

Turning the workplace tables: The power and significance of reverse mentoring

In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) business landscape, organisations increasingly recognise workplaces as not merely operational hubs but as complex ecosystems for lifelong learning.

Temps de lecture : minute

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The latest Gallup survey reports that 59% of individuals are “quiet quitting” in the workplace. They are in this position for a number of reasons, but one of the main ones is that they do not feel listened to. In addition, Better-up’s latest connection survey revealed that 69% of employees aren’t satisfied with the opportunities for connection inside the workplace, 52% want more connection at work and 38% don’t trust their coworkers. This is a really sad state of affairs especially as we spend the majority of our adult lives in the workplace. As leaders and colleagues, it is our duty to invest in our work relationships, so if we can contribute to a more inclusive workplace, why wouldn’t we?

Against this complex backdrop, the emergent practice of reverse mentoring stands out as a robust strategic asset for business transformation. It addresses key challenges while offering a multitude of benefits that extend from individual enrichment to organisational growth.

Reverse mentoring is when senior leaders are mentored by a person from an under-represented background (gender, age, ethnicity, disability ...). They become the novice and lean into their growth mindset to understand

their biases and drive change when it comes to equity.

Addressing multifaceted business challenges

Bridging generational gaps

The workplace of today can contain a mix of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z employees. This amalgamation of different age groups presents both challenges and opportunities. Reverse mentoring serves as a vital platform for multigenerational interaction. Younger employees can familiarize senior team members with digital tools, social media etiquette, and new models of work-life integration. Conversely, seasoned employees can provide mentorship on institutional memory, governance structures, and the intricacies of corporate diplomacy. This form of mentorship thereby acts as a catalyst for breaking down generational barriers and promotes a more cohesive, effective team.

Advancing gender equity

Gender equity remains an ongoing struggle in the corporate realm, despite the increasing spotlight and alignment with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Reverse mentoring can be an agile and effective tool for narrowing gender gaps. By facilitating frank dialogues between genders, this form of mentorship can tackle implicit biases head-on. It provides a safe space to address issues like gender-specific challenges, pay gaps, and the need for equitable representation in leadership roles.

Promoting ethnic and cultural representation

In a global business environment, the workforce is invariably multicultural. In such settings, cultural intelligence becomes as crucial as

technical skills or leadership ability. Reverse mentoring can act as a potent mechanism for cultural exchange. It can help in avoiding the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and promote a more inclusive world view. This is not merely about tolerance but about harnessing the rich tapestry of diverse cultural perspectives to drive innovation and problem-solving.

Navigating the gig economy

Freelancers, contractors, and gig workers are becoming an increasingly prevalent part of the workforce, challenging traditional notions of employment and commitment. Reverse mentoring can provide insight into this new model of work for those accustomed to more conventional structures. Those in the gig economy can offer lessons on flexibility, digital platforms, and self-branding, while receiving guidance on institutional loyalty and career development from full-time employees.

Incorporating AI and technological advancements

In an era where technology disrupts traditional business models, understanding and adaptation are key. Younger employees, who are often more natively fluent in digital technologies and artificial intelligence, can provide invaluable guidance. Through reverse mentoring, they can offer both operational and ethical frameworks for integrating new technologies into existing practices. Simultaneously, more experienced employees can provide a macro-level view, placing technological changes within a broader business context.

The Ripple Effect: Outcomes for leadership and organisations

Deep Connection with Diverse Individuals: Leaders often operate in echo chambers, surrounded by individuals who echo their own perspectives. Reverse mentoring can serve as an antidote, presenting leaders with

nuanced, first-hand experiences of those who come from different demographic backgrounds.

Catalyst for Employee Engagement: The implications of a successful reverse mentoring program are expansive. Insights gleaned and actions taken from these relationships can propagate through various organisational strata, enhancing overall engagement and well-being.

A Seat at the Leadership Table: Junior employees who serve as mentors gain a virtual seat at the leadership table, allowing for a democratization of decision-making processes. This leads to policies and strategies that are more comprehensive and less myopic.

Leadership Rejuvenation: Senior executives can become insulated from ground-level perspectives and challenges. Serving as a mentee can rejuvenate their leadership approach, making them more receptive to change and fostering a culture of continuous learning.

Holistic Policy Formulation: The more diverse the input, the more universally applicable the output. Including junior employees in policy discussions can lead to more inclusive and effective organisational directives.

Breaking Hierarchical Barriers: One of the intangible benefits of reverse mentoring is its ability to dismantle the bureaucratic barriers that can stifle innovation and employee satisfaction. Leaders who engage in this practice become more approachable, contributing to an organizational culture that prioritizes openness and transparency.

Reverse mentoring transcends its role as a personal development tool; it serves as a strategic lever capable of driving comprehensive organizational change. Through its multifaceted applications, it fosters an environment that is adaptive, inclusive, and perpetually evolving, positioning organizations to thrive in the complex business landscapes of

today and tomorrow.

Patrice Gordon is the founder of *Eminere*, which provides reverse mentoring and inclusive leadership programs, executive coaching and strategic business development. She is also the author of *Reverse Mentoring: Removing Barriers and Building Belonging in the Workplace*.

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