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Reverse mentoring

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Reverse mentoring

Asked to describe a “typical” mentoring programme, most people talk about a hierarchical relationship, with a senior manager or professional as mentor and a more junior person as mentee. But there are valuable learning conversations to be had from relationships between peers and those, which reverse the hierarchy of traditional mentoring. Sometimes called reverse mentoring, sometimes upward mentoring, these relationships make the hierarchically more senior person the primary learner and emphasise the experience of the more junior person. Reverse mentoring is valuable because people in senior positions in organizations can easily lose touch with the external world and with the perceptions and concerns of people at lower levels. They may also have missed out on skills, which they find difficult to admit to not having.

The two main forms of reverse mentoring are technical and diversity. Technical reverse mentoring provides a safe haven for executives to explore skills such as IT, both in terms of how they use technology and the big picture of how the technology is developing. Crafting effective strategic responses to technology change can be helped significantly through personal exposure to using technologies. For the more junior employee, there is an exchange in terms of understanding how the leaders think and in visibility at higher levels.

Diversity reverse mentoring aims to educate leaders about diversity issues, by exposing them to challenging dialogue, which they might otherwise never encounter. A classic case study is a division of Procter and Gamble, which overcame severe problems of retention of women at junior and middle management and almost no representation of women at senior management, by turning a planned traditional mentoring programme on its head. Reverse mentoring worked so well that retention of female talent is no longer a significant issue.

In practice, effective reverse mentoring is always a two-way flow of learning and some organizations, such as BP, call it mutual mentoring, to emphasise the duality of roles.

Key concerns in reverse mentoring are preventing the senior manager from slipping into dominant behaviours; and empowering the more junior employee to feel comfortable in “speaking truth to power”. Our experience of helping organisations design and implement effective upward mentoring programmes suggests the following guidelines:



1. Be very clear about the purpose of the programme. What learning do you want each party in the relationships to acquire and why? How will you know what shifts in perception, thinking and behaviour have occurred? Clarity about the broad organisational goals is important in reassuring people about the process
2. Train both parties for their roles. Training for junior mentors should include learning how to confront and challenge someone more senior, in ways that stimulate reflection and open dialogue. Training for senior mentees should include how to be open to such challenge, how to confront their own assumptions and stereotypes, and how to encourage the junior mentor to be honest and forthright
3. Review relationships regularly to ensure they are on track. If necessary, coach one or both parties in how to manage their roles effectively. Ideally, the review process should begin with the relationship
4. Be attentive to themes that recur across a number of reverse mentoring relationships. These are often clues to diversity or other people management issues, which the organisation needs to address urgently
5. Don't be too ambitious at first. Small pilots (12-30 pairs) allow you to make and learn from mistakes, which would be far more damaging on a larger scale. Use participants as an informal steering group in planning how to roll out the programme to a larger audience

We are currently seeing an expansion of interest in reverse mentoring, driven primarily by recognition that diversity management issues can only be tackled comprehensively, if leaders have a deep and personal understanding of them. Such insights do not come from attending classes or reading books; they come from focused dialogue with real people, who are different. One of the many positive outcomes from reverse mentoring is therefore that leaders learn to be more comfortable to have open, learning conversations with other people, who come from backgrounds and cultures substantially different from themselves.