Mentoring from the bottom up, part 1

How and why to “do it yourself” with a cross-generational mentoring program. by Diane Thielfoldt

Even though mentoring is one of the most effective career development paths for young employees, surveys show that only one in five organizations offers a formal mentoring program. This is in spite of the need—especially for today’s electrical distribution organizations—for fast, point-of-need learning partnerships to help share critical knowledge, onboard new hires, develop talent, and grow future leaders. This makes it very likely that you and your team are left high and dry when it comes to mentoring newer or younger employees—but it doesn’t mean you can’t set up an effective program yourself.

Managers and supervisors at all levels have a simple, viable strategy available for providing mentoring to their teams without waiting for senior management to set up a formal program. This do-it-yourself option is called “reverse mentoring” because it turns around mentoring as most know it.

Traditionally, a person with more experience will mentor a colleague with less experience; this method has been proven through master/apprentice relationships that have allowed knowledge to be handed down over hundreds of years. In reverse mentoring, a more experienced employee, or even a manager, actively seeks the council of an employee with less overall experience. This modern twist has older employees depending on younger staff for fresh perspectives, trend spotting, and technology guidance.

As Alan Webber, co-founder of Fast Company (fastcompany.com), put it, “Reverse mentoring is when the old fogies in the organization realize that by the time employees are in their 40s and 50s, they’re not in touch with the future in the same way as the 20-somethings are. They come with fresh eyes, open minds, and instant links to the technology of our future.”

Reverse mentoring refreshes learning for veteran employees and managers while helping to build leadership skills and experience of the newer employees—who are, of course, also learning new insights during the relationship. And when a manager is paired with a 20-something employee, the mentor gets a glimpse into the world of leadership and top-level leaders—something the younger generation particularly values.

WHY REVERSE YOUR MENTORING?

Reverse mentoring has some unique benefits that should be of special interest to the industry, many of which have to do with attracting and keeping employees in the Millennial generation (those born between 1977 and 1998)—an essential demographic for any forward-thinking organization.

These six benefits specific to reverse mentoring are just the tip of the iceberg:

1. Reverse mentoring helps to engage, retain, and promote younger talent. It creates a two-way conversation, allowing supervisors to learn what workplace conditions younger employees seek to advance themselves in along with the interests of the company.
2. Reverse mentoring engages younger and newer employees, promoting their loyalty and generating trust.
3. Reverse mentoring empowers emerging and established leaders.
4. Reverse mentoring “shrinks” big organizations and transcends boundaries normally wouldn’t be crossed.
5. Reverse mentoring begins to close the knowledge gap between long-time employees and newer hires.
6. Reverse mentoring offers different, fresh, and/or younger perspectives.

Reverse mentoring is ideal in situations where it is desirable for established employees and managers to gain technical expertise—from business applications to smartphone apps. The same is true of learning about new and emerging trends in marketing or areas of work and society that might impact the business.

It can also strengthen the team as it grows the skills and strengths of individuals involved. For example, when a people-savvy associate is paired with a manager working on winning over a prospective client, everyone can benefit.

**BEST PRACTICES**

Before sending a seasoned executive and an intern into a conference room and saying “Go,” there are a few high-level guidelines to consider. No matter how simple the structure of the mentoring program is intended to be, take time to make a plan.

Reverse mentoring can take place as informally as desired—or even within an existing mentoring program. It simply calls for matching up pairs of employees of different generations and then encouraging them to meet regularly to exchange ideas and challenge each other. Note that these relationships shouldn’t be restricted to people of the same gender or who have similar backgrounds—because there is so much that can be learned from those who are different from oneself.

Take some time to consider the “hard glue” and “soft glue” that can hold a successful program together:

- **The hard glue:**
  1. Define expectations. Both partners need to be very clear on what they want to accomplish.
  2. Agree on the rules. Each partner must be fully committed to the mentoring relationship with regular meetings and activities and to getting together at least monthly. Partners should agree to be cooperative and respectful.
- **The soft glue:**
  1. Willingness to learn. In a reverse mentoring relationship, both parties must genuinely want to learn from and share with the other.
  2. Mutual trust. The goal is to push the other outside of his or her comfort zone and try new ways of thinking, working, and being. Ideally, the pair will create a safe, risk-taking environment and maintain confidentiality.
  3. Transparency. Partners must be open with their feelings and with what they are thinking. They must be able to overcome differences in communication style and be open to seeing situations from different angles.

My research shows that the biggest dangers to any successful mentoring relationship are neglect (a lack of commitment, time, and energy), breaches of confidence, and the failure to understand culture and generational differences. As a reverse mentoring program is implemented, be on the lookout for these pitfalls.

Next month, part two of this series will outline a basic action plan for a reverse mentoring program.

**Thieffoldt** is co-founder of The Learning Cafe (thelarningcafe.net), a consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations develop, engage, and retain the talent of every generation. An accomplished workshop facilitator and engaging speaker, she has educated hundreds of managers on issues involving the multigenerational workplace. Reach her at tlc@thelarningcafe.net.

**Stories of success**

At Werner Electric in Cottage Grove, Minn., President Ben Granley has tapped into reverse mentoring in an effective yet informal way. Dustin Ranem, a Millennial delivery driver, regularly visits the marketing department to provide his perspective on the company’s social media presence and to give specific recommendations. In fact, when Granley was promoted to president, he asked Ranem to review his LinkedIn page and his social media presence and provide a list of recommended improvements.

“He has educated our entire organization about the power of social media, corrected some of our mistakes, and helped me out personally with Twitter chats and more,” said Granley.

At Milbank Manufacturing (milbankmfg.com), a small group started a reverse mentoring program in October 2012. "It’s gone well and I think we’ll learn a lot from each other," said Christine Henry Vetter, a Millennial-generation marketing specialist who is paired with the CEO. “My overarching goals are to gain a better understanding of how Milbank operates at a 30,000+ view, as well as to develop ways to make the company more multigeneration friendly.”

CEO Lavon Winkler wants to use the program to understand the dynamics of Millennials and how companies can create opportunities that are exciting for members of that generation.

The Milbank pairs have agreed to meet once a month during the first year of the DIY program. After this pilot period, the reverse mentoring program will be rolled out company-wide. —D.T.
Part one of this article, which ran in the January issue, outlined six benefits specific to reverse mentoring, along with a few high-level guidelines to consider when structuring such a program. Here, we continue with a basic plan of action. Remember, because this is a DIY project, keeping things simple is key—but it will be necessary to recruit one or more managers to oversee the program. This can be an informal role with fairly light responsibilities, which include:

Step 1: Define the goal(s). Many companies have straightforward objectives that range from simply creating positive work relationships among older and younger workers to more ambitious outcomes such as transferring technology savvy and new industry expertise or cross-training.

Also consider whether support of senior leadership will be needed to help the program succeed. If so, identify the key stakeholders and describe what their involvement will look like.

Step 2: Pair up mentors and partners. To a large extent, how participants are determined and paired will depend on specific goals and the needs of the individual and the company. When pairing, consider that personal chemistry is often overrated. Oftentimes the best matches are mismatches, which broaden the opportunities for growth for both participants.

As mentors are matched to students, consider the characteristics of each. Are they motivated to learn? Willing to be mentored by a younger colleague?

Step 3: Plan the launch. Host a two- to four-hour orientation meeting with all participants to kick off the program. The coordinator(s) can explain the definition and benefits of reverse

Mentoring from the bottom up, part 2: A basic plan of action
Five steps to a successful cross-generational mentoring program.

by Diane Thielfoldt
mentoring, introduce partners to each other, and go over goals and guidelines. This meeting should be a comfortable, informal forum for everyone to get grounded and organized. Pairs can begin to discuss their own goals and expectations.

If possible, give each pair some brief training on how to teach and learn and provide a planner that serves as a guide for the partnership. At minimum, describe a typical first meeting or activity that partners can use to get started (see the sidebar to the right). Tips regarding generational differences should also be covered. Caution everyone about stereotypes and perpetuating stale messages. Comments like “They don’t want to pay their dues” from tenured employees and “They’re stuck in the past” from newer employees will shut down reverse mentoring efforts before they start.

Close the meeting by outlining any logistics and details involved in checking progress of the partnerships.

**Step 4: Prioritize and persist.**
Follow-up and tracking are crucial to ensure the program is effective. For the first two months of a mentoring initiative, the program’s coordinator or sponsor should plan a pulse-check every two to three weeks to confirm that the guidelines and ground rules are still in place. After the first two months, scale back to a monthly check. Ask for participants’ feedback, focus on catching any problems early, and ask about successes. Remind each participant that you’re available for support.

How can you tell that the mentoring relationship is working? Look for the following success indicators:

- Are people taking the time to meet and work together?
- Are the partners satisfied with the progress?
- Are they benefiting from and enjoying the partnership?
- What ideas do they have to improve the program?

Many partners report that the most valuable part of a mentoring partnership is the opportunity to learn and stretch personally and professionally. Publish, share, and celebrate these successes.

**Step 5: Measure progress.**
Part of the plan should include means for evaluating the success of the program, including measuring and quantifying outcomes. The coordinator(s) should perform all monitoring of participating pairs (though help with evaluation may be necessary).

The evaluation might include questionnaires or surveys of participants, individual interviews, and/or observation of their meetings. You are seeking to measure some difficult-to-quantify outcomes, including individual attitude, behavior, and accomplishments.

If evaluations indicate that the program is not meeting its goals, be prepared to make some changes, retrain participants, or otherwise provide additional support to ensure the program’s success.

Reverse mentoring can be a winning situation for everyone involved. It can cement the loyalty, interest, and talents of Millennial team members, while more experienced employees will realize that opening up to new and different ideas will more effectively serve their clients and drive earnings. In other words, when fresh, unbiased perspectives are mixed with detailed knowledge and strategic skills, the results are innovation and increased employee engagement across the board.

**First meeting success**
The first meeting between mentor and partner is like sitting down to write a book and staring at a blank piece of paper. How do you get started? The answer in this case: by getting to know each other.

The mentor here—that is, the younger employee—takes the role of teacher. He or she can start the conversation by telling stories and encouraging his or her partner to tell stories, giving specific examples related to his or her personal and professional experiences. Here are some conversation starters to kick off meaningful conversations:

- **Open up:** What is something that most people don’t know about you?
- **Discuss strategies to balance work and personal life:** What have you learned that you could share? What compromises have you made?
- **Talk about your work and life experiences:** What have you done that was unusual or controversial? What experiences do you hope to have?
- **Discuss some mistakes you have made:** That you thought would have a negative impact on your career. How did you learn from them? What would you do differently?
- **Talk about the smartest decision you ever made—and why:** What did you learn that you’d like to apply to the future?
- **Discuss the legacy you are creating:** What kinds of things are you doing to pass along your expertise?
- **Share some of the best career advice you’ve received:** Why was it great and how have you put it into practice?

The formula for making a conversation comfortable and candid is actually pretty simple, but the results can be extraordinary. All that is really needed is curiosity and a willingness to be changed or stretched by another person’s experience.—D.T.