

Hammonds: Where Mentoring is Part of the Furniture!

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Richard Hammonds, MD & Chairman Hammonds Furniture



Case-study by Hamish Fraser

If you’ve ever bought a new bedroom wardrobe, a home office, or even a new kitchen, there’s a strong chance you’ve visited Hammonds Furniture.

Hammonds is a stalwart of the high-street, having been founded in 1926 by cabinet maker Thomas Stanley Hammond. Not far off a century later, Hammonds has over 80 concessions and shops up and down the country, with over 1,000 employed and self-employed staff.

Part of Hammonds’ success is its Chairman and joint Managing Director Richard Hammonds. Richard is constantly on the lookout for new ways to create higher levels of engagement and motivation in his employees, as well as finding new ways to grow his company’s revenues and profits.

A while back, when Richard was travelling through an airport he picked up a book called *Millionaire Upgrade*, which examines in depth the mindset of successful business owners and business leaders. This was a mindset Richard recognised in himself, and he thought if only he could get his people to think the same way, he’d be able to create a more motivated and engaged workforce, and a more profitable company.

Speaking about the challenges he faced, Richard said, “Many of my managers thought just like managers and they didn’t think like business



Chairman and Joint Managing Director, Richard Hammonds

owners. They came to work and did a good job for me, but they did a job based around what they considered to be managing rather than to actually think, ‘this is my business and I own this patch, and I’ve got to make the most out of it that I can.’”

It was Richard’s belief that he could achieve more in his business if he could show his managers and employees a different way of approaching their jobs which led him to look deeper into the work of the author of *Millionaire Upgrade*.

Richard Hammonds discovered that the author had met, interviewed and modelled many successful UK business owners and business leaders to discover precisely how they achieved the extraordinary results they do. Those who were modelled included **Duncan Bannatyne** and **Simon Woodroffe** from Dragons’ Den, **Lord Bilimoria** (founder of Cobra Beer), **Lord Harris** (founder of CarpetRight) and **Nick Wheeler** (founder of Charles Tyrwhitt) plus

many more recognised names from UK industry.

The outcome of the interviews was the development of a rich multi-media mentoring programme (*Enterprise Mentor™*) which takes managers and employees on their own journey of personal and business development, and shows them a new way of thinking which is more in tune with business owners like Richard Hammonds.

Richard decided to purchase a site-licence for the mentoring programme, and at the start of last year, his first group of employees and managers began their journey. Already he is seeing a dramatic change in the levels of motivation and engagement of those who have received the mentoring. This has been reflected in the business results with a noticeable improvements in the customer’s experience and an increase in revenues – which are up 20% in the regions where the mentoring programme has been introduced.

In response to the higher levels of employee motivation and engagement he’s seeing, Richard said of his people, “*The best way of describing it is they are awakened to an opportunity that they could never see before. It’s very difficult to describe but they become alive and alert; they’re different people from a business perspective.*”

So, how has Hammonds Furniture been able to achieve these changes

in people and profits, and what did they do?

Enterprise Mentoring

The catalyst for change at Hammonds has been the mentoring programme Richard invested in. This is a portfolio of tools and strategies to allow managers to mentor their employees.

The programme includes 21 MP3 audio mentoring sessions, a 218 page workbook, 21 MP3 summary sessions, face-to-face mentoring sessions which take place between the manager and employees, a final presentation by the employees back to the mentor, and various follow-on activities to keep the new energy and way of thinking alive in the workforce, and employees involved and connected to the business.

At Hammonds, an initial group of mentors and protégés were chosen from the sales team. The programme is subsequently being rolled out to the rest of the company.

David and Justin (both senior executives) acted as mentors to eight protégés, who included area managers Matthew, Kathryn, Vanessa and Simon. You'll hear from these protégés and mentors in the rest of this case study.

MP3 Mentoring Sessions

To start the mentoring, each mentor and protégé was given a low-cost MP3 player which had the entire 21-session MP3 mentoring sessions pre-loaded on it. Also on the MP3 players were 21 MP3 summary sessions and extra MP3 interviews with some of the 50+ business owners and leaders interviewed to create the programme.

Being audio based allowed the protégés to listen to the mentoring sessions at a time and place which suited them. As Vanessa explained, "We do quite a bit of travelling around so it was good to listen to the course while we were travelling. I put it in the car and listened to it. It is motivational as well when you're driving to work in the morning and you're listening to it. That worked really well for me."

Even Richard Hammonds kept an MP3 player in his Aston Martin and would regularly dip into the programme.

Each protégé would listen to two



Hammonds—who sell bedroom furniture, home offices and kitchens—are seeing revenue up by 20% in regions where they have implemented the mentoring programme

to three mentoring sessions per week, before having a face-to-face meeting with their mentor (David or Justin) to discuss exactly what they had learnt in the MP3 session, and explore ways of bringing the learning alive in Hammonds.

Kathryn, one of the early protégés, felt the MP3 learning was so addictive, she even went to bed listening to it. "My husband said, 'You have to be having a laugh!' He's gone through the programme as well. It wasn't optional because I talked about it constantly. Every time he sat down to eat I would be talking it, or the workbook would be sitting under my nose as I was doing something else."

Kathryn wasn't alone. Fellow protégé Matthew was glued to the MP3 mentoring sessions as well.

Matthew's wife even considered looking at the workbook and the MP3 herself! She said to Matthew, "If I've got to listen to that for a few weeks and walk about with that stuck to my ear to get the confidence that you've got, then give it to me!"

Workbook Exercise: CEO for a Day

Where the MP3 sessions gave each protégé an underlying business education, and taught them the fundamentals of business which are consistent with all great business owners and business leaders, it wasn't until the protégés completed the exercises in the workbook that they could really apply the learning back

to their own business and day-to-day work.

The workbook summarises everything in 'written form' that the protégés hear in the MP3 sessions.

One of the key exercises is where the protégés are asked, 'What would you do if you were CEO for the day?' This question really makes the protégés start to think like business owners and business leaders, and involves and engages them in the business in a way they have never done before.

As Kathryn explained, "You don't ever put yourself in Richard's situation and think, 'Okay, if this was my company what would I want? Or what would I do?' Those sections were actually really, really powerful because you can imagine the sort of feedback that he got in terms of potential ideas. I found those sections really good to think about ideas and regenerate a bit of energy into things."

For Matthew, these exercises were one of the hardest parts of the programme, but really got him thinking. "I spent most of the time flashing ideas onto pieces of paper and everything else! There were bits of scrap paper with ideas on everywhere — lying around my car, around the house, even on the back of receipts! At one point after about five or six days into the course I said to David, 'I hope you don't want this workbook back because it looks as if there has been a graffiti artist all over it.' There were scribbles and highlighters all over

the place. You take so much from it.”

Face-to-Face Mentoring Sessions

Once the protégés had completed two or three MP3 mentoring sessions and the relevant sections of the workbook, they would get together with their respective mentors, David or Justin. Both David and Justin had previously been through the programme themselves, and had discussed it at length with Richard Hammonds as part of the decision making process when deciding to invest in the course.

The face-to-face sessions took the protégés’ learning to a whole new level, and was the magic which allowed Hammonds Furniture to really get the most from the programme, and deliver the biggest results for the company.

Initially, David and Justin mentored their protégés over the phone, and although this worked, they found the results were much greater when they got together in small groups of four to exchange ideas, to discuss what they had learnt from the MP3 sessions and bring the whole programme back in context to Hammonds Furniture.

Simon, who was initially sceptical of the programme, but quickly turned round because of the mentoring sessions, said, “What I found more beneficial than anything else were the mentor sessions. They really dotted the Is and crossed the Ts for me. We got together as a group and put our ideas together about what we had learnt and that’s really when it started to sink in. I (to quote the course) became a believer.”

Vanessa benefited from the mentoring sessions too and said, “I really enjoyed going to the sessions. We listened again to the section we were doing and then talked about it afterwards. We discussed what each of us had come up with, and sometimes we had the same ideas and sometimes they were different. Justin was a great role model for this because he really bought into it and so it really helped with our enthusiasm. It was really good and worked really well.”

Kathryn felt the mentoring pulled the whole thing together and made it relevant. “It also helped share the learning and shared different people’s experiences and backgrounds. We had

a very mixed group of people. I don’t know if that was deliberate or just a coincidence, but you wouldn’t have had such a rounded learning experience if you hadn’t had that shared opportunity.”

Final Presentation

Built into the structure of the programme is the ‘final presentation’. This is where each protégé has an opportunity to present all that they have learnt to the management team. It’s also their opportunity to share some of their ideas from the ‘what would you do if you were CEO for a day’ exercise.

In the final presentation, the protégés presented back to Justin, David, Richard Hammonds and HR Director, Stuart Sinfield.

Although Richard Hammonds had noticed changes in his team as they were progressing through the programme, he said after the final presentations, “It’s as if a light bulb has been switched on! The thinking of the protégés who completed the course, compared to how they were six months ago, is day and night. They now think like business owners. I am now able to have a conversation with them at a more commercial level. They understand that the growth of this company is not just about revenue, but about margins and cash. They understand the importance of the people in their teams, the importance of recruiting the right people, and the importance of managers being leaders and not just managers. And they understand how to grow this business.”

Simon one of the protégés presenting said, “It’s funny, because Richard Hammonds said to me at the end of the final presentation. ‘Simon you’re a different person from the last time you presented to me.’ I can only take his word for it, but I’m sure he’s absolutely right. I got a lot out of it and I think from Richard’s point of view, he got his money’s worth. He’s very, very happy with the feedback from all the presentations that day.”

Change in Behaviour!

Just a few months after introducing mentoring into his company, Richard Hammonds is already seeing a 10% increase in conversion of prospects into paying customers, and revenues up by 20%. Richard said, “I think what happened was that the programme began to open their minds and

they actually began to realize it was their responsibility to look after customers in the way that I would.

They began to realize that they could have a positive effect on the business. It wasn’t just a case of managing the status quo, they could actually have a physical positive effect on the business, which would produce more sales, produce more profit, and actually be much more satisfying for the manager in their work.”

It isn’t just Richard who is saying this - the protégés noticed a change in their own thinking and behaviour too!

Vanessa said, “It happened to me when I started listening to the entrepreneurs and their stories. That was the time when I thought, this is just brilliant! I can walk into a business now and I see ways of improving it.”

Matthew said, “Just after the first mentoring session, I had three very, very strong weeks in January. I don’t think I’ve ever had three strong weeks! Without the course I probably wouldn’t have done that.”

Going Viral!

If the sign of a good programme is if other people want to be part of it, then the mentoring at Hammonds has caught on. Kathryn explains the viral effect of the programme. “Do you know what’s interesting? The number of other departments who are asking questions about the course. They have been saying, ‘Is it only for sales?’ I’ve had to explain to them that the programme has been rolled out first in sales, but that it will go further later on.”

Let’s leave the final word to Richard Hammonds who said, “99.9 percent of the time, training courses don’t deliver, or they don’t seem to deliver, or maybe they don’t catch our imagination. We have looked at other stuff before, but this has caught the imagination of our people. Yes I’ve wanted it and the guys at the top bought into it, but it’s the individuals that are enjoying the course, and passing it onto their peers.”

For more details about the Enterprise Mentor Programme, or to download a full copy of the Hammonds case-study which is included in the book *People Upgrade*, visit www.enterpriseleaders.com