

THE VALUE OF

REVERSING MENTORING

Reverse mentoring is an opportunity for organizations to acknowledge that skill gaps exist among all generations and can motivate both younger and more experienced employees to push outside their comfort zones.

BY RITA BALIAN ALLEN

There are currently five generations in the workforce, presenting tremendous opportunity for all to enhance their outlook and creativity.

But it also requires us to push our thinking and practices in new and different ways to access this depth of perspective and reap the incredible rewards and value.

As you drive for change and innovation in your organization, attracting and retaining talent that represents various demographics to build your pipeline is in-

creasingly critical to maintain a competitive edge. Competing for talent is an ongoing challenge for many executives. Being creative and current with practices to engage your employees is essential. One such practice is to encourage and support reverse mentoring and incorporate it as a norm within your organizational culture.

What is reverse mentoring? Typically, in a mentoring relationship the mentor is someone who has more experience in a particular area or in their career and who provides guidance to a mentee with less experience. Reverse mentoring is the same concept but often featuring a younger employee imparting know-how and improved methods to an older, perhaps more workplace-experienced worker.

Implementing reverse mentoring is one of many opportunities for organizations with a multigenerational workforce. It acknowledges that you can have gaps in skills on both sides and helps motivate the younger as well as more experienced employees to push out of their comfort zone.

THE CASE FOR REVERSE MENTORING

It has been said that Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, initiated the concept of reverse mentoring back in the 1990s when he realized that many of the newer and younger employees had much more expertise and knowledge about the newest technologies than their managers, including himself. As a result, he had all managers seek out mentors from the pool of younger employees.

The range of experiences, assets, beliefs and motivations among the various generations cannot be overstated. These differences add value to how we do our work, communicate and collaborate and can ultimately enhance performance. With these opportunities come potential challenges, but these can be embraced and welcomed to ensure that the benefits greatly outweigh any conflicts.

Recognizing that each generation has been exposed to different influences that shape our thinking in unique ways can open up new possibilities. For example, millennials (born between 1980-1996) grew up with computers from the time they were in elementary school, whereas for boomers (born between 1946-1964), television was the new technology. Allowing millennial teammates — and Generation Z as they continue to enter the workforce — to share their expertise with technology with Generation X and boomers can heighten the older

generations' awareness and expand their knowledge.

Reverse mentoring can also be a critical career development strategy that gives employees different ways to take charge of their careers and create their own paths. Seeking multiple mentors from a variety of venues is an effective way to address various goals and needs. It also enables each employee to be their own advocate by initiating these relationships, whether they are a mentor or mentee, and embrace them as an ongoing process through different career stages.

Taking the time to build strong relationships across all generations makes us more valuable as

individuals, teams, departments and organizations. The things we can learn from one another help push us in new ways and allow us to grow into more effective professionals, contributing to higher productivity. In addition, it can be highly motivating and engaging and lead to higher retention of all generations of employees.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

There are a number of things you can do to ensure effective, successful reverse mentoring is taking place in your organization.

First, it's important to determine well-matched pairs — creating appropriate partnerships is foundational to having a good mentoring relationship. Both the mentor and mentee should understand and appreciate the value of their differences and the importance of the skill sets each brings to the relationship. Each party should also be invested and committed to the relationship with a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. There should be alignment with the skill and/or experience gap that the mentee is looking to fill and the mentor has to offer. Last, there should be an openness by both mentor and mentee to explore, engage and learn.

It's also important to identify what is needed — to set specific goals and objectives to be achieved within the mentoring relationship. The best mentoring relationships typically are mentee-driven. The mentee should be realistic and practical with expectations, being thoughtful of their mentor's time. Make sure partnerships of give and take are being created. The mentee can offer assistance, knowledge and resources to their mentor, as well. Keep in mind, it is all about relationship building — what each puts into the relationship will determine what they get out of it. Both parties must be sincere and

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authentic about what is needed to concisely communicate needs and expectations. Openness and acknowledgment of different generational communication styles by both is also a must.

Encourage mentors and especially mentees to enter the relationship with curiosity and an open mind — reverse mentoring can challenge many traditional views and experiences. It's important to engage with an open and eager mind to try something different. It will require a shift in mindset for many, offering unique rewards. As learning leaders, this is a key factor in communicating and implementing a reverse mentor practice. Reinforcing this point and offering tools and resources to help both the mentor and mentee as they enter into these pairs will be a key ingredient for success.

Both the mentor and mentee must also be able to ask for and be open to receiving feedback. Prior to entering any mentor relationship, it's important that both parties do their homework. The mentor should prepare themselves for the difficult questions they may be asked and the mentee should be ready for the challenge by being aware of their strengths, weaknesses, skills, interests, values, goals and priorities. They should understand their differentiators, their personal brand and the value each brings to the partnership. Keeping each other accountable requires an openness to feedback, both positive and constructive, and a willingness to embrace that feedback in order to grow.

In any mentoring relationship, professional etiquette should be practiced, keeping in mind the commitment and being respectful of each individual's time and efforts. Those involved should be prompt and on time for all meetings, offer follow-up as requested, accept constructive criticism and offer concerns in a profes-

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SO YOU WANT TO BE A MENTOR?

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Mentor responsibilities:

- Make a commitment to be accessible.
- Listen with an open mind, offering constructive feedback.
- Share experiences openly.
- Honor confidentiality.
- Ask mentee for clear and concise objectives.
- Ask questions and be reflective.
- Offer encouragement and support; help build self-confidence.
- Provide information, not solutions.

Mentee responsibilities:

- Have well-defined objectives and realistic expectations.
- Know what you need or want from the relationship.
- Initiate regular contact with specific discussion items.
- Openly share successes as well as struggles.
- Actively seek constructive feedback and be receptive to input.
- Invest in making the relationship successful.
- Give the mentor feedback on progress.
- Focus on learning, raising issues as they emerge.

SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES

Mentor:

- Coaching and advising
- Inspiring
- Influencing
- Providing feedback
- Managing risks
- Active listening
- Encouraging

Mentee:

- Self-directed
- Quick learner
- Relationship building
- Active listening
- Goal setting
- Resourceful
- Follow through

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING AND ENHANCING MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

- Each person takes initiative and risks.
- Give regular feedback — what's working and what's not.
- Set mutually agreed upon objectives.
- Openly address unmet objectives or expectations.
- Develop mutual trust and respect.

- Keep discussions confidential.
- Listen with open minds; be honest and frank.
- Mentor needs to have a sense of satisfaction.
- Mentee needs to gain empowerment and accomplishment.
- Celebrate and publicize successes.

CREATING A REVERSE MENTORING CULTURE

- Advocate for reverse mentor relationships as a norm.
- Encourage reverse mentorship as critical to success with supportive practices.

- Engage all levels to be approachable and ready to participate.
- Embrace mentoring as a core corporate value.

— Rita Balian Allen

sional and nurturing manner. The best relationships are built when there is a strong foundation of trust. This encourages people to show vulnerability and take some risks. Maintaining professional etiquette throughout the process is essential in all communications, whether in person, via email or text, or in any other form of social interaction.

Finally, keep channels of communication open throughout the mentor relationship and beyond. Maintain an ongoing dialogue with both parties about their give and take of information and progress. Encourage mentees to be open and honest about their progress, struggles, lessons learned and successes. Mentees should give their mentors feedback regularly by sharing the positive ways they are impacting them. Expressing their gratitude will be appreciated. Both mentor and mentee need to be active listeners, reflecting on the feedback received and incorporating it into their strategies.

RESPECTING OUR DIFFERENCES

In order for reverse mentoring to be successful, there needs to be a strong desire to listen to each other, to ask probing questions that broaden our base of information and to see our differences through a new lens. Disagreement is good because it forces us to open our minds in ways that stretch our thinking.

For example, traditionalists (born between 1925-1946) may have a strong belief of being respectful of authority whereas Gen Xers (born between 1965-1980) may be less impressed with authority, which could translate to a mix of opposing behaviors and expectations. Having an open and transparent dialogue can reveal

some of these different viewpoints and result in a respectful exchange that enlightens each other to see the value of both perspectives.

Learning to communicate and partner across generations in a manner that resonates with one another rather than alienating one another can be quite powerful. Looking forward, taking the time to establish and nurture reverse mentoring practices within your organization across all generations will enable your learning function to lead a culture that empowers all employees to feel valued, appreciated and challenged, offering new opportunities for growth and development. **CLO**

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sive leadership libraries to expose participants to the latest thinking on topics such as leadership, organization development, emotional intelligence, change management, strategy development and execution, and team development.

NO. 7: INCORPORATE EXPERIENTIAL AND ACTION LEARNING INTO PROGRAM DESIGN

Finally, no cohort-based leadership development program is complete without including multiple experiential elements and activities (e.g., action learning, adventuring, physical challenge components, community building, somatic activities and self-reflection exercises) to help nurture individual self-awareness and forge trust and chemistry among cohort members. These activities can take many forms — from the social to the physically challenging — and serve to help participants commit to personal learning goals and to building bonds of connection with their fellow cohort members. In one cohort program we facilitated, cohort members spent time climbing ropes and preparing a meal together, complete with the assistance of a master sommelier. In other sessions we've conducted, cohort members have taken part in light physical exercises, intended to build trust and chemistry. We heartily recommend that action and experiential learning components be incorporated into cohort program design at key points — most importantly at the beginning and midpoint.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF MODERN ORGANIZATIONS

Cohort-based leadership development programs can be of value to modern organizations in many ways. Such programs can skill leaders up to meet a variety of current or emerging business challenges. The community-based nature of such learning fosters the development of critical interpersonal skills among leaders (collaboration, communication, emotional intelligence and relationship management). Finally, cohort-based leadership development programs foster the sharing of critical leadership perspectives, experiences and insights across functional/organizational boundaries and encourage robust exploration of ideas and practices that can contribute to the development of adaptive leaders and to agile, high-performing organizations. **CLO**

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