

Reverse Mentoring: The Atypical Mentoring Relationship

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In my recent INK article, *The Mentoring Game: Get in or Prepare to Watch from the Sidelines*, I discussed the absolute necessity of mentoring relationships to successful career advancement in corporate America. The perspective I took in that article, was that of the typical mentoring relationship that occurs between an older, more experienced individual and his or her younger, less experienced colleague. After, reading feedback provided by INK subscribers, I thought it interesting and necessary to address another type of mentoring relationship, *reverse mentoring*, that is not always discussed in mentoring literature, but is a growing trend in business and elsewhere.

What is Reverse Mentoring?

Like any typical mentoring relationship, reverse mentoring involves two individuals: a more experienced manager or executive and a junior colleague. However, in this relationship the role of mentor and mentee is reversed with the junior colleague serving as the mentor and the more experienced individual serving as the mentee.

Reverse mentoring has become popular in business, especially in industries that are more technologically based, due to the evolution of the Internet and rapidly changing technological capabilities. Notably, reverse mentoring gained momentum when Jack Welch, then chairman of General Electric, required hundreds of GE's top managers to build mentoring relationships with their younger employees in order to learn more about the Internet.

Why it is Used

Reverse mentoring is primarily implemented within the high-tech industry and industries that are heavily technologically based. In this type of industry, an understanding of the constantly evolving technology available to, and being exploited by, the company is imperative. Therefore, younger individuals who may likely be more comfortable with their computer skills and knowledge of state-of-the-art technology are being called upon to bring their superiors up to speed. After all, this younger generation of individuals has grown up in a wired world, where cell phones, the Internet, online social networkings etc. are standard forms of communication and heavily integrated in business practices.

Furthermore, another reason reverse mentoring is employed, is that younger, less experienced individuals can provide a new perspective on current issues and ideas. New hires come into the organization with a fresh perspective untainted by the culture of the company. Therefore, older managers or executives can benefit from this new perspective and can better understand the skills, priorities, concerns, etc. of a generation of people

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they may not have considered otherwise.

Potential Pitfalls

Like other mentoring relationships, there are several pitfalls that can occur given improper implementation. For example, in a recent survey conducted by the Center for Coaching and Mentoring¹ 35% of respondents currently engaged in a reverse mentoring relationship indicated that finding time to meet was one of the biggest challenges to making a reverse mentoring relationship work. This was followed by 28% who felt that considering different ideas and perspectives was the biggest challenge, and 25% who felt that listening without judgment was the biggest obstacle. These issues are relevant in all mentoring relationships if they are not addressed properly, and can prohibit any chance at an effective outcome.

How it Works

Other than the role reversal, reverse mentoring works very similarly to other mentoring relationships in that, in order for the mentoring relationship to be successful, there needs to be a very clear understanding of the mentoring objective. Clarity regarding the purpose of the relationship will help dispel feelings of an unsatisfying mentoring relationship. If both parties have clearly defined goals, you have a way to measure progress. Also, there must be an equal commitment from both parties. If an equal commitment exists, this should alleviate the burden of scheduling, as both parties will be flexible in order to accommodate their mentoring schedule.

Furthermore, being wholly committed to the mentoring objective should enhance the relationship between the mentor and mentee so issues regarding listening and judgment will be minimized. Both parties should be receptive to the ideas and perspectives of the other in order to be successful.

Finally, according to Dr. Curtis J. Crawford, author of *Manager's Guide to Mentoring* the mentor and mentee should commit to, at a minimum, a six-month partnership.² Ideally, the mentoring relationship should last at least a year, but six months is still long enough to produce effective results.

A Look Toward the Future

Today's workforce is multi-generational, more so now that the baby boomers are staying in the workforce for a longer amount of time. Reverse mentoring will become even more critical to their continued success. There is no doubt that younger generations of people are more knowledgeable about today's changing technologies and also, perhaps more importantly, make up a significant portion of their companies' target market. Therefore, the presence of reverse mentoring, either as an informal mentoring relationship or in typical corporate mentoring curriculums, will likely continue to increase.

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