



How to design a Reverse Mentoring Program

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Reverse Mentoring

Introduction

Most traditional mentoring scenarios assume the pairing of an experienced leader or professional with a younger person to achieve a goal or overcome a challenge. **Reverse mentoring turns this conventional mentoring concept on its head:** experienced managers become the students and young employees, with fresh perspectives become the mentors. **Knowledge is exchanged across generational boundaries.** The young mentor passes on everything they know about new technologies, social media, new perspectives of the world of work and other topical areas of skill transfer.

Jack Welch, is credited with the development of reverse mentoring whilst he was CEO of General Electric back in the late 1990s. Welch had met with another senior executive who told him he had a more junior mentor; Welch was surprised, why did this **accomplished colleague** have a mentor who was his junior in the organisation? His colleague explained that his mentor was advising him on the internet and how his company could benefit from it.

Welsh went back to General Electric and set up a reverse mentoring program where all GE senior executives were assigned to a reverse mentor to help them understand and exploit the new technology of the internet.

Jack Welch also found reverse mentoring to be valuable in that it broke down the traditional hierarchies of an organisation.

At a time when technology and the way that organisations operate is changing so rapidly, it is little surprise that reverse mentoring is now **becoming more widespread.** Individuals need to look for every opportunity to keep their **knowledge and skills relevant** and reverse mentoring has become a way for professionals to strengthen skills and competencies in the interest of **remaining competitive** in today's marketplace

Reverse mentoring can be used to **kick-start creative thinking** and to close the knowledge and skills gap for both parties involved. It gives a less-experienced professional access to a more experienced **professional's business insight**, while the experienced professional learns about the latest technology trends and skills.

Reverse mentoring can also help to increase both participants productivity as it gives them a channel for getting **questions answered** and to find resources quickly, saving time and effort.

As with any mentoring relationship, a productive reverse-mentoring relationship will also help produce **increased confidence** and expanded communication skills.



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Benefits of reverse mentoring

- > **Increased retention of millennials.** If employees feel that they are listened to and that their ideas and insights are valued by their company, they are more likely to stay.
- > **Sharing of digital skills.** As with the GE example above reverse mentoring can help drive innovation as more senior executives realise the advantage of new technologies or how technology can leverage advantage with existing products or services or possibly lead to new ones.
- > **Promoting diversity.** This can be through specific reverse mentoring approaches such as a BAME and LGBT reverse mentoring program allowing senior executives to gain insights into how their more junior colleagues perceive their environment or have been impacted by socio-economic factors.
- > **Talent management.** Young mentors can gain a lot from the relationship with their more senior mentee. The development of leadership skills, as well as having a senior advocate for their future career development, may mean employees who would potentially have been overlooked, are better supported in their career development.
- > **Reverse mentoring creates a positive view** of the organisation for the junior mentor. Closer contact with senior leaders creates a positive view of the company and leads to junior mentors influencing their peers.

Potential issues (or things to be aware of)

- > **Senior execs may find it difficult to take advice from a more junior colleague.** Reverse mentoring may be considered 'teaching an old dog new tricks', and some senior managers and leaders may find this pointless and even insulting, but from the GE example, this is far from the case. The best way to negate this potential issue is to spend time upfront with the mentees to sell them on the benefits of the program.
- > **Keeping information confidential.** Some mentees may be concerned that their knowledge gap or perceptions may become public knowledge and put them off fully engaging with the program. It's important senior mentees are assured of confidentiality, and that junior mentors respect this.
- > **In reverse mentoring** the mentee (more senior exec) has to be particularly well prepared so that the experience is a positive one for the junior mentor. It's important to ensure the mentee is well prepared for their sessions and gives a consistent and positive experience to the junior mentor.



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Getting started with a reverse mentoring

- > **Be clear about what you want from the program.** Your reverse mentoring program lead should define the aims and objectives of the program. What is it that the organisation wants to achieve; upskilling senior mentees in new technology, understanding how millennials perceive the world of work, understanding people from different socio-economic backgrounds or all of these. Whatever your aims and objectives, you should know how you are going to track and review these throughout and at the end of the program.
- > **Establish program governance.** Ensure the program is sponsored by somebody senior in your organisation like the head of HR or equivalent and that the senior execs who are engaging in the program have bought into it. Establish some form of program reporting that can be shared with the program's governance.
- > **Give support and training to mentor and mentee.** It's important to ensure both mentee and mentor are supported on the reverse mentoring program. Training can be provided face to face, virtually or in some form of reference material. Ensure the training clearly states the goals of the program, any ground rules such as confidentiality and how the program will be tracked and monitored. Clarify what support mentors and mentees can expect to get from the program team.
- > **Find the right match between mentor and mentee.** Ensure mentees are matched with the right mentor, this can be achieved by defining your matching criteria; this could include department or cross-department, skill sets such as digital tools (apps, social networks etc.), mobile working, new organisation perspectives etc.
- > **Set goals and timeline.** As mentioned earlier, it's important to understand the goals of your reverse mentoring program. You should also set expectations on the time period for the mentoring and how many sessions both the mentee and mentor are expected to commit to.
- > **Gain feedback.** You should solicit feedback during the course of the mentoring program. The program lead should set out how feedback can be provided, and some suggestions for this include; ensuring mentees and mentors have a clear contact point should feedback be necessary outside agreed feedback points and mechanisms such as surveys. Having a 'mid-point' where mentees and mentors can meet in their groups to feedback on how things are going is a useful step and then finally the end of program review.
- > **Review the program and make changes/improvements.** If there is a set timeline for the program, then ensure time is set aside for a review and from that review, improvements are planned in for when the program next runs. If your reverse mentoring is a rolling program, then set aside a governance review at the most appropriate point of the year. Communicate back to both mentor and mentees, highlighting any program successes as well as the improvements that will be made to the program as a result of their feedback.



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Conclusion

For reverse mentoring to work, younger professionals need to feel confident enough to share their opinions and give feedback to older colleagues. Likewise, senior professionals need to overcome their pride and fears and be open with their younger mentor, revealing areas where they lack skills and knowledge and be open to receiving feedback from them. If these issues are addressed, reverse mentoring can be incredibly rewarding.

Reverse mentoring is a powerful way to improve engagement and retention as well as transfer new skills to senior individuals in your organisation. Tracking program progress and success is key to refining a reverse mentoring program that delivers benefits within your organisation.

If you think reverse mentoring could benefit you then why not take a look at our mentoring program.

