

Mentoring is traditionally perceived - and practiced - as having a one-way benefit, where younger employees gain valuable knowledge from older, more experienced colleagues. However, the value of differences between millennials and their preceding generations is increasingly being recognised, and there has been a growing need for leaders to learn from their less experienced colleagues. One way of doing this is through reverse mentorship.

The millennial myth

By 2025, millennials - individuals born between 1980 and 1995 - will make up 75 percent of the global workforce. With the relatively small population of Gen Xers and increasing retirement of baby boomers, they will also become the most available candidates to fill leadership gaps (Forbes, 2013).

But it's not simply the prevalence of millennials that makes them worthy of your attention.

You don't need to look hard to find criticisms surrounding millennials - they're spoiled, arrogant, and discontented. However, these myths are fading and employers are increasingly beginning to realise the immediate benefits this generation have to offer. Although the millennial voice can lack in business experience and seniority, it embodies many attitudes and motivations generally lacking at boardroom level but which are common in both customers and new recruits. Millennials have grown up during an era where advancing technology is part of daily life, communication is instant, change is constant, and collaboration is strived for. This way of seeing the world can be advantageous to leaders who have become out of touch with these growing trends and who are more comfortable with traditional methods of conducting business.

Fostering reverse mentorship relationships between millennials and senior leaders is one mutually beneficial way you can bring millennial thinking into your organisation. Not only do younger generations learn from older, more experienced ones, but older managers can learn from employees who 'come with fresh eyes, open minds, and instant links to the technology of our future' (Alan Webber, Co-founder of Fast Company).

**"In learning you will teach,
and in teaching you will learn."**

Phil Collins

So how do you get the most from reverse mentorship?

For meaningful and productive mentoring, both individuals need to be fully committed to learning and teaching. Here are a few ways to achieve a successful reverse mentorship:

1. Throw yourselves in at the deep end

Incorporating millennial working into an existing organisational culture is difficult to do purely through abstract thinking or research. The best way for businesses to adapt and evolve is by creating opportunities for millennial employees to be brought into real business discussions and decisions with business leaders. Don't simply invite them to shadow you - involve them. Your younger mentor may lack experience, but they can offer a fresh perspective.

2. Have authentic conversations

If you want to truly understand millennial thinking, take on the role of the Anthropologist in your organisation. Seek out ways to interact and connect with the millennials around you, but not just with focus groups or formal interviews. Instead, create

authentic relationships. Do this, and you will start to see things that have previously gone unnoticed by you and your colleagues. Look for someone you can have authentic conversations with, who you can explore ideas with, and who won't be afraid to give you honest feedback. Commit to meeting regularly, be open to new ideas, and challenge each other.

3. Look past your own doorstep

You may already have someone within your department or business function in mind as a potential reverse mentoring partner. That's great – and don't be afraid to reach out to them – but it can be worth looking outside of your own function as well. If you're worried about your millennial counterpart finding it difficult to provide honest feedback to someone they see as having authority over them, linking up with a millennial who has no direct reporting line to you can help remove some of the barriers to open dialogue.

4. Empower them and allow for career development

Research has shown that personal and career development is more important to millennials than salary, so try to provide them with opportunities to help you and build on their skills - not as onlookers but as partners in collaboration. If you want to move beyond simple reverse-mentorship, you could even consider creating a Millennial Board for your company: a group of high potential millennials your current leadership team can consult with or propose ideas to for review.

What are the results?

Reverse mentoring can have a huge impact on the entire organisation. Millennials gain valuable insight and knowledge that comes from their counterparts' decades of business experience, while the seasoned leaders absorb a lot of information about new technology, the latest best practices and fresh techniques for doing things. This helps both

parties be more productive individually, and helps to strengthen the relationships between them to create solid teamwork.



Conclusion

Incorporating millennials into your leadership structure allows for unexpected learnings for business veterans, as well as accelerating talent development by exposing the less experienced millennials to new considerations and ways of thinking. We should strive to create more of these mutually beneficial opportunities. It's low cost, low effort, with potential for big benefits. Can you think of anyone in your organisation you could develop a reverse mentoring relationship with?

About the author

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Mike is responsible for capturing and representing the voice of Insights' customers, and using it to enable customer-led improvements throughout the organisation. Before joining Insights in early 2013, he worked in a variety of customer insight roles for Tesco, focusing on driving improvements to their service and social media channels. Mike is passionate about enhancing the customer journey and engagement, and challenges himself to come up with innovative ways to make things easier and better for people at every opportunity.