

SmartBlog on Leadership

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Reverse mentoring: How young leaders can transform your organization

By [Joel Garfinkle](#) on January 21st, 2013

January is National Mentoring Month. Because you're probably already **familiar with the mentoring concept**, let's look at a relatively recent variation: reverse mentoring.

When your 5-year-old grandchild shows you how to tag a photo on Facebook, that's reverse mentoring.

According to **The Wall Street Journal**, the concept was introduced by former General Electric Chairman Jack Welch more than a decade ago. The practice continues to gain popularity as rapid advances in technology widen the generation gap in virtually every business. To put it simply, if you're in your 40s or 50s and beyond, the 20-somethings are more technologically savvy than you are, and you can learn a lot from them.

So let's take a look at some reverse-mentoring specifics. We'll discuss three requirements of a reverse mentorship and three benefits it can provide.

Three requirements:

1. Formalize the relationship
2. Cultivate mutual trust
3. Stay open to new ideas

Formalize the relationship. A good mentoring relationship seldom "just happens." It must be created. Both people need to be clear about their expectations — **what they want from the relationship** and what they expect to give in return. Ground rules should be clear, and putting them in writing works best. How often will the parties talk? What topics will be covered? What areas (if any) are off-limits?

Cultivate mutual trust. The mentorship should be a peer-to-peer relationship, with neither person playing a dominant role. A good reverse mentor relationship can bring different generations closer together. Stop operating in an "us versus them" mentality. It's a two-way street.

Stay open to new ideas. While the basic concept started with technology, it doesn't need to stop there. Older players can learn management techniques that will motivate young

workers, while younger people can find out how to **accelerate their climb up the corporate ladder**. Who knows? You might even end up discussing the virtues of French wines versus microbrews.

Three benefits:

1. Shortens the learning curve
2. Builds morale and productivity
3. Reveals future leaders

Shortens the learning curve. Could you learn how to maximize use of the apps on your iPad all by yourself? Probably. But if you spend an hour or so with a tech-savvy 20-something, you'll learn it much faster and you'll enjoy the process a lot more.

Builds morale and productivity. People love it when someone asks for their opinion or advice. When younger people feel that their knowledge and input is valued by senior management, they are motivated to do more and do it better. And senior managers can use their new knowledge to improve bottom-line results.

Reveals future leaders. Reverse mentoring lets junior employees see the larger corporate picture, giving them a glimpse of macro-level management issues. It also increases retention of Generation Y or Millennial employees. It increases multi-generational cooperation and reduces conflicts between age groups in the workplace.

Why not celebrate National Mentoring Month by starting your own reverse mentoring program?

***Joel Garfinkle** is the author of seven books, including **"Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level."** He has 17 years of executive-coaching experience, most recently helping a mid-level manager advance to senior manager in just two months. More than 10,000 people receive his Fulfillment@Work newsletter. Receive his e-book "41 Proven Strategies to Get Promoted Now" when you **subscribe**.*