

MENTORING REVERSED

INCREASINGLY, ORGANISATIONS ARE TURNING TO YOUNGER MEMBERS OF THE WORKFORCE TO MENTOR THEIR OLDER AND MORE SENIOR COLLEAGUES. IMPLEMENTING IT, HOWEVER, CAN BE A CHALLENGE, PARTICULARLY IN SOME GEOGRAPHIES. HOW CAN BUSINESSES MAKE THIS RELATIONSHIP WORK?

IN THE LAST DECADE or so, the traditional image of the mentor has been radically turned on its head. In the corporate world, many organisations are encouraging reverse mentoring, where senior-level executives are coached by millennials and young recruits. This is part of a growing movement to create a more diverse workforce and a more inclusive employment model. It reflects the hugely varied demographic many employers are facing, with the workforce now spanning three or four generations, from age 18 to 80.

The trend of reverse mentoring is, according to Inga Beale, CEO of Lloyd's of London, a response to the VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) climate we are now living in.

Beale, who meets regularly with a 19-year-old mentor from the insurance firm's apprentice scheme, says it is about creating a workforce that reflects the world around us. "We need to be reminded of what's happening in the world and how the new generation thinks and behaves and wants different things," she says. "I take ideas and inspiration from all the young people I work with. This helps me to think about how we can do things differently and appeal to that generation."

NEW VIEWS

Learning how to think differently is, says Beale, essential in a fast-changing and increasingly complex

world. "It is more important at a time like this, when many people are losing faith in the world's political and economic systems, to come up with the answers to the challenges people face."

Many people feel as though their societal and economic concerns, such as globalisation, equality and eroding social values, are being ignored, says Beale. "We have to try to remedy this. And the decisions we make on hiring a diverse workforce have the power to shape the society we live in."

Beale believes that reverse mentoring is about learning from the people around you and fostering a more open and inclusive culture. And her views are echoed by numerous other innovative employers.

Diane Herbert, the former HR Director of Channel 4 and Director of consultancy Mindshift, says: "The thing I like about reverse mentoring is that it sends a really clear message that learning and developing is a life-long process and not related to one's age or the amount of years' experience a person has." It signals, Herbert adds, that a company values ideas and perspectives, regardless of where they come from.

Kathy Poole, Interim Group HR Director at Air Partner, says it helps put senior executives in touch with the future. "Youngsters often come with fresh perspectives, open minds and, most importantly, an intuitive approach to new technology and ideas. Reverse mentoring schemes help organisations tap into this huge resource to the benefit of all."

"WE SEE THINGS THAT OLDER GENERATIONS MISS, MEANING WE CAN CREATE BETTER OPPORTUNITIES"

— HAYLEY SMITH, BOXED OUT PR

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Richard Curtis, CEO of The Mentoring School, says it has seen a significant surge in demand for reverse mentoring training in the last few years. "I think many companies are interested because it gives them a unique insight into how the younger generations view their products, processes or the use of technology," he notes. "We expect this to result in increased engagement and satisfaction for young people, and better insight for the company employing them."

Sophie Robson is Founder of the Millennial Matters blog, which looks at how financial services and other employers can engage with the next generation. A millennial herself, she believes that they want to feel engaged and fulfilled in their work, but that they also have a great deal to bring to employers.

"We're the last generation to remember the pre-digital age, but we're also young enough to take digital innovation in our stride, so millennials are uniquely placed to advise on how we blend modern technology and thinking with the old-world hierarchy," she notes.

VALUED BY ALL

Donna Miller, European HR Director at Enterprise Rent-A-Car, says their reverse mentoring programme developed almost by accident from a top-down mentoring initiative that began about six years ago.

"This involved our mostly baby boomer top-level leaders mentoring primarily millennial junior to middle manager females," she explains. "When we started the

programme, we used it as a high-potential programme with a specific objective of identifying junior to mid-level women for next-level promotion opportunities."

Today, all women are eligible to apply for the programme. She explains: "Our senior directors quickly realised the value of spending time with younger team members (generally an hour a month), who were at the operational coalface and brought insights from different life experiences as well as different ways of working, particularly around innovative ways to communicate more effectively using technology." The scheme was so successful that it was extended across the business to all regional general managers and the executive head office team.

So how do millennials view these programmes? Hayley Smith is owner of Boxed Out PR and a millennial mentor at the Central Research Laboratory, a start-up co-working space. She believes that millennials are changing the landscape for working and that reverse mentoring programmes let them share their knowledge. They are, according to Smith, less risk averse than previous generations. "We have foresight and an entrepreneurial mindset. We see things that older generations will miss, meaning we can create better opportunities."

BALANCING NEEDS

There are also challenges to these programmes, especially in certain geographies. In some cultures, ▶

- ▶ such as China and India, where age is revered, reverse mentoring might pose some sensitive issues around seniority. In such cases, the programmes may have to be tweaked or adjusted accordingly.

Emily Cosgrove, co-founder of the Conversation Space, explains: “During our experience rolling out the global mentoring programme at jewellery firm Swarovski, we were mindful and aware of the nuances and impact of cultural contexts.”

At their first session in Asia Pacific, for example, they had to focus the mentees on considering how they would engage with their mentor in more of an equal ‘adult-to-adult’ conversation, rather than a “parent-child” type relationship. In practical terms this meant noticing language and paying attention to power differences, Cosgrove says.

She also recommends creating a safe, neutral space for both participants, where their hierarchical roles are easier to overcome. She adds that it can also be a great equaliser, capable of shifting perspectives.

“The wider the generation gap, the bigger the impact,” says Cosgrove. “It’s about putting yourself in someone else’s shoes. What does it feel like to be in an ethnic minority and not see anyone else in your organisation like you? Unless you ask the question, you won’t ever really know.”

Miller agrees, adding: “Generations are fluid. Mentoring and reverse mentoring between age groups is an effective way to increase understanding and thereby collaboration and teamwork.” She notes at Enterprise Rent-A-Car, while there may have been some concerns that the more senior-level, longstanding staff may have taken umbrage to being mentored by someone who wasn’t yet born when they were applying for a mortgage, some of the oldest employees have benefited most.

“Many of our older employees have been with the business for a long time and started working in a branch many years previously, while our younger, generally millennial, employees are now closest to our customers at the branch,” she notes. “Their experiences and insights are invaluable in informing the business strategy, and this is an enormous benefit of having reverse mentoring.” ■



A BOOST TO DIVERSITY

PwC launched its reverse mentoring programme in 2014 as part of its diversity and inclusion drive. Kalee Talvitie-Brown, Head of People at PwC Consulting, says: “We knew that diversity was one of the things the younger generation value most. We wanted to empower them, to make them feel that their viewpoint was valid and look at different perspectives.”

The programme is open to female and BAME staff who are higher apprentices, associates, senior associates or managers. They currently have 122 millennials mentoring 200 partners and directors. The mentors meet with their mentees once a month, while mentors meet quarterly to discuss any issues.

Talvitie-Brown says one of the best things about the reverse mentoring scheme is that it’s given the partners a better insight into the different challenges faced by young women in the workplace, such as settling back into work after maternity leave. “The partners gained insights into the challenges of returning from parental leave and we have since set up Parental Pals, a buddy group in the business, to give better support to parent returners,” she notes.

PwC also runs a training programme for the mentors every January which looks at the dynamics between different generations, what their role will entail and hierarchical boundaries. It’s important that age or seniority does not dictate who leads this type of relationship.

“We want the relationship between the mentee and the mentor to be led by the mentor, rather than the senior-level executive,” says Talvitie-Brown. “We want the mentors to feel as though they can ask challenging questions to the partners and to be clear about their purpose.”

Krystal Allen is a millennial mentor and Manager at PwC. She says: “What I have enjoyed most is the ability to share my experience as a woman within the firm to challenge the partner’s views and ways of working, in a safe environment,

“We want to help shape our partners to appreciate and recognise differences, and the reverse mentoring programme gives you the space and ability to do just that.”