

# A Study on Dynamic Model of Reverse Mentoring at Workplace – Conceptual Study

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## Abstract

“In learning you will teach, and in teaching you will learn.” - Phil Collins. In today’s globalized world, every organization wants to move ahead of its competitor. For this purpose, organizations want to develop smart human resource inventory. Considering Human Resource Development viewpoint, reverse mentoring helps in personal development of employees. It is an exceptional means for making an efficient milieu in place of work where exchange of new and old thoughts could guide an incomparable organizational development. With rapidly changing technology, consumer preferences are also changing. So, every organization wants to be brought up to date consumer’s behavioral pattern. To identify and learn the customer preferences, a company can undergo a reverse mentoring program; in which a customer can act as a source of information to the company’s marketing team. This paper highlights the role of reverse mentoring in marketing and human resource management. This study also discusses the points that are important for successful reverse mentoring. Future research in this direction suggests studying the concept of reverse mentoring empirically in manufacturing organizations. Also, future research can conduct a comparative study of reverse mentoring in low and high-power distance cultures.

*Keywords: Reverse Mentoring, Learning, Marketing, Organizational Development*

## 1. Introduction

“The world belongs to those who think and act with it, who keeps a finger on its pulse.”-William R. Inge (1860 – 1954). The senior managers, who are more experienced and make most of the decisions in organizations often experience a state of ego defensiveness in learning from new employees as it is against the conventional office practices, where only senior managers provide mentorship to newer and less experienced employees (Artinger et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the dynamic advancement in knowledge, expertise and technology has upturned this reason in some workplaces, where experienced employees though possess experience and knowledge, except deficient in good skills about newer technologies (Lancaster, 2019). In businesses that depend highly on technology like IT, Telecommunication etc., reverse-mentoring is a helpful tool to make older employees more convenient with the areas which are highly integrated with computers and internet (Jammulamadaka, 2020). For young generation, dealing with new technology is an easy game as they are so indulged in it right from their birth (Luttrel & McGrath, 2021).

Companies with large numbers of boomers and millennial see Reverse mentoring to bridge the generation gap and create a two-way exchange of knowledge. Reverse mentoring also increases retention of Gen Y employees and gives senior executives the satisfaction of sharing their knowledge with the next generation. It increases multi-generational engagement and helps reduce conflicts between generations in the workplace. The paper seeks to discuss reverse mentoring as a marketing strategy and a HR tool (Alkadash, & Shahid, 2017).

This paper discuss the business cases highlighting reverse mentoring as a marketing strategy and HR tool in organizations in order to identify the important points for implementing successful reverse mentoring program in organizations.

The study is exploratory conceptual paper that based on the analysis of the literature review to reveal the existing knowledge in the research are.

## 2. The Concept of Reverse Mentoring

Reverse mentoring refers to an initiative in which older executives are paired with and mentored by younger employees on topics such as technology, social media and current trends (Tiwari et al., 2019). Although mentoring is considered as the most valuable career growth way for new employees, research has proved that that only twenty percent of companies

provide proper mentoring program (Chaudhuri et al., 2021). This is need of the hour, especially for today's turbulent business environment where technology up gradation is so fast; organizations need to develop learning partnerships so that through knowledge sharing committed and talented employees could be transformed into future leaders. This means that while team building, a new agenda of mentorship and knowledge sharing has to be set up, where both new and old ideas could mingle up to produce highly effectual results (Chaudhuri et al., 2021).

Sometimes, older managers have to face disgrace on account of mentored by younger employees as very few accept it as a prospect of give and take, where both old and newer groups develop themselves resulting in better communication, acceptance and cooperation in the workplace. This two-way development can be considered as an ideal mentorship program for an organization (Browne, 2021; Nakagome et al., 2020).

The former CEO of General Electric, Jack Welch, is ascribed with conceiving the theory of reverse mentoring. He defined the concept as professional friendship, between junior and senior, in which they exchange skills, knowledge and understanding (Chaudhuri et al., 2021; Tiwari et al., 2019). Conventionally, a mentor is predicted to be more senior and experienced than his or her mentee. Conversely, reverse mentoring identifies that skills gaps exists on both the parts, and that both ends can overcome their limitations with the facilitation of the other's potency. For instance, a younger employee can give assistance of advanced skills and knowledge up to the senior employees and in return someone older can become his career mentor or idol (Browne, 2021).

From employer's perspective, reverse mentoring has its own benefits. It can address the most important issue of today's industry i.e., Employee Retention, every business organization wants to attract, retain, endorse trained and talented workforce which constitutes mostly the Millennial generation (born between 1977 and 1998) —an indispensable part for any radical thought process of business organizations (Browne, 2021; Nakagome et al., 2020). Following are few advantages of reverse mentoring:

1. Reverse mentoring is a helpful tool in attracting; retaining and promoting employees for an organization as it develops mutual exchange of knowledge, enabling managers to understand the needs of younger employees required for advancement in their career congruent with the benefit of the organization.
2. It deploys both young and senior employees in a cooperative relationship which is beneficial for organizational development.
3. It allows senior employees to learn afresh and be up-to-date as reputable leaders.
4. It brings closed cultured, tall, structured organizations together to cross all the barriers and have open access to knowledge for all.
5. It bridges the knowledge gap between junior and senior employees.
6. It generates new and innovative ideas in all spheres of the company.

### **3. Previous Studies in Reverse Mentoring**

Mentoring is a famous concept used in all spheres of life. The notion of mentoring is discussed and tested empirically by many researchers. In a study conducted by Brcic and Mihelic (2015) claimed that to share knowledge, the establishment of relationship between mentor and mentees is important.

According to the study, mentoring is not just an activity but a bond between two generations who differ in terms of perception, ideas, thinking and experiences. Mentoring process helps the mentor and mentee to understand each other in a better way and produce best results.

Hays and Swanson (2012) expanded the frontiers of mentoring and considered it not only an association between seniors and their subordinates, but an exchange and a bond between colleagues, family, members of any society or group, spouses and so on; in which one party may advice/counsel/suggest another on available options. The study also highlighted that the mentoring process conducted in a formal manner gives better results as compared to an informal mentoring process as the former follows meticulous planning and action.

The traditional view of mentoring considers the older generation (seniors) on the supplier side while the young generation (juniors) on the recipient side. But as the world is witnessing advanced and rapid change in technology, the concept of Reverse Mentoring is gaining popularity as it makes change process better in view of new perspectives. In present situation of pandemic, virtual and hybrid working structures has gained tremendous popularity. In such scenario, it has been observed that tech savvy employees, tech savvy consumers, tech savvy learners by far endured in their respective spheres. Miao, Lu. (2021). The knowledge of new tools and techniques is imperative. Reverse mentoring in present situation of pandemic has brought new pedagogy of learning in which the young generation is committed to make the older generation learn new technology and, in the process, older generation is also engaged.

Chaudhuri, S. , Ghosh, R. (2012) called reverse mentoring as a tool which helps the two generations to pass on the best knowledge, they have for each other irrespective of their positions. In order to be aligned with fast changing technological environment, it is important to make individual learning robust in all spheres of life. The concept of Reverse Mentoring was first coined by Jack Welch (the former CEO of General Electric), as he realized that the company

executives are not technologically updated. He called for a unique mentoring program for 600 executives, in which the younger workers exchange knowledge with the senior executives (Hays & Swanson, 2012).

Cai (2014) discussed various sides of mentoring process like supervision, counseling, coaching etc. which directly or indirectly benefit mentors in long run. Mentoring process helps the mentor to develop his personality traits, social skills, and leadership abilities. It is not only the mentee, but the mentors also grow in the process of mentoring. Various research studies have proved that Mentoring process bring positive effect on organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior and satisfaction.

Gugercin (2017) also advocated that the need of technological expansion has made the need of reverse mentoring more evident. Traditional mentoring process can no longer generate effectiveness alone instead reverse mentoring program allows tech savvy younger employees to proffer their important technological knowhow to the senior generation. Undoubtedly, the tech savvy younger employees are more comfortable with the new technology, social media, sophisticated equipment, and the new digital world. This is the reason; they are making great contribution in Reverse Mentoring.

Chen (2013) in his study mentioned features of new business world as more global and younger workforce, flat structures, diversity, innovative industries, rapid change in consumer preferences affecting the mentoring process. These characteristics mandate the role of reverse mentoring not only in the field of technology but also in human resources and marketing. Consumers do participate in mentoring process of new product development and younger employees are called as technology mentors to their senior members.

According to Chaudhuri and Ghosh (2012), millennial is gaining more confidence and recognition by mentoring high positioned Boomers who have more power and influence. The process of Reverse Mentoring in this case generates better understanding and respect between the two generations.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1. Reverse Mentoring as a Marketing Strategy

Innovative ideas lead a business to the way of success. Diversity for a business unit not only means to have a diverse line of employees; but it also means having a range of target population with their choice of products. A business unit has to ensure that what are the need as well as choice of customers, because customer’s voice narrates the success story of a business unit. Employees and Customers are equally important for a business unit. If innovative ideas generated by employees leads to organizational development, in same way customers views and suggestions also makes the company’s product perfect and the best. So, both perspectives ensure success of a business unit.

There are number of examples when reverse mentoring by marketing teams has played a vital task in learning the buying behavior of different generation groups. Marketing teams underwent such reverse mentoring program to make the product as per consumers need and proves to be a hit. As we know, Generations are categorized as - baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), Generation Y (born between 1980 and 2000) and Generation Z (born after 2000). Knowing choice of these generation groups is an important part of marketing research teams of all business units. As these generation groups’ associates to different social and cultural states, differing in thoughts, perceptions, attitudes; so, difference in buying behavior also exist.

Procter & Gamble has viewed and applied reverse mentoring, as a marketing strategy. According to Procter & Gamble consumers are not only who generate income for them, but it views customers as important sources of information also. Procter & Gamble conducted research and listened to consumers suggestions so that they could produce products that meet their needs as well as choice. For instance, when Procter & Gamble decided to launch a razor in Indian market, it sent its marketing research team to India to survey Indian target population to know their need and choice. It helped Procter & Gamble to get direct information about the choice of Indian men, which helped Procter & Gamble to incorporate the suggestions gathered by the marketing research team and thus develop highly successful product - Gillette Guard.

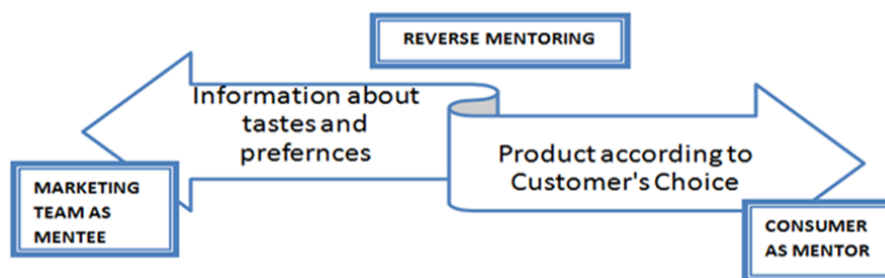


Fig. 1. Reverse Mentoring as a Marketing Strategy

Thus, as a marketing tool reverse mentoring is very useful, different outlooks in the company as well as outside the company are important. So, companies can view customers as vital source of information by tapping the customers' suggestions. Procter & Gamble used virtual models during research, thus enabling them to incorporate changes at once into the design as per suggestions. It enabled two-way communications between Procter & Gamble's marketing team and customers to get a strong hold on the target population's need and choice to develop best product.

Procter & Gamble has launched a program named Connect + Develop program, which enable anyone from anywhere to give ideas and suggestions through Web. This program has practically worked and resulted to 42 percent of Procter & Gamble new products in last decade.

Reverse mentoring program has also been successfully implemented by Airtel few years back. In Airtel, younger employees are helping senior managers to learn about the mobile phone's data consumption and other smart technology. Younger employees are master's in it as per their interest areas. Thus, enabling company to know what the choice of today's youth Airtel leaders proactively collaborates with junior employees to discuss the features to be added so that young customers could be targeted. Junior employees are helping senior managers understand and share direct insights about younger target population.

In the same way, Nestle used reverse mentoring to tap the customer's choice. According to Nestlé's CEO, reverse mentoring is not only understanding the digital world it is also understanding different perspectives from different generations.

Most companies understand the importance of improving customer experience. Without customers, companies could not even be in business. Customers are central to everything company does. But too few companies are making customer experience a key factor in planning their marketing campaigns. It originates the role of reverse mentoring in success of an organization. To see customer as a valuable source of information can generate revenues as well as customer loyalty for a company.

#### 4.2. Reverse Mentoring as an HR Tool

Diversity of thought is critical to both service improvement and innovation. The power of diversity guards against group think, promotes innovation, and helps organization understand how people think and be their authentic selves. When valued, thought diversity demonstrates real benefits for people. There is a lot of evidence for it, but it is not always embraced.

India is considered as a young nation because its more than 50 per cent population is below the age of 25 and more than 65 per cent below the age of 35, so the traditional concept of mentorship do not fit for India to be successful. As, population is becoming younger, it becomes important for companies to stand out the supplies of young India.

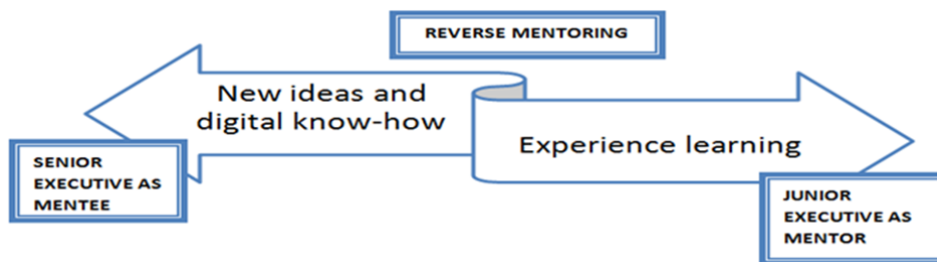


Fig. 2. Reverse Mentoring as an HR Tool

In highly technology savvy companies, to enhance technical know-how and innovative ideas, reverse mentoring is most suitable. Also new ideas in the field of marketing and HR, reverse mentoring is essential as it bridges the knowledge gap effectively. Team building can get an advanced intervention called reverse mentoring for organizational development, because when a people-savvy manager is paired with a technology-savvy associate, everyone can benefit.

A successful reverse mentoring program is a "win-win" situation for all in the organization. The junior employee gains valuable insight in areas of expertise from the experienced senior person. In return, the senior employee witness direct know-how by working with technically sound junior employee. Procter & Gamble, Airtel, General Electric Motors, Nestle has successfully implemented a reverse mentoring program, which allows employees from all levels and departments to serve as mentors to the company's leaders.

Different generation patterns in an organization also results in diverse workforce. Reverse Mentoring is a great HR tool for all age groups. Traditionally, the flow of information is top to bottom. But there is another flow too where learning moves from bottom to top, in reverse mentoring.

### 4.3. Reverse Mentoring Success Mantras

- Eager to Learn – As there is no age bar for learning. In a reverse mentoring relationship, both younger and senior person should be enthusiastic enough to learn. They must respect each other's know-how.
- Target setting – Both parties should be clear about the learning agenda. What they expect from each other i.e., what they want to learn must be clear right from the beginning so that skill gap could be covered up.
- Openness – Both mentor and mentee should be open enough to communicate with each other. Any communication gap may block the learning process.
- Trust – Both parties must have mutual trust to take sufficient risk to get into an innovative idea, so confidence on each other is very important to build a strong relationship.
- Knowledge of all spheres – Not only technological know-how is idea of exchange, but every sphere has to be touched like Economics, Marketing etc.
- Celebrate the success – All the set targets when achieved should be communicated officially so that reverse mentoring could get equal importance as like any other traditional mentoring program.

## 5. Conclusion

Learning is an ongoing and enduring process. There is no age bar for learning. As technology is continuously changing and subject knowledge is being updated; the process of learning provides the opportunity to expand skills and deepen understanding of various subjects. Today every organization is working hard to better manage their workforce and tapping their customer base. In this research paper both these challenges are addressed via reverse mentoring program. To attain, retain and develop diverse workforce, Reverse Mentoring can act as a HR tool ant to tap the target population, it can act as a marketing strategy. In today's turbulent environment, reverse mentoring can act as a difference for any organization to meet the success. Exchange of ideas always results to be fruitful so, reverse mentoring is an effective way to learn by developing a 360-degree communication with all generations.

## 6. Directions for Future Research

Future research in this direction suggests studying the concept of reverse mentoring empirically in manufacturing organizations. Also, future research can conduct a comparative study of reverse mentoring in low and high-power distance cultures. In a high-power distance culture, there is resistance in the process of reverse mentoring. As the older generation tends to remain in status quo and indulge in ego defensiveness rather than learning process.

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