Inclusive Employers

Reverse mentoring guide

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Introduction

This guide is here to help you learn more about what reverse mentoring is and the positive impact it could have at your organisation.

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1. Understanding reverse mentoring

Reverse mentoring provides opportunities for new ways of learning, breaking down barriers and developing inclusive cultures.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a form of goal orientated support, where the mentee wants to learn skills or knowledge from a person who already has the ability or expertise.

The mentoring relationship is aimed at giving the mentee the confidence and capability to meet current and future challenges at work or in relationships. Mentoring has been a key part of many organisations' learning and development offering for many years. More recently, reverse or reciprocal mentoring has become popular for those creating inclusive workplaces.

What is reverse mentoring?

The former CEO of General Electric, Jack Welch, is credited with inventing the concept of reverse mentoring. He recognised his lack of technology skills in the late 1990s and believed that the youngest people joining the company were far more knowledgeable about new technologies than their managers. So, he asked 500 of his top executives to seek out mentors from among these new joiners.

Reverse mentoring is when a senior or more experienced employee is mentored by a more junior colleague. In most instances, the more junior colleague comes from a group who are not represented at leadership level. For instance, if an organisation's Executive team is mostly white men who are middle class, the mentors might be of a different ethnicity from a working-class background, a different generation, sexuality, or gender.

Part of the reason why reverse mentoring can be so transformative is that it flips the power dynamics we are used to: in the mentor-mentee relationship the more junior colleague is the expert, and the senior colleague (who is often used to 'knowing it all') is the one there to listen and learn.

Within the sessions the reverse mentor will share their lived experience within and outside of the workplace. The reverse mentee is there to listen and try to formulate an understanding of these lived experiences, as well as build actions they can take as an ally to make the workplace more inclusive. They, after all, are in the best place to do so.

Reverse mentoring is an effective way to build genuine awareness of the barriers faced by diverse groups of employees, but it goes much deeper than that. The relationships built between mentors and mentees can often be deep and long-lasting, many continue after the formal mentoring period into long term connections. Best practice for reverse mentoring is when the relationship is truly reciprocal: both sides learn, grow and benefit from the experience. Some organisations even choose to refer to the scheme as reciprocal mentoring rather than reverse mentoring. This is the choice of the organisation and there is no preferred term.

When we look at reverse mentoring, we can see the process recognises that there are skill gaps and opportunities to learn on both sides of a mentoring relationship and flipping the traditional format on its head can be very beneficial for both parties. Reverse mentoring challenges the idea of mentoring being elitist, as it's not about a senior person taking someone under their wing, but a formal relationship for the purpose of skill sharing and professional development.

2. What impact can reverse mentoring have?

Reverse mentoring has many personal and organisational benefits and can create a real lasting impact within an organisation.

The benefits of reverse mentoring

The benefits of reverse mentoring can include:

- Senior leadership become more nuanced in their understanding and knowledge about the impact of exclusion and discrimination within and outside of the workplace

- Senior leadership become confident allies and champions of inclusion and diversity

- The scheme will contribute towards proactively constructing a better and more inclusive working culture and practices

- Gives a voice to colleagues from historically marginalised backgrounds to influence policy and actions to overcome issues and barriers

- More informed policy making to help create positive change for everyone

- Helping to build a learning culture

- Closer working relationships with senior employees

- Developing self-confidence and self-awareness

- Closing generational gaps

- Developing experience of dispensing knowledge and communicating with all levels of management

- Helping to develop leadership skills in early career employees

- Providing a sense of worth within the workplace

- Developing critical understanding about different lived experiences

- Supporting inclusion

- Acknowledging difference and understanding how diversity can benefit the organisation to perform better

Both mentoring and reverse mentoring are important, however while mentoring shapes an individual's path, reverse mentoring shapes the organisations path; helping to achieve strategic aims and build long-lasting, strong, relationships.

Case studies

Organisations such as KPMG, General Electric, and Fidelity have all found success across different business areas from running reverse mentoring programmes. From supporting diversity initiatives, to engaging and developing their graduate employees. In the past, workplaces were often dominated by a single age group, but today we see a more diverse mix of ages and generations.

One company, Pershings, recorded a 97% retention rate of their millennial workforce following a reverse mentoring programme. Also, a recent study by Deloitte suggests that half of millennials and Gen Z workers will quit within five years if they do not feel heard on issues that are important to them, such as the environment, workplace mental health, and equality.

As well as organisational benefits, reverse mentoring is a powerful way to build human connections and community within a company. Through mentoring at Marks & Spencer, many senior employees are both being mentors and being mentored. One mentor, James Newton-Brown, spoke of his experience of reverse mentoring:

> *"Every time you have a conversation with someone, you learn something. You learn something about people's behaviour, their motivations, and most importantly you learn something about yourself. For me, it's a win-win all round."*

In our own reverse mentoring programmes Inclusive Employers have run for clients, a 2023 survey for a reverse mentoring plan focusing on race found:

- 56% increase in confidence talking about issues surrounding race and ethnicity

- 84% increase in the understanding of specific issues and inequalities experienced by ethnic communities

- 67% increase in confidence to ask questions relating to issues around race and ethnicity

- 50% increase in confidence to share knowledge with others surrounding how race and ethnicity relates to their role/workplace

Mentoring can also have wider benefits beyond the mentor/mentee relationship. A study funded by the Saving Lives at Birth partners found that five highly trained nurses who had received mentoring, shared their knowledge with a group of colleagues, who in turn increased their competency scores from 32% - 97%.

The challenges of reverse mentoring

At times it can be difficult for someone who has been at the company for 10-15 years to start taking advice from a less experienced colleague. Some of the most common challenges that a reverse mentoring programme can face:

- Employees at the start of their careers are often not seen as experts

- Resistance to learning from someone less experienced

- Younger employees are reluctant to mentor senior leaders

- It can be challenging for participants from historically marginalised groups to share their lived experiences of discrimination

- The organisation is not open to changing practices and procedures as a result of the programme

- The programme is not connected to other inclusion work, learning and development options, and risks becoming siloed

However, securing senior buy-in, clear comms about the programme and its intentions, alongside a well organised programme that has clear expectations and is aligned with an I&D strategy will help to navigate these challenges.

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3. How to move forward with a reverse mentoring programme?

Planning a reverse mentoring scheme must be fully thought through and should not amplify existing inequalities by maintaining, rather than breaking down, power structures.

Planning a reverse mentoring scheme

Reverse mentoring should never be an organisation's only initiative; it has to be complemented by a suite of formal learning and development options and fit into a larger inclusion and diversity strategy.

Before a programme is designed, think about the goals of the programme. What does the organisation want to achieve? What does the organisation hope to gain from the scheme? How will the reverse mentors and the reverse mentees be supported?

Do people want to participate? Will there be enough interest from a variety of employees to run a programme? It is often best to start with a pilot to test the model, and then roll out the programme using the pilot cohort as ambassadors for the scheme.

Top tips for success

Over many years of running reverse mentoring programmes here at Inclusive Employers, thinking about the following steps will help your organisation to run a successful programme:

Design you programme by building it collaboratively

- Don't design in a bubble. Work with relevant stakeholders to scope and design the programme – this could include participants and staff networks or employee resource groups. Think about how the programme will meet the needs and desires of reverse mentors and reverse mentees

- Think about ways to build and maintain psychological safety for participants

- How will the organisation ensure the power dynamic between the parties is well-managed? For example, junior employees may need help to feel comfortable enough and safe enough to provide feedback to senior leaders

- How will the organisation reward reverse mentors who are giving up their time to work on the programme with leaders?

Matching applications

- Put serious thought into how mentors and mentees are paired. Both parties should be able to offer something to the other. For example, does the reverse mentee lead an area that the mentor is interested in working in or progressing to? Try not to pair people who interact regularly. This will help to avoid existing power dynamics and allow willing reverse mentors to be candid with their reverse mentees without fear of harming their own careers

- Develop a clear framework of expectations for mentors, mentees, and the programme

- Think about the ongoing support that may be needed for mentors and mentees during the programme. If a pairing is not working well together, what support could be offered?

- Make sure mentors will gain something tangible from the scheme. Otherwise, there is a potential risk of tokenism or asking specific community groups to shoulder the burden of inclusion.

Equipping mentors and mentees

- Run kick-off workshops for mentors and mentees respectively, to clarify expectations and prepare them with the skills and perspectives they need to make the most of the programme

- Consider running knowledge sessions through the programme: regular sessions or webinars covering key inclusion topics that mentors and mentees attend together as a learning group

- Consider the logistics. Who is going to set up the calendar invites and set the agenda? Be aware that these tasks usually fall to more junior colleagues and consider the impact on the power dynamic in the pairings

Evaluation and next steps

- Think about what happens after the programme ends. Will it be up to reverse mentors and reverse mentees to decide whether they want to continue their relationship? Will the organisation provide future learning sessions? How can progress and outcomes be tracked?

- How could participant feedback be gathered to hone the programme?

- Once a pilot has been run and learning has been collated, make amends and look to rollout the programme more widely. Consider how often the programme will run (e.g. once a year?) and who it will be open to. For example, if the Exec team took part first as mentees, will this then be offered to senior managers? What about external boards or Trustees?

- Is there an opportunity to involve other organisations from your sector in the programme? This could particularly help smaller organisations and would bring a different perspective to the programme

- For a pilot group, they should be ambassadors for the programme: writing comms about it, encouraging participation, and demonstrating what they have learnt from the experience

- A good follow up to reverse mentoring programmes can be an allies programme, to train mentors and mentees to become Inclusion Allies across the organisation

Resources

TEDx Talk: Patrice Gordon (Virgin Atlantic's first ever reverse mentor) -
https://youtu.be/NMVgg6zuiB0

Balfour Beatty – Project Engineer, Ayo Ogunbambi-Alao, shares her experience of Balfour Beatty's reverse mentoring programme in which Group Chief Executive, Leo Quinn became her mentee - https://youtu.be/dNj-1F3Yb9E

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