

Reversing the roles: Why Gen Ys can make great mentors

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Gen Ys are more pundits than protégés. They have grown up in an online world in which it is normal to upload information, distribute knowledge and share opinions. They come into workplaces with the moniker of being “scary smart” and often have more post-secondary education than previous generations. Even if they have not attended school, their skill sets are developed to a level higher than previous generations at the same age.

Learning from a more junior person may be a foreign concept for many leaders and colleagues. Traditionally, mentoring has been viewed as a mechanism by which a more experienced (usually older) employee passes on knowledge and expertise to a less experienced (usually younger) employee. But the roles are reversing and younger employees have become valuable mentors, able to pass on knowledge and expertise.

There are many relevant skills Gen Ys (defined as age nine to 28) bring to the workplace. Not surprisingly, their technical skills as a generation surpass any other generational cohort. Many Gen Ys can teach older generations how to use software or hardware (such as PDAs, Blackberrys or iPhones) more efficiently. As a generation born with a laptop in the house, Gen Ys instinctively know how to maximize or re-program technology and business leaders can, and should, harness this ability.

Gen Ys also tend to question assumptions and have the ability to shed light on ever-evolving consumer marketplaces. They see the world, and how things work within it, through a different lens than Gen Xers (age 29 to 44), baby boomers (age 45 to 63) and traditionalists (age 64 to 87).

Gen Ys can be both refreshing and critical to the success of a business, says Mark Ferrier, founding partner of Traffikgroup, a Toronto-based marketing and promotions company, who says he continuously learns from his younger colleagues. They challenge him, he says, to question how he looks at the relationship between what marketers

believe consumers do versus what they actually do — there is a reason why Gen Ys are often called “Generation Why.”

Fresh perspectives on old processes

Whether it is through a formal mentoring program or an informal working relationship, Gen Ys can provide a different outlook. A senior leader at a chartered bank, for example, was amazed at how much value summer interns brought to the business once their strengths were properly channeled. While completing summer projects, some of the Gen-Y groups presented fresh perspectives on the bank’s customers, products and services. While not all of the recommendations were implemented, the leader realized these younger workers had a great grasp of the business and customer needs, despite their lack of experience.

The notion of mentoring also works colleague to colleague. A baby boomer team member, for example, can enjoy working with younger colleagues because they bring high energy and new ideas to the table. Breaking moulds and old habits can also improve processes.

Historically, mentoring was viewed as a way to shape, guide and even mould an employee into an image of the “ideal.” This hierarchical relationship, spearheaded by traditionalists, became the standard by which subsequent generations were mentored. Baby boomers, who were mentored by traditionalists, had to comply and work hard to be accepted by their mentor to move up the organizational ladder. Baby boomers may now try to use this form of mentoring with Gen Xers and Gen Ys, but this often fails because these two generations opt out of programs that are not designed to focus on their interests and needs.

Dealing with resistance

Gen Xers don’t want to emulate their mentors and Gen Ys believe their mentors should emulate them. They expect a mentoring relationship to focus on their learning needs, not on the mentor’s teaching desires. For both generations, it is imperative to create a successful mentoring relationship based on two-way respect.

Sometimes, the experienced generations are reluctant to accept the notion younger generations have anything to offer. As one engineer said to his colleague, “I have socks older than you.” To overcome this reluctance, HR professionals and leaders should raise awareness of the skill sets younger colleagues can bring to the table. They can also highlight examples of informal reverse-mentoring successes. For example, ask colleagues what they have learned from their children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren to demonstrate that, even outside of work, they frequently learn from younger generations.

It’s also important to point out age discrimination can happen in all directions: People shouldn’t make assumptions about the older or younger generations. Ultimately, for mentoring to work, both parties need to focus on building a productive relationship.

Building a great relationship

Below are a few tips for building a great mentoring relationship:

- Allow parties to opt in or out of the relationship with no undue hardships or consequences.
- Create a process by which mentors and mentees select each other.
- Provide each party with guidance as to how they can build a successful relationship.
- Focus on what the mentee wants to learn rather than what the organization or the mentor wants to teach.

Reverse mentoring allows all four generations to interact and learn from each other. Organizations that actively promote this form of mentoring may find increasing numbers of traditionalists, baby boomers and Gen Xers wish to participate as mentees. And, as an added bonus, Gen Ys will be engaged early on as successful contributors to the business.

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