



DON'T GET LEFT BEHIND

Reverse mentoring is a great way for senior executives to tap into fresh perspectives and stay current. **Emily Cosgrove** and **Sara Hope** show how it is working at RSM

In the last decade or so, the traditional face of organisations has been slowly changing. There is undoubtedly a growing recognition of the benefits of creating a more diverse workforce and a more inclusive employment model.

And rightly so. Not just because it's good for business, but because it is the right thing to do.

Those with the responsibility of leading organisations need to be building a workforce that reflects the changing world around them. A workforce that now often spans three or four generations, from age 18 to

80. And one that thinks, behaves and often expects and values very different things to previous generations. For example, a healthy work-life balance, regular feedback, clear purpose and meaning in their job and a diverse and inclusive environment.

It is essential for companies to take ownership and share the responsibility for embracing and supporting this change.

Companies need to be leaning in and embedding the necessary systems and processes that offer opportunities for the best people to rise through the ranks, not just the people who

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reflect those already at the top.

Organisations have a role in shaping the future society we live in. We must be brave and innovate together; be open and willing to learn from those who don't look or sound or think like ourselves; and have more conversations with people who are different to ourselves, be that older or younger, a different race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth.

So how do we speed up this process? The world is changing far quicker than organisations, and the risk is high for those organisations that do not catch up and keep up.

People from all walks of life are becoming part of movements for change and are finding their voices at work to challenge; insisting that their organisations uphold fairness and respect and provide meaning for all.

Fresh perspective

One of the ways that senior executives can get in touch with the future and generate ideas on how their business needs to adapt is through reverse mentoring. Young people often bring fresh perspectives, open minds and unique insights into what might otherwise be missed.

Inga Beale, former CEO of Lloyd's of London, wrote that reverse mentoring is one of her professional #LifeHacks. Inga says: "So often, the more senior we get, the more we think we have to pass on our advice to others. Having someone who is starting out in their career give you their views on how you should run a business is enlightening and enriching.

"It means you've really got to cultivate your listening skills – don't do too much talking – just listen to what they're saying. I'd recommend it to everybody. It keeps you in touch with what the younger generation and the leaders of the future are looking for in the workplace."

Learning how to listen to different voices and think differently is essential in such a fast-changing and complex world.

The old model of command and control is out of date, does not engage and does not inspire. By reversing the status quo, executive members of an organisation build a one-to-one relationship with someone with a different mindset and/or perspective.

The intent is to grow understanding of what it is like to be different in some way to their own personal experience. Whether that is a different gender, generation, sexual orientation, race, social background – the list goes on.

It is a new kind of conversation; one that we are not used to having at work and in some ways, it can be quite difficult to do.

Reverse mentoring in action

One organisation that has taken the brave step of embedding a reverse mentoring programme is RSM.¹ Mark Taylor, central regional

managing partner and sponsor of the programme, was clear on why he chose to embark on this ambitious journey to reshape the future culture within the business.

“I listened to a speaker who specialises in inter-generational issues and the impact of different views between millennials and their predecessor generations,” says Mark. “She talked about work-life balance, the desire to move roles more frequently, and having greater flexibility.

“I was inspired to think about how we could do something to ensure the different views and attitudes within RSM were heard.”

Reverse mentoring was chosen as the learning methodology to provide a framework for cross-generational connection and engagement, a forum for innovation and a driver for cultural change.

It created new relationships that challenged mindset and perspectives, encouraging a more diverse workforce and an environment of improved engagement.

As part of the learning needs analysis, a focus group of 10 junior staff was held to gather views on culture and communication across the different levels in the business. The clear message was a need to break down traditional barriers of top-down hierarchy and focus on building better connection between people at different levels.

This, combined with an objective-setting session with the regional managing partner and L&D, resulted in the programme purpose statement: “The creation of new relationships that together challenge perspectives on culture, resulting in creating/building an environment of improved engagement and inspiration.”

The programme took a brave decision by inviting partners, traditionally seen as the ‘wise experts’, to take the role of mentees, and junior staff to take the role of mentors.

External support

Mark believes that a key factor in the success of the programme and its roll-out nationwide is the presence of continued and structured external support.

In the supported programme, senior partners are invited to embrace the



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relationship with a complete beginner’s mindset; to be curious, to truly listen and be willing to look through an alternative lens to learn from someone very different to themselves, rather than turn up with an expectation of having to know all the answers.

As mentee, they are invited to step away from being expert and into a vulnerable space of not knowing.

The more junior and younger reverse mentors, by nature of their role, are asked to speak their truth to power within the organisation – to people who have influence over their future careers. Also a challenging and vulnerable place to be.

Consultancy, individual matching support, programme design, training delivery and evaluation have all played a part in this innovative and powerful nine-month blended programme.

Pairs meet regularly and work together as a cohort to create specific learning opportunities, build multi-level engagement and affect the future shape of the organisation.

Mark describes the impact of this support: “The business now has confidence in the robustness of what we are doing and that has been a really important asset.”

Avoid the pitfalls

The importance of this confidence cannot be stressed highly enough, with reports from other companies of reverse mentoring partnerships failing before they begin.

Without adequate levels of support, participants’ expectations, introductions and the ability to grow trust and honesty can easily be

misaligned and break down before they have a chance to get going. The impact from the ripples that inevitably spread from such experiences are hard to come back from.

At a local level, the RSM programme has led to better listening, understanding and the generation of ideas. It has resulted in different cohorts creating local project lists to aid engagement across each office, which are still being driven by participants.

One such project has enhanced communication to ensure a consistent experience across faculties and clarity around existing policies.

In addition, mentors and mentees have found value in seeing issues from a different perspective and have built new relationships across the office.

Tangible business outcomes

At a national level, one tangible business outcome has been the setting up of a national shadow board, ‘Talk to the Top’, sponsored by CEO, David Gwilliam.

As Mark explains: “The board meets every two months to talk about themes, topics and issues facing the business so that David directly gets first-hand input. It’s generated lots of interest in our business, has been really well received and has actively shaped future policy.”

RSM has used reverse mentoring as a way of ensuring conversations about the future of work stay at the forefront of decision-makers’ minds. Its bold ambition to create new relationships that challenge perspectives and create innovative ideas has been recognised through winning the RSM Innovation Award, as well as being shortlisted for the 2019 TJ Awards Best Coaching/Mentoring Award.

Provided it is carefully supported, a reverse mentoring relationship can become not only an unusual connection out of the formal hierarchy, but also an important step into the future world of work. **TJ**

Emily Cosgrove and Sara Hope are co-founders of *The Conversation Space*. Find out more at www.theconversationspace.com

Reference

1 <https://www.rsm.global/>