FEATURE

Who's the Mentor Now?

A Word of Caution about Reverse Business Mentoring

By Judith Ashton, Esq., and Rene Petrin

INTRODUCTION

A trend these days is for businesses to seek opportunities for senior-level employees to pair with juniors to learn new technology, innovative business concepts, or simply about generation Xs or Ys view of the world. In addition to designing traditional mentoring programs, mentoring consultants and in-house professionals are asked to create these new programs, usually known as reverse mentoring programs. HR professionals must review carefully with business management just what reverse mentoring entails and what it can and cannot accomplish. While the concept has much strength, those considering implementing a reverse mentoring program for an organization should

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understand thoroughly that reverse mentoring is generally more akin to coaching than mentoring and may not be as beneficial to either the organization or the individual mentor as the more powerful transformational tool of traditional mentoring.

DEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP: AN ESSENTIAL FIRST STEP

As every HR professional knows all too well, employee development relationships are serious matters with serious consequences. Before employees are paired for mentoring or coaching, the professional must ensure that the organization and both parties to the relationship understand the relationship's purpose, the organization's goals, the pair's roles, and the skills the pair must bring to the table. Absent an explicit definition and delineation of the relationship, it is bound to fail. Thus, before an organization can evaluate the efficacy of reverse mentoring for its employees, its executives must be educated as to what mentoring is and what it is not.

MENTORING VERSUS COACHING

Mentoring is a long-term relationship designed to promote an employee's professional and personal development by linking the employee with a mentor inside the organization. At its best, mentoring is transformational and relational. Specific learning goals or competencies may be used as a basis for creating the relationship, but its focus goes beyond these areas to include such concerns as work/life balance, self-confidence, self-perception, etc. Its purpose is to develop the individual not only in his or her current position, but for the future. Mentoring relationships can be invaluable to the organization in helping it retain promising employees and develop the next generation of company leaders. Those chosen as mentors must be "inside experts" about the company, its culture, and its history. A company's mentors certainly have content expertise, but, more important, they possess superior interpersonal skills, enabling them to create a trusting learning environment for the mentoree.

Business executives must also appreciate the distinctions between mentoring and coaching, which serve quite different purposes. While mentoring is primarily relational, coaching is more functional. Coaching provides an employee with a content expert, from inside or outside the company, charged with imparting skills or knowledge. Often, a coaching relationship is short term and its focus is usually exclusively on professional issues. Sometimes coaching is remedial, but mentoring never is. A coach must be a skilled communicator and have credibility as a subject matter expert. Unlike mentoring, the dynamics of a coaching relationship and the coach's knowledge of the organization's culture are generally not as important as the coach's skill as a teacher. In short, while a mentor may coach a mentoree, a coach is not a mentor.

REVERSE MENTORING

The concept of reverse mentoring is relatively new. Reverse mentoring is said to have started formally when Jack Welch, then CEO of General Electric, assigned himself a young technologically knowledgeable employee to teach Welch about computers. Since then, many employers

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have implemented reverse mentoring programs. Some have focused on providing senior protégés with knowledge about technology, some have focused on passing on to the seniors new ideas MBA students or university graduates have learned in professional school, and others focus on diversity. IBM, for example, has created reverse mentoring initiatives as part of its "Intelligent Mentoring" program. One initiative pairs GLBT mentors with straight IBM employees to provide insights as to the challenges GLBT people face in the workplace and in the community. Procter & Gamble has developed a thoughtful "Mentor Up" program with the specific goal to raise executives' awareness of women's work-related issues. Female juniors are paired with senior executives, both male and female, to work on these issues. The program was adopted, along with other innovative measures, to stem the tide of female turnover at the company and it has succeeded. University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business pairs MBA students with senior executives in the community in a "Fellows Program" in which the students teach the seniors about innovative ideas in the business field. Reverse mentoring is said to facilitate the senior mentoree's learning about the different perspectives of the next working generation and to improve relationships between professionals of different generations. While its benefits have not been studied scientifically, it is said to improve technological competence, help senior workers remain current, improve diversity, and enhance a more global perspective in the workplace. It may also reduce turnover in younger workers, who may feel more valued by an organization that asks them to contribute in this way.

Assuredly, tapping the skills and understanding the worldview of younger workers is of value to any organization. Senior employees can become stale and

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stuck in their ways and this type of interaction may energize their careers. They may also increase their respect for the juniors' ability to contribute to the organization. Similarly, younger employees may become more comfortable working with people they once saw as authority figures and this may increase their maturity and self-esteem.

Nonetheless, it is a mistake to confuse this kind of development program with mentoring, and it should never be implemented in place of traditional mentoring. To do so would deprive younger workers of an extraordinary transformational opportunity and deprive the organization of a tool not only to attract and prepare its next generation of leaders but to pass down through the ranks the expertise of its experienced leaders. Surely, potential young leaders are more likely to be attracted to join and remain at a business in which senior managers are willing, in a formal way, to prepare them for a future at the company than a business in which they are simply paired with seniors to teach the seniors specific skills. Moreover, when baby boomers retire, critical knowledge of the company's history and culture would be lost forever without traditional mentoring.

One factor often missing in discussions on reverse mentoring is emotional intelligence. In Mike Poskey's article, "The Importance of Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace," he defines emotional intelligence as "a set of competencies demonstrating the ability one has to recognize his or her behaviors, moods, and impulses, and to manage them best according to the situation." This used to be called maturity. A successful mentor must have enough self-knowledge and self-awareness to be able to empathize with the mentoree and provide meaningful emotional support. It is this component in mentoring that makes people want to have a mentor and, if successful, to be transformed by the experience.

Since mentoring is built upon a relationship rather than on sharing knowledge, when a mentor is just starting out in his/her career, the mentor may not yet possess the type of emotional intelligence found in an older adult. This can create a serious problem for both parties in the mentoring relationship. The junior mentor may not have the depth and breadth of maturity to provide nuanced responses to the mentoree's issues and this can lead to shallow thinking and little emotional support. This is not to say that younger employees cannot be mentors; rather, if an organization is going to implement reverse mentoring it—and especially its mentoring professional—must consider the emotional intelligence of assigned junior mentors to assure that the relationships will be successful.

One survey of reverse mentoring experiences done by Matt M. Starcevich at the Center for Coaching and Mentoring found that the largest number of people surveyed saw the purpose of the relationship "to gain technical expertise." If this is true, then it confirms that for most organizations with such programs, reverse mentoring is coaching, not mentoring. Moreover, the technological knowledge possessed by juniors is divergent, as are their communication and teaching skills. Perhaps other teaching formats would be more efficient and cost-effective to impart technological expertise. Finally, the Starcevich survey indicates that more than half of those surveyed believe that their reverse mentoring relationships would have been improved by "having a game plan and goal." In traditional mentoring, the goals, as stated above, are clear.

CONCLUSION

Pairing junior and senior employees in a coaching relationship in which the junior employees are the content experts and the seniors are the learners may add value to an organization. This is particularly so if the company sets clear goals and parameters for the relationship and the junior has subject matter expertise to teach that the senior would benefit from learning. The Procter & Gamble "Mentor Up" program is a fine example of such a program. Juniors may also increase their self confidence and both seniors and juniors may learn to understand each other's perspectives more fully. Nonetheless, well-designed traditional mentoring may be of greater sustained value to organizations and to both members of the pair. The mentor gains greater job satisfaction and renewal by helping the less experienced worker achieve more in his or her career and by passing on the mentor's experiential wisdom. The mentoree establishes professional networks, gains professional support and encouragement, grows in competence and effectiveness, receives important feedback in key areas such as leadership skills and communication, moves forward on personal goals, and gains valuable knowledge about the organization's culture. Finally, the organization benefits by encouraging retention, reducing turnover costs, elevating knowledge transfer, enhancing professional development, and creating and sustaining a culture of mentoring in the organization. ■

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