

By C.S. "Bud" Kulesza, CMA, CFM, and Daniel Smith, CMA, CPA

Reverse Mentoring— Something for Everyone!

Reverse mentoring is particularly effective in a multigenerational workforce because it provides benefits to the mentor, the mentee, and the company.

If you haven't heard of reverse mentoring, it's exactly what it sounds like—a younger individual mentors someone older. Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, has often been credited with popularizing reverse mentoring. He believes, as many do, that "everyone in the organization brings something to the table." Mentoring typically involves an older, more experienced individual giving guidance and advice to a younger, less experienced individual. Reverse mentoring is more of a two-way street where both individuals mentor each other.

When discussing reverse mentoring, the two most common age groups to interact are Millennials and Baby Boomers. Both age groups span several decades and have similar population sizes, but that's where the similarity often ends.

Millennials are the current young professionals. Born in the 1980s and 1990s, they tend to be very technologically savvy, collaborative, embracing of networking, entrepreneurial, and able to multitask. Baby Boomers are the babies

of the late 1940s through the 1960s. Contrary to Millennials, Boomers are often intimidated by technology, and their

desire for personal fulfillment is often viewed as independence.

They focus on themselves more than others, and their focus often inhibits their ability to multitask.

The very idea of mentoring in general can often be difficult for a mentee because it connotes they have something to learn. This can be even more difficult for an older person when that individual realizes the knowledge being shared lies within someone younger.

Knowledge is best measured by experience rather than years. Time alone doesn't make someone more knowledgeable; learning does. Therefore, with an open mind, mentoring can be a vehicle for personal development for both the mentee and the mentor.

Benefits

Everyone benefits from the exchange of knowledge. Reverse mentoring in a multigenerational workforce will break down stereotypes, reduce conflicts, and lead to greater interaction among team members. Millennials, in particular, will receive greater insight into the organization from both

macro- and micromanagement perspectives. And all members of the team will experience the increased satisfaction of sharing their knowledge and learning from each other.

The most obvious example involves technology. Boomers generally consider technology to be an intimidating, necessary evil that they must master to stay current. The application of technology doesn't come easily to Boomers, who learned most of what they know by being shown or taught by someone else rather than through self-teaching. Even after mastering a concept, Boomers face the daunting challenges that come with continuous technological change. Millennials, however, have grown up surrounded by technology and like-minded individuals who are adept at teaching themselves how to use any application. They embrace new ways to employ technology, and the speed of technological changes is something a Millennial accepts, even seeks.

Because of the different learning styles and terminology, Millennials often have little concept of how to adequately explain to a Boomer how to use a new program or even website navigation. For Millennials to become effec-



tive leaders in a multigenerational workforce, however, they need to acquire teaching skills, and Boomers present a good training ground for developing those skills.

Leadership

Daniel—Bud and I view this point differently. I personally believe the crux of reverse mentoring is about leadership development. To me, one objective of reverse mentoring is to allow the junior mentor to feel comfortable as a leader. Bud feels this type of leadership development occurs mainly in traditional mentoring. In my experience, however, junior staff members with the greatest technical ability often won't consider themselves leadership material. An opportunity to mentor a veteran businessperson—to be viewed as a leader by another—can help Millennials to begin seeing themselves as leaders.

This leadership perception aspect of reverse mentoring is important for the ongoing human resource development of an organization. It creates a group of highly skilled young staffers aware of their own leadership potential, which sets the stage for truly successful, traditional leadership development programs in an organization later in their careers.

Furthermore, given the current business landscape, a Baby Boomer in a management position (or trying to earn one) needs to know how Millennials think and how to motivate them. The mentor-mentee relationship fosters a deep understanding between both parties. A Boomer mentee will understand the personality and driving factors of their Millennial mentor

in a way a regular mentee never could. As many Millennials elect the corporate career path, the individual who understands how to motivate them will be viewed as a valuable asset to the firm, providing justification for leadership positions and promotions.

Bud—While Daniel and I may have a difference of opinion as to where in the leadership toolbox reverse mentoring should be placed, we do agree that it's important to make certain it's in the toolbox. I have personally been a mentor as well as a mentee and have been (and continue to be) engaged in a reverse mentoring relationship. Mentoring is *not* a short-term relationship and shouldn't be confused with coaching. The scenario that Daniel describes seems to me to be more coaching than mentoring.

Because of the confidential nature of mentoring, most mentoring relationships aren't readily visible to those outside the mentoring relationship. As a result, there is no widespread recognition of who is involved and what's going on in the reverse mentoring process. Both parties are getting something out of the relationship and giving something into it. Whether it's leadership or technical skills, it is a win/win for developing individuals and the organization.

Because mentoring focuses on improving an individual's knowledge and skills, bosses don't always make the best mentors: Mentees may be reluctant to discuss relative weaknesses the boss may not be aware of. There are upsides to having someone other than your boss as your mentor, allowing

such discussion to take place more readily. This is especially true in reverse mentoring relationships where the confidentiality of what transpires within the relationship will allow for a freer exchange of knowledge and where the more-senior person is in the position of discussing his or her relative weaknesses. In a close working relationship between a boss and a subordinate, the increased knowledge of each other's shortcomings can often lead to work issues in addition to increased understandings.

As it relates to leadership, mentoring as either a mentor or a mentee comes with significant responsibilities that need to be agreed on by both parties. Mentoring does play an important role in the development of leaders—but not without access to programs and courses that provide an assessment of an individual's skills and identification of areas for improvement, coupled with a plan for gaining the knowledge and experience necessary to make those improvements. Leadership development requires a holistic approach of instruction and application. Giving someone the opportunity to do something without guidance and training can sometimes work, but it usually isn't as successful. Putting someone in a leadership role without guidance and training is like teaching someone how to swim by throwing them into the deep end of the pool.

Business Acumen and Politics

Daniel—Most of us have been told the best way to get ahead in business is through networking and increasing visibility. This face-to-face culture is how Boomers found

success and is what many Boomers currently emulate in their attempts for promotions and raises.

But this is beginning to change among young professionals. Contrast the Boomers' perception of face-to-face business culture to the culture of the Internet (in other words, the culture of Millennials), where everyone is largely faceless and ability is the only differentiating factor—any recognition is achieved mainly through skill and knowledge, not politicking.

This creates a cultural divide between Boomers and Millennials. Boomers assume the “go getter” attitude is exemplary of a great leader or leadership potential. Yet, as our organizations become more technical and more saturated with Millennials, a shift is occurring toward technical ability recognition instead of political ability. In fact, promotions based on people skills alone have the potential for disengagement among highly technical teams.

Bud—Whether we like it or not, business politics has been, is now, and forever will be an issue for employees to cope with. From the time of stone tablets to written letters to electronic communication, the combination of what a person knows and does with that knowledge has been the deciding factor as to whether or not that person advances in an organization. As a Boomer, I have noticed that individuals who haven't embraced change, company culture, and technology have been consistently overlooked for advancement. Skill and knowledge alone aren't enough. I'm not suggesting that an understanding of politics will

allow you to forgo skill and knowledge. I am saying that if you understand the political landscape of your environment, then you will be better positioned to address how you perform your job and to employ the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve results and success. Unlike some governmental jobs that are driven by test scores or longevity, what you know about your company's culture, as well as who you know, is important. People do matter, and the savvy Millennial knows that the faceless world of technology can be as big a negative as it is a positive. Millennials' use of technology to differentiate themselves from others, showcase their skills, highlight their results, and build relationships in targeted ways to different audiences will lead to success.

Most of us on the Internet are

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not faceless; some of us even have avatars to make ourselves into someone we would rather be viewed as. Skill plays a part in advancement, but the use of that skill in the application of technology to target the group you want to influence is business acumen and politics taken to a new level. Such application of technology has impacted everything from purchases to elections. The skill is in the application, not necessarily the message. In my perspective, it isn't much different from corporate politics, just a different medium.

Mutual Understanding

As Millennials advance into roles that can determine promotions, an understanding of what drives respect and recognition in Millennials is now vital for the career advancement of Baby Boomers. Furthermore, familiarity with the latest technology, be it social media or a new reporting software suite, is no longer a career enhancer; it's a requisite. Reverse mentoring provides a means to educate Baby Boomers on these topics and is a foundation of leadership development in Millennials.

Whether you are a Millennial or a Boomer, you have unique knowledge and skills that can be shared. While specific areas such as technology and organizational culture often are points of focus, our respect for each other and our ability to work together will ultimately come from the intergenerational interaction that increases our knowledge of each other. Consequently, all generations benefit as Boomers and Millennials leverage the skills of each other to

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maximize the effective use of technology and business acumen.

Fundamentally, an organization chooses to undertake programs such as reverse mentoring to increase its human capital. The time and resources invested in the program must pay positive returns in overall employee technical and leadership ability as well as retention and increased intergenerational interaction. For those organizations considering a reverse mentoring program, we hope this article has shown how reverse mentoring as a part of an overall leadership development strategy can develop the knowledge and skills of employees at all levels. For individuals, we encourage you to become part of a reverse mentoring program for the same reasons, even if your organization doesn't offer one. **SF**

C.S. "Bud" Kulesza, CMA, CFM, is the Dean Emeritus of the IMA® Leadership Academy and was named one of the top 100 most influential persons in accounting by Accounting Today. A former IMA Chair, he is a member of IMA's Austin Area Chapter. You can reach Bud at bud@budkulesza.com.

Daniel Smith, CMA, CPA, is a senior business intelligence strategist at JWT Advertising and a faculty member of the IMA Leadership Academy. He is also a member of IMA's Dallas Fort Worth Chapter. You can reach Daniel at daniel.smith@jwt.com.