

Going the way of reverse mentoring

Knowledge sharing is no longer a one-way street

Mentoring is not a new concept where organisational development initiatives are concerned. Many companies have put into place mentoring programmes, both formal and informal, to pass on experience and knowledge within the organisation.

However, recent technological advances and the revolution of communication using web 2.0 tools have prompted organisations to reassess existing mentoring models, other HR-related initiatives and even business processes. In response to such changes, organisations are turning to their younger, junior employees to spread technical expertise to their senior executives.

Spreading knowledge all around

Information sharing is essential in a knowledge-based economy. As businesses evolve with the changing landscape and technology, companies are more aware that knowledge no longer comes from traditional sources. The main goal for any organisation should be to utilise knowledge within to its full advantage.

Reverse technology becomes an effective and integral tool of an organisation's training and development programme. While traditional concept of mentoring involves a more senior executive sharing knowledge and experience with a junior executive, reverse mentoring – as it suggests – sees junior staff teaching the “old dogs” new tricks.

Embracing reverse mentoring

Like most corporate initiatives, proper planning is required to ensure the success of a reverse mentoring programme. At the foremost, defined targets and goals must be set, and these clearly communicated to and understood by participants involved. A structured curriculum could be implemented to encourage employees to participate without being compelled to skip session due to an overwhelming workload. In this case, a mutually accepted arrangement is best.

The programme, whether conducted informally or formally, should be documented and measured for effective assessment. On HR's part, a set up of performance indicators ensure relevant issues are monitored, addressed and revised. Most importantly, the programme is supported by top management and line managers.

And in any mentoring programme, mentors should be patient while mentees should check their egos at the door, and be open-minded. It is a mentor-mentee relationship that may take time to adjust. Nevertheless, reverse mentoring is a mutual learning experience where each is able to leverage off one another's knowledge and skills.

The best of reverse mentoring

While reverse mentoring is commonly applied in organisations where technology is a fundamental part of the work environment – Jack Welsh, former CEO of General Electric first used reverse mentoring to train his managers and himself in the ways of technology – it is also relevant and, at the same time, beneficial to many other organisation initiatives.

It sends a strong message to potential employees that they are valued and that management or senior employees are willing to listen to younger staff. It indicates to senior executives the organisation remains committed in their professional development.

In addition, reverse mentoring demonstrates that the company values diversity. This encourages alternative perspectives from younger and less experienced staff, which can help improve business processes and drive innovation.

In essence, reverse mentoring is a powerful talent attraction and retention tool; it promotes employee engagement and advocates workplace diversity. It cultivates and strengthens workplace relationships, enhancing workplace dynamics where employees acknowledge the roles each play in one another's success.

This article is contributed by Mr Josh Goh, Assistant Director, Corporate Services, GSI Executive Search.

