state education sector should be applauded.

But the Government should not ignore the social problems which have bred this ill-disciplined generation, social problems created by like-minded adults.

Keeping your head when all around are losing theirs

Come over here, Bill. The King of England's climbing out of the window!"

I have to take you back three centuries and more to put this remark in context.

Most people, I imagine, know that Queen Victoria went to her eternal rest at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, where, surrounded first by her family and then by sweet-scented lilies, she passed gently away. This is obviously the preferred royal exit, but plenty of them went out very differently. Take the case of an earlier holiday-maker, who found the island an attractive alternative to the court.

When Charles I was finally defeated by the parliamentary forces in 1646 he graciously agreed to be their guest at Hampton Court, while both sides figured out what to do in unprecedented and exceptional circumstances.

For Charles it was not a wait he was prepared to make, and in November 1647 he escaped to Titchfield House in Hampshire, where he opened negotiations with the parliamentary governor of the Isle of Wight to move there instead. The man in question – Colonel Hammond – also happened to be the brother of the king's chaplain, so dealings were quite amicable.

Later the same month Charles arrived at Carisbrooke Castle, the principal fortress on the island, and took up spacious lodgings there. The king was even allowed the freedom of the whole island, until an uprising to reinstate him on the throne brought the authorities down in force. From then on the castle alone was to be his place of entertainment.

Nevertheless, as bed and breakfast went, it was not an uncomfortable situ-



CHRIS UPTON

ation, and the commander of the castle even laid out an enormous bowling green for the king to wile away his spare hours, of which there were many.

But Charles I was not the grandson of Mary Queen of Scots for nothing, and escape was in his blood. Given what had happened to her, it was not an unreasonable idea. Losing one's head was soon to become a careless family tradition.

On March 22 1648, Charles made his move. Having made contact with sympathisers outside the castle walls, Charles arranged to climb out of his bedroom window, lower himself down by means of a cord to the courtyard below and ride off into the sunset.

When making plans like this it's advisable to check how far apart the bars on the window are. Too narrow they were for anyone, let alone a king, and Charles Stewart, King of England, Scotland and Ireland, Defender of the Faith etc, got stuck like some incompetent burglar.

At this point Charles was transferred to more secure accommodation, but this did not prevent one more escape attempt. This time, having learned his lesson, he loosened the bars of the window with nitric acid and climbed out. Looking down from the ledge, Charles found the courtyard full of people gazing up at him: clearly his plot had been revealed. On mature reflection, then, he climbed back inside. Disappointing to the onlookers, but probably the best course of action.

When Charles I did leave Carisbrooke in September 1648 it was under armed guard and through the main gate on his way to Newport and then to London, where trial and execution awaited him.

One wonders, as he stepped out onto that scaffold at Whitehall on January 30 1649, whether the king reflected on the incident at Carisbrooke. "Iron bars," as one of his predecessors said, "do not a prison make", but they go some way towards it.

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International aspirations let down by dire transport

LETTERS: post.letters@birminghampost.net

Dear Editor, I read the excellent *Birmingham Post* property supplement with a sense of growing excitement when examining some of the detail surrounding, the proposed 10 year, £17 billion development of Birmingham city centre. The iconic V Building, the development of Park Central, the Calthorpe Estates' proposed £40 million office development and the redevelopment of Five Ways and the A38 corridor. These proposed and planned developments will certainly place Birmingham at the forefront of international focus and generate interest from the business and commercial sectors.

Unfortunately my enthusiasm slowly waned as I realised that yet again the one key area of focus that is always missing from these grandiose plans is the development of appropriate and suitable transport infrastructure to support the increasing urbanisation of our city.

Our city planners are guilty of being romanced by the idea of creating a legacy, of building bigger, taller and shinier than their counterparts in other cities; and guilty of demonstrating their impressive plans at international expos and conventions while knowing that our city is lacking quality transport amenities.

The sad fact is that our transport infrastructure is outdated and badly implemented. Our gateway railway station is a national joke, our national coach and bus depot is an appalling blot on the landscape and in the wrong part of the city to be of any practical use. Our grossly overpriced and overhyped bus service fails on several counts, including cleanliness, availability, frequency and accessibility. Transportation within the city centre is non-existent and car drivers have been branded persona non-grata by redevelopments which have destroyed or severely limited vehicle access.

Someone should pitch up next to our high flying city promotions team and tell the eager international community that it can take up to 45 minute to travel four miles along the Hagley Road to the city on any

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given weekday, that public transport is shabby and erratic, that despite massive investment plans for New Street station's redevelopment there will still be only two tracks in and two tracks out, that light-rail and tramway plans are being proposed, investigated and discarded in lightning fashion, and there is no appreciable long-term integrated transport proposal let alone a solution.

The incumbent city fathers, with their burning desire to create a lasting legacy, need to face reality and get our priorities right. We need fast, frequent transport within the city and surrounding districts. The West Midlands tramway is good as far as it goes (one track), but as we all now realise, it doesn't go far enough and recent reports have suggested that it isn't going to go any further.

The answer? Don't waste any more time trying to shoehorn the tram into a city where it just won't fit. Look at alternatives. We had a fantastic network of tramways and trolley-buses in and around this city. Trams and trolley buses are environmentally friendly, pollution free and are only limited by the availability of an overhead power supply or track. The cost of installing pylons and cable must be infinitesimal compared to the projected costs of a light rail extension, which would be a single line "all the way" to Five Ways if we are lucky. We should be creating a superb 21st century city centre transport system capable of providing the interconnects between Digbeth bus and coach station, Snow Hill, Moor Street and New Street stations, in conjunction with large park and ride facilities built on the city perimeter approaches. Such a system would also provide the means for city centre residents to be able to dwell in the city without the need for the ubiquitous motor car.

If second-rate towns like Sheffield can develop city-wide tram services that move local people and encourage cars to be left at home, then why can't Birmingham? We must get the basics right before we reach for the stars. A 21st century city needs 21st century transportation.

A GARCARZ
By email

Plans in place to end Britain's social divide

Dear Editor, The contrasts in British city life have seldom been so stark – but don't just take my word for it.

A study in the *British Medical Journal* reveals that life expectancy inequalities across the UK are at their widest since Victorian times.

The Government's own statistics show that under Labour, the gap in infant mortality between the richest and poorest families has widened. Income inequality, measured by the internationally-recognised Gini coefficient, is at its highest since comparable records began in 1961.

A paper published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation last week reported that the clustering of poverty in our cities has increased and in parts of some cities, more than half of all households are now headline poor.

This does not make happy reading, but one of the problems of the current Government is that it refuses to acknowledge the divisions and disadvantage that so many of these communities face, because to do so would be to acknowledge their failure to take action to change the situation over the last 11 years.

What are the Conservative solutions to the division and deprivation in Britain's cities?

To tackle the pockets of worklessness that you find in every British city today, Conservatives have published radical plans for welfare reform, and to target help in our cities we will pay a premium to providers who get people to work from Britain's most deprived areas.

We will ensure everyone has the skills they need to get into work by creating up to 100,000 additional apprenticeships for people of all ages, with a £2,000 bonus for small businesses who agree to take them on.

To give all children the best start in life, we will introduce more than 4,000

more health visitors across the country so that families in deprived wards have the support and advice they need.

There will also be a Child Health Inequalities Fund of £10 million per year to boost support for families in the most deprived areas.

In schooling we will introduce a "pupil premium" for pupils from deprived families, to reverse the current trend where children from disadvantaged backgrounds fall further and further behind other pupils.

We want to tackle crime and restore community safety in our most deprived areas by scrapping unnecessary police bureaucracy, such as the form-filling that goes with stop and search powers and taking a strong, zero tolerance approach to the gun and knife crime that blights so many of our poorer neighbourhoods.

Finally it is essential that we rebuild a sense of pride and ownership in our communities.

We will support the charities and social groups that often are the driving force behind community cohesion and regeneration. Projects such as our National Citizens Service, which will be open to all 16-year-olds, and community work for the long-term unemployed, will work to help people achieve a sense of purpose, so that they help to regenerate deprived areas and give participants a sense of ownership of the communities they live in.

These are just some of the policies we have outlined this week to help tackle the social divide in Britain's cities.

I am under no illusions, there is more work to be done. No solution will be found overnight, but it's an important challenge and one we all have to meet.

CHRIS GRAYLING MP
Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, Conservative

Parents an essential part of a child's life

Dear Editor, Until such time as Gordon Brown and Home Secretary Jacqui Smith realise that lack of parity in family law is removing wholesome fathers and grandparents from children's lives in their formative years, then the greater anti-social behaviour will become.

Well over 600,000 children have been denied contact to more than one million grandparents since Labour came to power in 1997.

They were then all in favour of a nanny state via the NSPCC, Social Services & CAFASS which undermines parental responsibility rights at an alarming rate.

We, for our part, must and will continue to highlight the ramifications upon society should family life be undermined to the point of no return and our nation's children become the ultimate victims.

National Society for Children and Family Contact (NSCFC) is a registered charity which believes that continuing contact with a child's parents, or extended family, after separation or divorce, is vital for the child's balanced development and it works tirelessly to foster those all-important family contacts.

As such we offer free support and advice to all those in need. Telephone the helpline at national rate on 0870 794 0075 or at www.nscfc.com

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Bitter sweets

It'll be Creme Eggs all round at Cadbury castle after the Bournville company announced profits beyond all expectations.

Coming after a topsy-turvy last year of salmonella outbreaks, demergers, job cuts and drumming gorillas, the results might seem almost miraculous to those unfamiliar with the workings of Birmingham's own chocolate factory.

The company claims it has received a boost from those of us who have turned to chocolate snacks to soothe our economic woes. It might even be right – the price of alcohol means drowning your sorrows might be beyond your means.

But the most welcome news will be the signal that no more jobs are to be cut at Bournville.

The announcement earlier this year that 200 jobs were set to go was a blow to one of the few genuinely worldwide brands to have come out of Birmingham.

And workers hearing about the dividends paid to shareholders may have feared more job cuts were on the way to satisfy the demands of a publicly listed company.

But let's not get too misty-eyed here.

Cadbury's profits in the teeth of the credit crunch is not some heartwarming tale of surviving against impossible odds. It's about shrewd pricing strategies, hard work recovering from blows to the image, and where necessary a ruthless attitude to cost cutting, product lines and restructuring divisions.

This isn't the Bournville as the founding fathers of Cadbury would have imagined. In a world of crunching credit, companies simply can't afford to be sentimental. Cadbury has some of the world's most demanding shareholders, and has shown time and time again that it's willing to be cruel to satisfy them.

What is also true is that it has some of the most demanding of customers and, in an increasingly fierce global marketplace, will continue to invest and show inventiveness to remain a leading brand.

Minority report

So Birmingham has first place in a "go-slow" table which charts the worst cities in terms of rush hour congestion.

Apparently, 15 per cent of drivers are stuck in traffic in the mornings on three key inner city routes.

But this figure must be surprising to commuters who take part in daily grind making their way into the city.

Surprising because the other 85 per cent must be the same people who eat tripe, like Ben Affleck films and listen to Coldplay records.

We all know these people exist – but does anyone actually know them?

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