



Management Mentors November 6, 2014

Reverse Mentoring & Managing Generational Diversity in the Workplace

Like Share 6 Email Article Tweet 2 +1 0 in Share 4

When most of us hear the word *diversity* we think in terms of nationality, race, and gender. But managing diversity in the workplace can—and should—delve even deeper to include the diversity between generations.

Creating one-on-one relationships can help to foster positive attitudes and manage **generational diversity**. A recent article by Leslie Kwoh for WSJ.com [More Firms Bow to Generation Y's Demands](#) highlighted some of the current viewpoints between two generations in the workplace—Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and Millennials (born in the 1980's and 1990's). Kwoh's research suggests that there are noticeably more companies who are modifying their culture to please the younger generation but those modifications require sensitivity to the boomers for generational harmony.



Kwoh says Millennials bring fresh skills and are typically "tech-savvy, racially diverse, socially interconnected and collaborative." Boomers, on the other hand, typically bring experience, best practices, and a long history of work ethics to the table.

A couple of examples of **problems that exist bi-generationally in the workplace** include:

- Millennials are asking for (and getting!) flexible work hours, higher pay, and quick promotions. Boomers feel they have climbed through the ranks and put in their due diligence and are confused and even angered by the fast track of the Millennials' success.
- Millennials don't understand and don't always appreciate the relentless hours and dedication that the Boomers have devoted to the success of their careers and the business. Often times, the Millennials don't know what they don't know.

These types of problems can create a **disconnect between generations**. If not properly managed, hostility may ensue, **ultimately affecting the company's bottom line**.

So how should companies maximize and manage the generational diversity in the workplace? **Reverse Mentoring** is one solution.

The skill sets and experiences that each generation offers a company can actually help to create a harmonious work environment as long as each generation is able to understand and appreciate the other. Reverse mentoring is a tool that many companies use today to develop talent between generations and to develop unity as well. There is a huge amount of **knowledge transfer** that can take place across generations such as the utilization of social media (Millennials) and business best practices (Boomers).

Reverse mentoring will allow pairs to meet in a non-hostile, common-ground environment. Lisa Quast of Forbes.com says the keys to a successful reverse mentoring relationship are:

- **Defined expectations:** Each party needs to be very clear on their expectations.
- **Agreed-upon rules:** Each party must be fully committed to the mentoring relationship and agree upon the rules that will be followed.
- **Willingness to learn:** In a reverse mentoring relationship, both parties act in the capacity of a mentor as well as a mentee; so they must both "genuinely want to learn from and share with the other."
- **Trust:** Reverse mentoring requires the trust of each party. The goal is to "push one another outside of their comfort zones and try new ways of thinking, working and being."
- **Transparency:** Both parties must be open with their feelings and with what they are thinking. They must be able to overcome differences in communication style (since different generations communicate differently) and be open to seeing situations from different angles.

Quast also says a reverse mentoring program:

- 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.
- Empowers emerging and established leaders.

[-Lisa Quast, Forbes.com, Reverse Mentoring: What It Is And Why It Is Beneficial](#)

Managing generational diversity in the workplace using a reverse mentoring program is a solution that many companies are already using including [GE](#), [Hewlett Packard](#), and [Cisco Systems](#). Reverse mentoring can be introduced to an organization as a [stand-alone mentoring program](#), or it can be introduced as part of a [mentoring program](#) that is already in place.

