

Reverse Mentoring And The Intergenerational Process Of Developing Leaders

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Abstract:

Background: Mentoring processes, in their most classic sense, involve the exchange of knowledge and experience, building the awareness and competences of the mentee, the person implementing the development process. In its traditional form, mentoring as a form of support typically focuses on a narrow field and the specific professional competencies associated with it. In this dimension, the collaboration involves, on one side, an experienced person (employee, leader), usually with more seniority and business maturity, and on the other, a typically younger employee whose level of knowledge and experience requires support at a given career stage. This study aims to analyze the essence and benefits of reverse mentoring in the context of developing young leaders.

Materials and methods: This article is conceptual and synthesizing in nature, aiming to systematize knowledge about the importance of reverse mentoring in developing young leaders and to develop recommendations for management practitioners. The study utilizes a narrative literature review.

Results: The results of the literature review indicate that the use of reverse mentoring in organizations can be important for shaping specific attitudes and behaviors in the context of developing young leaders.

Conclusion: Reverse mentoring is a valuable tool for developing young leaders and can be effectively utilized in the context of Generation Z employees transitioning into management.

Keywords: reverse mentoring, mentoring, diversity, leadership development, generation Z

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I. Introduction

The concept of mentoring draws its roots from Homer's *Odyssey*, where Odysseus, before setting off to fight the Trojan War, entrusted the education of his son to a friend called Mentor. In contrast, the ancient Chinese perspective (bai-shi-xui-yi, a bow to a master to learn) assumes that mentors are responsible for instilling knowledge, skills, and values in students, acting as their guides (Chen, 2013). Contemporary mentoring is defined as a multifaceted, complex relationship between senior and junior professionals. In its most positive dimension, if effective, it serves to strengthen and expand the qualities inherent in professional development (Barondess, 1997). Mentoring as a relationship is viewed as a journey that involves building a relationship based on equality, characterized by trust, knowledge sharing, moral support, and the ability to help (Awaya, McEwan, et al., 2003).

Mentoring is often equated with the word "coaching" (Cranwell-Ward, Bossons, et.al., 2004), so it's important to understand the differences between the two processes, which are difficult to consider entirely identical. Nevertheless, in the context of both terms, it should be assumed that these are developmental relationships based on learning, building awareness, realizing aspirations, and ultimately maximizing potential and achieving personal results (Jones & Smith, 2025; cited in: Garvey & Stokes, 2022; Jones & Smith, 2022). In the case of coaching, the coach promotes independent learning and discovery, and in this respect, specialist knowledge is not required from the person participating in the process. The coach's role is to stimulate awareness and reflection in the student through questions, but not to immediately provide answers. In the coaching process, the focus is on listening rather than just speaking. It's about building a space based on curiosity and confidentiality, but without judgment (Mand, Santen, et.al., 2025). Mentoring, in turn, is based on engaging in processes that support the "mentee" in professional or personal matters – developing skills, building self-confidence, or career planning. The mentor typically possesses specialized knowledge because they have already walked a similar path. In this respect, it is assumed that their role is to share knowledge and experience (Mand, Santen, et.al., 2025).

Currently, the idea of reverse mentoring, in which the roles of the participants are reversed, is gaining traction. In reverse mentoring, unlike in traditional mentoring, it is assumed that older and more experienced individuals don't teach and guide younger ones, but rather the exact opposite occurs. In this perspective, representatives of younger generations, including Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2009) and, in the future, Generation Alpha (born after 2010), are becoming a support for experienced individuals with established professional positions. Based on a literature review, this paper analyzes the essence and benefits of reverse

mentoring in the context of developing young leaders, assuming that the development of their potential is also possible when they fulfill roles that are not traditionally assigned to their age.

II. Reverse Mentoring – Essence And Definition

Reverse mentoring is viewed as an innovative approach to support learning processes and foster intergenerational relationships. Its concept focuses on connecting younger employees, serving as mentors, with older ones. The primary goal is knowledge sharing, but the mentors' leadership development is also crucial. The opportunity for individual interaction with senior management allows younger employees to develop a more sophisticated and strategic perspective on the organization (Marcinkus Murphy, 2012).

The benefits of such development processes should be considered mutual – they provide older employees with the opportunity to learn a new, different perspective related to, among other things, new technologies or the digital world, and subsequently develop competencies in these areas, while younger employees have the opportunity to learn and understand the organization at a strategic level. This is why, due to the mutual influence, reverse mentoring is sometimes referred to as reciprocal mentoring. The term reverse mentoring is generally understood to reflect the idea that individuals in high-ranking or powerful positions receive support in a metaphorical "regression" in their thinking so they can move forward more consciously and inclusively (learning and unlearning). To be effective, reverse mentoring requires breaking down the typical power dynamics inherent in more traditional mentoring (O'Connor, Barraclough, et al., 2025).

Research indicates that reverse mentoring can offer benefits not only to the individuals involved in the relationship but also to the entire organization. In this context, it can be an important tool for knowledge sharing, building engagement, developing leadership, and, most importantly, building intergenerational relationships based on mutual acceptance. Research analysis indicates that the effectiveness of the process depends not only on the level of commitment to the relationship but also on the level of organizational support, i.e., the commitment of the management team itself (Gadomska-Lila, 2020).

In contemporary business, reverse mentoring is a strategic tool that not only facilitates knowledge transfer but also bridges generational gaps between employees. Research indicates that Generation Z, through their technological competencies, flexibility, and digital skills, contributes to building intergenerational collaboration and promoting a culture of continuous learning in organizations (Venugopal, Gopalakrishna, et al., 2025). Technological competences, so frequently emphasized in the literature, constitute just one element of the knowledge that younger generations can share and with which they are most often identified. Meanwhile, in the context of younger generations, attention should also be paid to a certain "freshness of mind," flexibility in perceiving and experiencing reality, and the courage to adopt specific attitudes and behaviors that are often truly aligned with their values, beliefs, and expectations. What may pose challenges for older generations, including Generation X and Baby Boomers, is often not burdened by the same number of barriers in the behavior and activities of younger generations, for whom naturalness, openness, creativity, and ultimately the courage to express themselves are inherent to their way of functioning in the world. In this context, a specific approach to learning, and above all, broadly understood change in the professional or personal dimension, can largely be based on what young generations consider a natural element of contemporary action, thus signifying a certain openness, courage, and flexibility in reinventing themselves.

Research shows that reverse mentoring breaks down hierarchical structures and facilitates the rapid exchange of insights between generations, which is particularly important in knowledge-based organizations. For leaders, reverse mentoring offers a private learning space where they can absorb, reflect, and experiment with ideas without the pressure of external interference, satisfying, among other things, their creative instincts. For younger employees, reverse mentoring facilitates intellectual stimulation. It allows emerging leaders to understand not only the complexities of the organization through the eyes of more experienced leaders but also achieve fulfillment through co-creating valuable collaboration (Browne, 2021).

The reverse mentoring process reverses the traditional, hierarchical learning dynamic, positioning the more experienced leader as a novice while encouraging them to adopt a new development mindset. Leaders are encouraged to critically reflect on their own biases, broaden their perspectives, and take action, including promoting equality and inclusion within the organization (Gordon, 2025). Although reverse mentoring is widely discussed, it rarely occurs in practice (Garg, Singh, 2020). Meanwhile, as Gugercin points out, there are at least two main benefits of mentoring. One is its contribution to the mentee's career development, and the other is the mentor's positive and significant psychosocial impact on the mentee's sense of competence. Among the psychosocial benefits, he also lists role modeling, acceptance, mentoring, and friendship. Besides the characteristics of the mentor and mentee (age, gender), the key factor determining the process is the context, including working conditions, organizational characteristics, and social networks (Gugercin, 2017). Analyzing the benefits of reverse mentoring, Jha also notes the potential for bridging the gap for both participants, integrating diverse generations, and providing senior management with the opportunity to stay up-to-date with the latest technologies and trends in the workplace. For younger employees, it provides insight into macro-level

management issues, and for older employees, it can be a source of satisfaction from sharing knowledge with the next generation. It contributes to building engagement, reduces intergenerational conflicts in the workplace, and energizes older employees. It also maintains engagement among younger employees and improves relationships between different generations within the organization. It supports diversity management (Jha, 2015).

There is no doubt that the benefits can be many more, and much depends on the company's organizational culture, its openness and awareness of knowledge sharing and leveraging employee potential, taking into account their predispositions, skills, and knowledge.

III. Reverse Mentoring – Opportunities And Benefits In Educating Young Leaders

The entry of young generations into the labour market, starting with the Millennial generation, has brought significant changes to both work culture and professional ecosystems. Differences in values, traits, and ultimately attitudes toward work and life mean that younger and older employees have different expectations regarding their professional lives (see, e.g., Meister & Willyerd, 2010).

Traditionally, it is assumed that young employees should draw on the knowledge and experience of older, more experienced, and more business-oriented employees. Developing employee potential and promoting leadership among young staff can be effective not only through traditional knowledge sharing from older to younger, but also through a properly planned and organized reverse mentoring process. The very idea of this concept is an expression of trust in young people – their knowledge, competencies, and skills. It is a belief in their potential, capabilities, and personality. Therefore, reverse mentoring can be considered a tool that not only contributes to the development and building of knowledge within an organization, fostering bonds between employees of different generations, but also shapes leadership attitudes, especially for younger employees, whose role in organizations is often marginalized. Lawrence points to the value of reverse mentoring when the mentor and mentee are provided with a foundation of trust, communication, comfort, idea-sharing, collaboration, and selflessness (Lawrence, 2017).

Analysis of the literature indicates that research to date has focused primarily on generational differences, primarily in the context of high turnover rates. Meanwhile, Hechl points out that leader-member exchange (LMX) theory supports the thesis that LMX relationships can mitigate retention problems, as mentoring has a positive impact on emotional commitment to the organization (Hechl, 2017). Generational change often causes managers to experience difficulties understanding and accepting younger employees who share similar experiences and adopt similar attitudes, which are often difficult to understand and evaluate.

Generation Z, which is already active in the labour market and currently the youngest professionally active generation, as literature indicates, will likely adopt a friendly and emotional approach to professional life, preferring creativity and activity over passivity. Knowing what they want, they place little value on authority figures and prefer individual and independent work. The next generation will be Alpha, which will enter the workforce in the 2030s, and whose socio-cultural characteristics will be completely different from those of previous generations. It's important to remember that this generation is being shaped in the age of artificial intelligence (Bozak, 2021). There is no doubt that digital and technological competencies are the strength of the younger generations. However, seeking value solely in digital competences and technological knowledge is insufficient in the context of the opportunities available to younger generations, who possess a full range of skills, competencies, and values that enable them to transform the functioning of modern organizations. These changes are already noticeable today, including through the transformation of approaches to work itself, its essence, and its environment, attention to work-life balance, well-being, work-life balance, and hybrid and remote work. These are aspects that weren't as prominent a decade ago as they are today. Therefore, the role of younger generations is becoming crucial, also in the context of their managerial roles, which can be initiated by carefully planning and implementing processes based on reverse mentoring in organizations (see, e.g., Saxena, 2024). Currently, many managers utilize the traditional leadership development model. Meanwhile, research indicates that both information technology and reverse mentoring foster the development of leadership competencies in verticals or at stages that influence innovation (Harrison, 2017).

The opportunities offered by reverse mentoring in management should be considered from both sides of the process. For experienced managers and employees, it offers a break from normal routine, a chance to increase clarity in organizational matters, where the need to present and defend one's position to someone new, not someone "higher in the hierarchy" than the manager, provides the impetus for change. Reverse mentoring forces a fresh rethink, but also develops individual leadership skills. It also provides invaluable benefits for young employees. Above all, it enables them to find meaning in their work, or rather, its purpose. As a result, this is often crucial from the perspective of younger generations. They have the opportunity to learn about the organization and their possible future. Because younger generations are associated with constant rush and the need for change, reverse mentoring provides relatively rapid knowledge about career opportunities (see Smith, 2019). Research confirms that reverse mentoring is positively associated with work engagement, which in turn increases productivity and reduces withdrawal (Garg, Murphy, et al., 2021).

Gordon presents important conclusions from the implementation of a reverse mentoring program, pointing out that leaders must cultivate curiosity about perspectives other than their own. Engagement with diverse perspectives is essential. Openness fosters mutual understanding and the creation of inclusive organizational cultures. In turn, intentional inclusivity is crucial. Simply avoiding exclusionary practices is not enough. The role of leaders involves taking conscious actions to foster inclusivity. Expanding beyond familiar professional networks, continuous learning, and self-reflection (Gordon, 2025). In the context of shaping managerial roles among young generations, reverse mentoring can be an opportunity to test oneself in a completely different role than would be implied by traditional assignment to a specific career stage at a given time. In other words, young employees have the opportunity to "feel" what a managerial role can entail and the skills it requires. This relationship, while building mutual trust, can be a significant opportunity, especially for young people, who not only learn about the specifics of the organization's operations and the individual roles within it, but also have the opportunity to learn and understand the difficulties, concerns, and challenges associated with fulfilling senior/managerial roles. Their knowledge of the organization, its potential benefits, and career development opportunities becomes tangible, clearly defining the direction and pace of actions necessary to achieve a specific professional level. It also provides an opportunity to test one's predispositions, particularly the social, mental, and emotional ones inherent to managerial roles, but also to learn how to enter into the diverse relationships that are part of every team. For organizations, reverse mentoring offers the opportunity to discover the true predispositions of young team members. It also assesses their potential and preferences, including those related to leadership roles within the organization.

IV. Conclusion And Recommendations

There's no doubt that reverse mentoring can be a significant opportunity for young employees just starting their careers, but aspiring to managerial roles. It's not only a process of knowledge exchange but also a platform for exploring one's capabilities and limitations. Depending on the openness of a given organization, its needs, and expectations, reverse mentoring can provide numerous opportunities for experienced managers seeking new knowledge, a different, fresh perspective on old problems, and self-reflection, but also for young employees who are also in the process of finding their career path and building a career. Trust, flexibility, and openness determine an organization's willingness to entrust, even partially, developmental processes to those who only seem to have little to offer.

Key recommendations for managers planning and organizing mentoring programs include building greater awareness and openness in promoting young employees as mentors by analyzing the organization's needs and the predispositions of young staff. Rejecting rigid patterns can allow them to see potential where it's often hardest to spot. The energy, openness to experience, and values displayed by representatives of the younger generation can be an important signal for entrusting them with roles that can be a source of knowledge building for them, but also strengthen their commitment to work. It's crucial to select mentoring pairs while taking into account the real needs, capabilities, and preferences of both parties involved, so that potential benefits can be considered on both sides of the process. Reverse mentoring is inherently linked to the trust an organization places in its staff. Therefore, when planning such development processes, it's always important to start with the question: do I trust the people I employ?

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