

Article: Shifting into reverse before moving forward -The latest mentoring trend

Reverse mentoring was championed by Jack Welch when he was chief executive of General Electric Co. He encouraged 500 top-level executives to reach out to more junior staff members below them to learn how to use the Internet. Jack himself was matched with an employee in her 20s who taught him how to surf the Web. Fast forward a decade and mentors are teaching their mentees about social media, consumer trends, teaching greater cultural awareness and even the latest business ideas.

We are all familiar with traditional mentoring where a seasoned manager/leader advises and guides a young up-and-coming individual about career development or leadership challenges.

Companies in all industries have formal and informal programs designed to enhance their talent and sharpen their competitive edge. The millennial generation and technology revolution bring an interesting twist to mentoring as we know it.

Reverse mentoring (or reciprocal mentoring) gives young entry-level, often “tech-competent” employees the chance to “educate” senior members of staff about business interests such as trends and utilities in social media, (these skills are now becoming increasingly more valuable), new technology, customer preferences and unusual methods to boost office morale.

The result, mentoring relationships that shift into reverse before they move forward. Picasso said, "It takes a very long time to become young." When you interact with your younger team members, even those who might be younger than your own children, it is a guaranteed eye-opener. You might discover that you are so far out of the loop you can't even see the loop. Reverse mentoring contributes to the efforts to retain eager millennials and keep older more senior staff technologically and socially relevant.

In addition to exposure on the latest social media platforms, reverse mentoring could also give the manager/leader more candid feedback than any 360 programme. Sometimes a younger and more junior person hasn't learned what they can't say, they have fresh eyes and fresh ears and could provide honest feedback on perceptions around leadership style, even opinions and views that others might find tough to express. They will say and share things because they haven't “carried the corporate baggage yet”. No doubt, younger, fresher eyes will see things differently than we will. Their insights might even be shocking, and if we can keep our egos in check, they could lead to powerful breakthroughs.

A further benefit of reverse mentoring initiatives provide managers with insight into team members' expectations and aspirations, allowing the organisation to foster a culture designed to keep them motivated and engaged as they become the next generation of leaders in the workplace

Possible topics for reverse mentoring relationships

- Operational insights, products, ideas and plans
- Angles on Diversity -Generational, cultural even gender perspectives
- Leadership Feedback, perceptions within the business
- Social media interface use of various platforms

- Technology awareness, e.g. apps for smart phones

Of course, reverse mentoring is rarely one-sided. Senior staff could have decades of management experience, they have learned valuable lessons, how to "handle people, different situations, —how to hold back and let the conversation evolve; lessons in leadership. Most tacit knowledge is “ungoogle-able” and such insights may provide greater discernment than any “social platform”

Mentoring relationships thrive on trust, respect and candor—but, of course, too much candor can backfire if the “new mentor” cross the lines of professionalism. Both parties need to have a healthy dose of emotional intelligence. It's critical to contract to be able to gauge what's appropriate and what's inappropriate.

A few pointers to consider before test driving your new relationship

- Create and maintain an attitude of openness to the experience.
- Dissolve the barriers of status, power and position.
- Commit the necessary time.
- Mentor with the end in mind – goals and plan
- Define rules of engagement.
- Set a mid point check point , then assess progress and value
- Commend and celebrate

It is time to learn, If you want to move forward in mentoring, try shifting into reverse, first!. Remember to make it fun! Mentoring doesn't have to be formal. Get out from behind your desk, do drinks, attend functions together, you can have a conversation anywhere -- it doesn't have to be confined to an office setting

"Theirs is the belief that if you're senior, you have a lot to teach, and if you're junior, you have a lot to learn”, maybe we should start to challenge this thinking. We all have something to share, regardless of career level; encourage others to define it and bring it to the table with positivity