**Reverse Mentoring**

You know, of course, how useful mentoring can be to a young employee. Maybe you’ve even been a mentor yourself. But what you might not know is that these days, a colleague who is much younger than you can do a lot to help you get ahead at work and in your career.

This kind of supporter is called a “reverse mentor.” It's an employee in their 20s or 30s who teaches an older employee how to: stay on top of workplace technology, master social media, know what younger people are thinking and doing, understand emerging consumer cultures, consider unconventional methods to boost office morale, and keep job skills up to date. Although reverse mentoring first found its way into the corporate vocabulary about 15 years ago, the phenomenon has really taken off with the social media explosion. If you feel tentative about using Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook in your job, for instance, a reverse mentor can probably show you the ropes. They may even be able to help you use your iPhone beyond what you may know already. Perhaps “there is an app for that”. If you are in your 50s you may recall helping your parents program their VCR after you walked in and saw the display blinking 00:00:00. The same goes for today’s technology, where the younger employees may be savvier than you. If your reverse mentor does help you with your iPhone, make certain they let you drive and they navigate. Otherwise, you didn’t learn anything, you just let them program your iPhone.

I recall early in my career that my manager told me he knew he needed someone with computer skills but he had little intention of learning it himself, so he hired me. He stated that he knew he had a gap and he filled it, so that made him a good manager. Well, that was a few decades ago. In today’s world nearly all of us use technology and it is changing so quickly that it is hard to keep up with. If you are a smart manager, you now know there may be a gap so fill it with a reverse mentor.

**What a Reverse Mentor Can Do For You**

Reverse mentoring can be beneficial for you in several ways:

1. You can get advice and information that you wouldn’t receive from your usual sources. A younger person can introduce you to hipper audiences, trendy thinkers and ideas you might not know about.
2. You can get caught up on technology faster. Broadening your sources of information to include online databases and social media applications lets you stay in the know. If you’ve maxed out your Facebook friends list at 30, a reverse mentor can show you how to significantly expand your contacts. And, maybe even more importantly help you understand why you should expand.
3. You can work together to come up with new ideas. Reverse mentoring makes you more creative, especially about ways to reach younger consumers or market a new product or service online inexpensively.
4. Closes the knowledge gap for both parties: For example, older employees learn social media from the younger person and the younger person learns business terminology and industry practices from the older employee.
5. You can get energized, and so can your reverse mentor. Engaging with a younger mentor enriches your daily experience on the job and increases the sense of a shared dialogue in the office. Who knows it might even open your eyes and help you to discover that you are so far out of the loop you can't even see the loop.

**How to Do It Right**

Reverse mentoring isn’t a magic elixir to better pay or promotions. It’s easy to goof up in this type of unorthodox relationship. Follow these guidelines to make the most of a reverse-mentoring relationship:

* **Don’t let the tail wag the dog.** Get as much tactical feedback as possible from your young adviser, but be wary about letting a reverse mentor dictate work strategies you should employ. Strategy usually involves longer-term thinking that requires more experience in the workplace. It’s an area where some gray hair can come in handy.
* **Keep things work appropriate.** The under-30 crowd might be hip to tech trends, but they don’t always understand how to use social media in a business context.
* **Establish ground rules about privacy and confidentiality.** If you don’t, your mentor might end up blurting out to the world some of your personal information, pictures or even trade secrets. And although that picture of you boogieing at the company holiday party may be funny, it might not be something you want potential clients or customers to see.
* **Be careful not to let your mentor persuade you to take on excessive risks.** For instance, just because you can tweet provocatively doesn't mean you should. It is easy to be free with your statements under the cloak of anonymity, but that does not make it right or ethical.
* **Dissolve the barriers of status, power and position.** The key to success in reverse mentoring is the ability to create and maintain an attitude of openness. This requires the willingness to break down those hierarchical silos, and work with each other as peers versus supervisor and subordinate.
* **Be the driver, and let them navigate.** As noted earlier, letting your reverse mentor do the programming denies you the opportunity to learn. It is tempting for them to want to do it themselves or to get frustrated as they teach the “old dawg” new tricks. However, doing the driving yourself, not only helps you learn, it teaches them important skills such as patience and how to articulate processes that are almost subconscious to them.
* **Make a concerted effort to listen to and learn.** Yep, learning can be a two-way street. Younger, fresher eyes will see things differently than we will. Their insights might even be shocking, and if we can keep our egos in check, they could lead to powerful breakthroughs. The old idiom “out of the mouth of babes oft comes gems” has foundational truth.

**Where to get a Reverse Mentor**

If your organization doesn’t already have a reverse mentoring program, start one. Do a test run with some of your younger employees, or create internships for computer-savvy college students.

Also make certain to include your department IT group in your strategic sessions. By exposing this group to your strategic goals they can often inform you of techno-savvy ways to bring your goals to fruition. For example, once you have streamlined your work order process, and you are ready to gather more timely and meaningful data your IT group can help you with hand held mobile devices, effective software and thin client technology.

And if all else fails, try something that has worked for me; get tutored about current trends by asking your kids. Just be ready for potentially brutal honesty.

**The Future for Reverse Mentoring**

As employers look for ways to better manage their increasingly age-diverse workforce, reverse mentoring just might be the start of something big.

The practice could pave the way for a new standard of open dialogue in business stretching far beyond technology. Ideally, learning and information sharing would cross all lines of seniority and responsibility. Call it mutual mentoring.

After all, advancing yourself in today’s volatile economy is all about continuous learning. And what better way to learn than by creating a 360-degree dialogue with all generations?