

Academic Paper

Exploring Reverse Mentoring; “Win-Win” Relationships in The Multi-Generational Workplace

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Abstract

The UK workplace is witnessing unprecedented change; for the first time witnessing four generations simultaneously active in the workplace. Organisations are increasingly adopting Reverse Mentoring (RM) to link generations together yet adoption is outpacing research into its effectiveness (Marcinkus-Murphy, 2012). A qualitative exploratory study of ten mentors and mentees, using a narrative methodology sought to understand the reverse mentoring relationship and derivation of value. Findings showed the relationship to be reciprocal, capable of generating significant value for mentee, mentor & organisations, beyond simply exchanging knowledge. The study outlined practical opportunities for HR professionals keen to harness the multi-generational workforce.

Keywords

reverse mentoring, generations, millennials, multi-generational workforce, diversity,

Article history

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Introduction

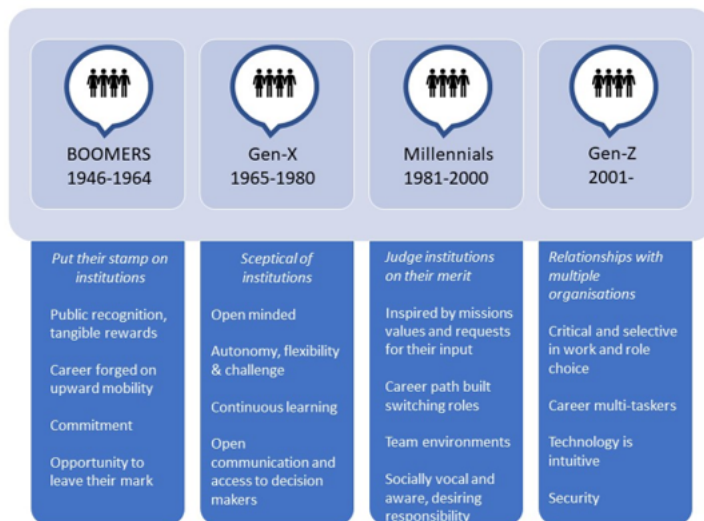
Workplace mentoring is a common practice in both the public and private sector, particularly focussed on connecting generations through supporting talent and career development of younger adults (Kram, 1988). Though lacking a singular definition, traditional mentoring emphasises imparting of age and experienced related wisdom to younger proteges. (Friday, Friday and Green, 2004; Levinson, 1987). The relative power of mentors is a core feature; their ability to offer patronage and privilege to mentees (Fagenson, 1989) and psychosocial and nurturing support (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 2004). It has long been associated with passing down knowledge to successive generations, sustaining continuity in organisations (Ragins and Kram, 2007).

RM is described as an inverted relationship, pairing junior workers to help more experienced leaders acquire new learning (Chaudhuri and Ghosh, 2012). Popularised by Jack Welch of General Electric at the start of this century, curiosity and adoption has grown such that as many as 25% of

UK companies deploy RM in some form (Eaves, 2018). Increasing adoption has been associated with the growth in knowledge-based business placing a premium on expert insight and speed of knowledge distribution across companies and borders and the increasing relevance of diversity, including generational diversity within the workplace.

The 2020 decade is the first to witness four distinct generations in the workplace at one time, holding different world-views, values and expectations of work and each other (Harrison, 2016). Traditional deference for age and seniority is evolving and sometimes outpacing organisational structures (Abessolo, Rossier and Hirschi, 2017), leading organisations to consider how to leverage generational difference harmoniously and productively. The four generations (illustrated in Figure 1) are not fixed concrete groups but are socially located in time and the transition from one to another is gradual and continuous (Kuljić, 2007). Rising retirement has sustained a presence of Boomers in senior roles whilst Millennials and GenZ, potentially born 30+ years apart from each other, are forecast to comprise 75% of the workforce by 2025 (Anderson et.al., 2017)

Figure 1



(Adapted from Wilson, 2009)

Positioning the research

Despite growing adoption of RM, empirical research to understand how it supports inter-generational development relative to traditional mentoring is sparse (Kase, Saksida and Mihelic, 2019). Mentoring is seen as attractive to Millennials and GenZ (Simoneaux and Stroud, 2010), addressing anxieties of career progression (Stein, 2013) and a strong desire for feedback, to be noticed, and seen, through interactions with senior leaders, as valuable and useful outcomes (Graen and Schiemann, 2013). The limited RM research that exists has tended to adopt a quantitative approach exploring teaching, particularly IT skills, to executives (Chaudhuri and Ghosh, 2012). Studies such as those by Murphy et.al. (2002), Chen (2013) and Kase, Saksida and Mihelic (2019) indicate extrinsic and intrinsic benefits to mentors and mentees, though offer limited insight as to how the relationship forms and develops to facilitate these benefits: what contributes to success and what inhibits progress. This gap presents a clear dilemma to organisations and HR professionals RM consumes a quantum of organisational resource yet without a deeper understanding of how relationships form, develop and generate value, the available benefits on offer to mentee, mentor and the sponsoring organisation, may be not be fully realised.

Methodology

Research approach and philosophy

Empirical research into RM is scarce (Marcinkus-Murphy, 2012) and qualitative insight extremely limited. A qualitative approach aligned to my research aim addressing the under-exploration of the experience and meaning making of participants. I selected narrative as a methodology, to go beyond lived experience at a singular point in time and capture feelings, thoughts and actions over an arc and sequence in time (Carless and Douglass, 2017). My adoption of a critical-realist philosophical stance aligned with Davies and Harre's (1990) observation that narrative storytelling draws on contextual resources respondents derive from socially constructed and objective realities. My aim was to allow voices to be visible over time and connected events, paying close attention to objective realities and the social constructions people make around such realities.

Narrative researching holds no fixed approach, though calls for inclusion of subjects who are representative of the research context, but without a minimum or maximum sample size (Bold, 2011). Narrative research can include written journals, documents and oral accounts and I chose to collect data through interviewing.

Participants

Narrative research aims for richness of detail (Bold, 2011). In this study I worked with ten individuals, four mentees and six mentors who worked for three large (5000+ employee) private sector organisations using semi-structured interviewing as primary means of data collection. Each organisation appointed a Gatekeeper (Crowhurst and Kennedy-Mac-Foy, 2013) to identify participants aligned with criteria set out in Table 1.

Table 1: criteria for participant selection and rationale

Criteria	Rationale
Participants should have a minimum of three months experience of reverse mentoring in either capacity as mentor or mentee	There is no consensus of the length of time a mentoring association becomes a relationship (Williams et.al., 2004). Three months appeared a reasonable minimum time period for understanding relationship formation and growth
Participants whose relationship had ceased could participate if the relationship had existed within the past twelve months	This criterion allowed for wider participation from subjects with longer relationships though still ensuring ability to recall experience
Subjects participated as individuals not as paired couples	This criterion was established based on a research decision to interview participants as individuals rather than dyadic pairings

Although relationships that had ceased were permitted, I did not anticipate setting the reason for cessation as a criterion. In recruitment, one respondent asked if they could participate even though they ceased what they described as an "unproductive relationship". This inclusion, though somewhat accidental was valuable to include.

Researching the relationship between mentors and mentees necessitated a decision to interview in dyadic pairings or as individuals. Though pairings seemed attractive, Wilson, Onweugbuzie and Manning (2016) warned that relationship power imbalances can compromise integrity of research. Though two pairings took part in the research, all participants were interviewed individually strictly not acknowledging or incorporating insight from other interviews.

Interviewing approach

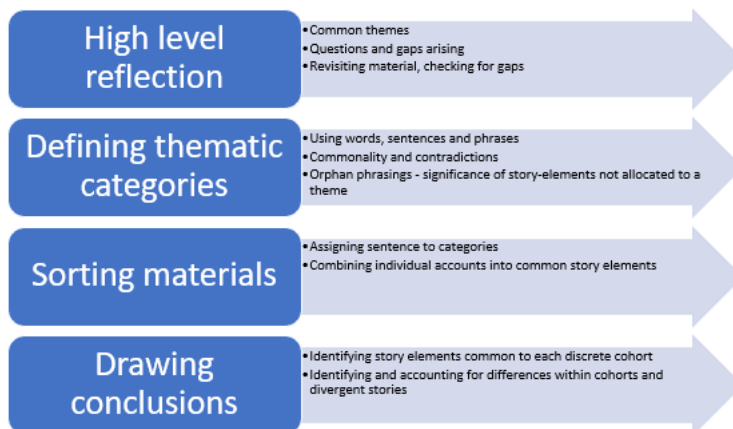
It was important to elicit stories that would help understand relationship formation, progression and the exchange of value and mutuality within the relationship, informed by gaps in literature and past research. A semi-structured interview with specific language to encourage story-telling such as "tell

me about your experience of” encouraged open dialogue (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002), created space for me as researcher to absorb the insight and use follow-ups such as “help me understand through an example” to encourage thick descriptions (Tracy, 2010). A pilot interview suggested participants needed gentle correction to remain focussed on their experience rather than describe their organisational processes. Participants likened the questions to their experience of competency-based interviews (Akhuly and Gupta, 2014) and this analogy appeared to encourage participants to enter into the open story-telling that was needed (Ollerenshaw and Cresswell, 2002). Interviews lasted between 50 and 60 minutes, conducted and recorded using a commercial grade teleconferencing facility. Participants were very used to this medium and though video interviewing might have added visual and non-visual cues (Lechuga, 2012), it was simple and avoided navigating corporate firewalls and an unnecessary learning curve (Stephens, 2007).

Analytical approach

Narrative research offers a range of analytical methods. I selected the thematic model (Riessman, 2008) which focusses more heavily on what is said than analysing linguistic structuring (Bold, 2011). Figure 2 outlines the four-stage process adapted from Lieblich and colleagues (2009), (cited in Esin, 2011) used for analysis. Recordings were held in secure cloud storage. I transcribed each interview, listening and relistening to each interview between three and five times, successively making note of emotive cues, pauses, cadence and uncertainty that might be lost in transcription. Narrative research asks participants to recall events and emotions but in practice this recall has a tendency to jump forward and backwards in time. Deeper familiarity with each individual also helped reassemble insight into their temporal order, an example of the restorying technique used in narrative research (Ollerenshaw and Cresswell, 2002). A software sorting tool Quirkos aided the process of sifting narrative segments into dominant themes and sub-themes emerging from the research.

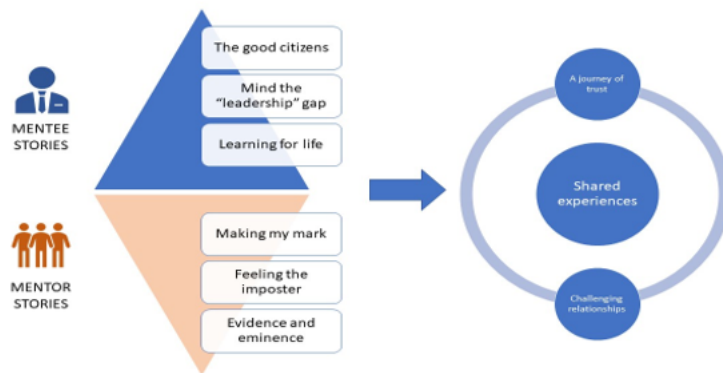
Figure 2: Approach to narrative analysis



Findings

The consequence of interviewing mentors and mentees produced distinct stories and sub themes for each audience. The nature of RM means that mentors and mentees encounter experiences that are their own as well as experiences that are co-created. This enabled findings and dominant themes to be presented in three sections, illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: themes and sub-themes emerging from the research findings



Mentee stories

The good citizens

Initially, mentee descriptions of their motivation to participate in RM appeared similar to traditional mentoring. Mentees, at settled stages of their career, described career enrichment as more meaningful than career advancement. Aware their career success had been supported by others in the past, all expressed a strong sense of duty to “pay-back” past favours, as a personal driver for participation. The choice to participate was voluntary, without expectation or pressure from their organisation, indeed mentees tended to describe this as a “secondary duty” and a somewhat private and personal choice, more attracted by faith and a belief in this being the right thing to do than an argued business case for participation or a process with robustly clear outcomes.

It was interesting to observe how life experience contributed to this motivation. Mentees often referenced their concerns for their own teenage or adult children, “paying it forward” in the hope somewhere another leader might be doing the same for their sons or daughters. Mentees in their stories recalled their early years starting out, trying out new jobs, finding their pathways, exploring new cities. They felt the job-hopping nature of younger workers to be understandable and rational, placing a responsibility on their organisations to earn the right to retain talent. Costanza and Finkelstein (2015) reference the necessity to understand older leaders not just as they are now, but also the decisions and choices they made then they were young and free of family and corporate responsibilities. The former lives and lives of mentees beyond their organisational roles appears to shape their values and motivation to participate. These influential factors could be easily be missed by organisations selecting candidates for reverse mentoring.

The (Leadership) Gap

Mentees were highly aware of how hierarchy and culture in their organisations tended to isolate them from younger and junior entrants to their organisation. This was something they viewed as unhelpful and unhealthy. Bridging this gap was cited as important in two ways. Firstly, that creative and commercial thinking was hampered through being surrounded principally by people like themselves rather than representative of their customer base. Secondly, a suspicion of information and opinion filtering that tended to strip out possibly unpalatable yet potentially innovative ideas as they percolated up through organisational layers. The commercial value of directly connecting with novel, sometimes specialist knowledge at speed and unfiltered by the micro-politics of an organisation was important and logical. Less expected was the way mentees appeared to genuinely crave moments where they could drop the leadership mantle, returning back to just being a “player” for a period of time, not having to be the leader in the room and thus creating a very different form of learning space.

Learning for life

All mentees place a significant value on learning, though noted as they shifted their focus from upward advancement to role enrichment, organisational investment in their development waned. This left gaps between their learning habit, practical need and provision –keeping pace with scientific or technical knowledge, re-learning communication and motivational techniques for a younger workforce and listening skills. Mentees also cited an absence of rounded feedback, that the hierarchical nature of their organisations frustrated an ability to really connect with the “factory floor”, citing for example tacit knowledge that site visits to connect “with the troops” were typically stage managed by middle management keen to put on their best show.

Mentees desired a space for learning that was distinct and separate from formal instructional learning or that overseen and accountable to an immediate supervisor. In practice some mentees used RM as a private space to explore sensitive areas such as diversity, valuing permission to make mistakes and confess ignorance without being seen as deficient or a lesser leader. This showed a conflict; the outward confidence and surety leaders projected externally, yet an inner vulnerability and honest intent to address flaws and deficiencies. Mentees also cited the burden of carrying a range of horizon issues that were not immediate enough to command boardroom attention yet still weighed constantly on their minds without an outlet or device to deliberate or resolve. From this emerged a need for a neutral learning space - different from receiving formal advice or driving an issue to a conclusion, but more a third learning space that was private, reflective, where the mentee was only accountable to themselves for pace and resolution. This was common to all mentees even though they worked for different organisations and very different industry types.

Mentor stories

Making my mark

Millennials and GenZ are often noted for holding high levels of ambition and a desire to make a mark on organisations and sometimes this gap between expectations and capability becomes a source of friction between younger and older workers (Pyöriä et.al. 2017). Mentors in this study clearly articulated high level of ambition and desire to make their mark. Similar to mentees, learning was highly valued. There was an observable preference for learning through doing and additionally, learning through association with and observation of perceived masters in a particular art or subject. Mentors consistently highlighted organisational culture and hierarchy as frustrating and limiting their ability to make the progress they felt possible at the speed they felt appropriate. New graduates in particular recognised the challenge and criticality expected at university as unwelcomed by new team-mates and supervisors, and the challenge of learning to stay quiet to fit in. This conflict between ambition and reality led to three motivations for participation. First, RM offered an opportunity to step above their organisational silo and see the connected organisation. Second, an attraction to learning through playing with “big ideas” of more profound significance. Third, access to the agency of a senior person able to make ideas come to life. Unlike traditional mentoring, career patronage or sponsorship was not sought and indeed seen by some as unhelpful to fostering mutual respect and appreciation. Instead, mentees placed a greater emphasis on seeing ideas brought to life, though this in turn created a high expectation of their mentees.

Insecurities and challenges

In the early stages of relationship formation, mentors tended to see their roles as provision of expert knowledge, contrasting with mentees’ expectations of “sounding board” relationships. The assumption created notable insecurity and concern on behalf of mentors that they might may not live up to expectations or might be “found out”, leading to inappropriate actions such as writing up session notes and action plans for the mentee. And some mentors expressed distrust in the permission space to challenge their mentee fearing if they upset the mentee, the fragile opportunity

to associate with a senior person would be lost. Though RM in theory reverses the natural hierarchy, the study consistently showed hierarchical norms to be a challenge, requiring attention by mentees, rather than mentors, to diffuse. The mismatch of expectations between mentors and mentees is important for scheme organisers to note.

Though RM is sometimes deployed to reconcile differences, (Biss and DuFrene, 2006) it was interesting to see occasions where the views of mentees and mentors converged within their independent accounts. Mentees were keen to disassociate a firm connection between their hierarchical status and wisdom. Mentors viewed hierarchical status with a degree of scepticism looking for evidence of capability in their mentee than being assuaged solely by their status. Mentees were thoughtful of how their insight of the factory floor was filtered by middle managers presenting a viewpoint they felt would be considered acceptable. Mentors were particularly critical of junior leaders, often themselves Millennials or GenZ, feeling inexperience and insecurity led to a lack of authenticity and trust, instead valuing a relationship with individuals they regarded as mature, confidently settled, experienced and without a need to prove themselves.

Shared experiences

The journey of trust

For mentors and mentees alike, RM was a journey of trust. Mentees tended to see trust through a business and personal lens – *can this person be trusted with business insight and do I trust their input and insight of me?* Mentors tended to see trust through the process an organisation; *can we really have frank conversations and is my organisation serious about this or is it just for show?* Trust was continuously evaluated throughout the relationships and appeared to be a factor influencing the length and depth of the relationship.

Relationships built progressively over three distinct phases, illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: relationship phase development



As with traditional mentoring, initial “get to know you” encounters tended to focus on exploring personal and professional backgrounds. This gentle easing in gave confidence of voice to mentors but also allowed mentees to evaluate the character in front of them. On some occasions the exchange of personal backgrounds exhibited vulnerability e.g. disclosure of mental health issues, and particularly where mentees exhibited vulnerability, contributed to trust for both parties. Relationships then shifted to transactional goals, simple exchanges of information such as how to communicate with younger people. Some relationships remained focussed on transactional exchange of information until the value of knowledge exchange waned. It was noticeable that the mentee tended to bring the relationship to a close, sometimes formally but also on some occasions by failing to make further time available. A smaller number of relationships continued beyond this transactional phase, shifting to a different style of relationship with noticeably greater vulnerability and levels of trust. Mentees appeared instrumental in opening the door to this type of relationship. Topics shifted to ones of greater commercial, strategic or personal significance to the mentee. This style of relationship required considerable levels of openness and trust, to facilitate greater gains in learning as illustrated in this mentee account:

“The importance of not being focussed on the problem but just on developing that trusted relationship I genuinely and honestly feel I have. I would happily discuss anything with (my mentor)”

In this phase, frequent informal interactions such as ad-hoc phone calls, messages, pre-conference meetups were also noticeable. Confidentiality also became more important, with more sensitive personal and business topics discussed and mentors appeared to place great value on honouring the privilege of being trusted in this way. In turn mentors appeared to feel more comfortable with disclosing vulnerabilities they would not comfortably discuss with their direct line managers. Mentors noted a substantial improvement in their understanding of the interconnected dynamics of the organisation, complexities and finely nuanced decisions leaders need to make, which in turn helped them better understand their own learning pathway to leadership. The two-way flow and dependency on trust was an interesting illustration of reciprocity within the relationship.

Challenged relationships

The study showed a number of challenges within relationships. Mentees quickly noticed the relative inexperience of their mentors in mentoring practice and techniques. Mentees had to exercise discipline to stay in role and not “fill the void” by flipping to traditional mentoring. In two instances the mentoring pair also had a professional relationship and were linked in proximate positions in their hierarchy creating unhelpful complexities. One mentor expressed anxiety that being tough on the mentee might lead to negative repercussions in the day job. Another mentor suffered from negative remarks in the wider team of being “teacher’s pet” and managers avoiding interaction fearing stories would get back to the mentee. These complexities appeared unnecessary and avoidable and could be usefully considered by scheme organisers.

Two mentors described how their organisations had sought to deploy RM specifically to teach older executives about the experience of black workers. Mentors were recruited based on a topic of personal significance. Mentees, consisting of an entire leadership team, were conscripted to take part. Perhaps inevitably mentor enthusiasm was a poor match for a disengaged executive, leading to disappointment.

“My mentee obviously doesn’t feel accountable for anything he has learned. I was hoping I’d be working with someone with that same desire and willingness that we could change the future together”

It is understandable that organisations look to RM to support cultural understanding and appreciation. This example brutally highlights the power differential between mentee and mentor in this instance leaving the mentor feeling “bitter and disillusioned” by the impotence of her company in delivering the agenda it had championed.

Discussion

Four main elements of learning emerged from the study:

- Bridging the generational divide, the nature of the challenge RM is positioned to resolve
- Participant drivers and motivations, how extrinsic and intrinsic motivations of mentors and mentees influence the progression of relationship depth and valuable outcomes
- Relationship facilitators and inhibitors, dynamics that foster and grow or constrain and inhibit value
- Evolution of relationship, how the reverse mentoring relationship appears to evolve and deepen over time

Bridging the generational divide

Reverse mentoring is frequently associated with bridging an assumed gap between generations in the workplace (Eaves, 2018) and differences in knowledge, expertise and social values between generations (Edmunds and Turner, 2005). The study showed participants certainly observe and are aware of age-related differences, aligning to research by Gerpott, Lehmann-Willbrock and Voelpel (2017). Whereas Finkelstein, Allen & Rhoton (2003) depict a workplace marked with inter-generational tension, conflict and adversarial relationships, participants in this study by contrast demonstrated positivity, respect and a desire to learn from each other. Younger mentors in this research appreciated older leaders' stability, earned self-confidence and trustworthiness relative to the insecurity and inexperience of their relatively junior line managers. In this study, in contrast with findings of Chaudhuri and Ghosh (2012), younger mentors appeared unconcerned that they were paired with a leader who was no longer vigorously pursuing promotion, valuing instead the established achievements and experiences, and the association RM enabled them to access. Mentees also noted that the settled nature of their careers afforded them the time and bandwidth to invest in RM relationships.

Akkermans et.al. (2019) describes an investment paradox for senior leaders – do I invest in this person knowing I may facilitate their market value and hasten them leaving the company? Given the cost of voluntary turnover to companies this is an understandable concern. Mentees however, felt RM could delay departure by showing the mentor the breadth of the organisation, strategic problems and scope for development. This study did not set out to measure the effect on affective orientation commitment but the narrative accounts of mentors suggested the experience deepened their respect and appreciation of career potential within their employing organisation.

Participant drivers and motivations - mentors

Marcinkus-Murphy (2012) proposed mentors are attracted to RM to further personal ambition and make their mark early in careers. This study concurs with Stein's (2013) observations that mentors, particularly graduates arrive in organisations with high expectations of their future yet become quickly frustrated and "held-back" by their place in the system. Mentors viewed RM as an opportunity to leapfrog hierarchy, satisfy intrinsic needs, learn faster and create material change through the agency of their mentee. Unlike traditional mentoring, mentors did not look to their mentee for extrinsic reward, such as promotion or sponsorship. Twenge et.al. (2010) note collaboration to be a factor in intrinsic fulfilment for Millennials and GenZ, which ultimately supports their career goals yet the opportunities for such individuals to truly collaborate directly with senior leaders is rare, however much it is craved. This was a particularly interesting finding, useful to HR professionals involved in cultivating value particularly amongst graduates.

Participant drivers and motivations – mentees

Mentees in this study were highly motivated by two intrinsic factors – the sense of generativity from investing in a younger life and the love of learning. The study concurred with observations by Kase, Saksida and Mihelic (2019) and Chen and Choi (2008) that learning is a powerful intrinsic motivator for older leaders, even where the outcome is not certain or the process easy and enjoyable. Mentors appeared prepared to learn through the RM process, tolerating a higher degree of uncertainty than they would accept in their normal day role. This is helpful insight for RM scheme organisers, suggesting mentee motivation to learn is a powerful driver and perhaps more important in recruiting mentees than operational details of the scheme.

Relationship facilitators and inhibitors

Organisation based coaching can present challenges such as coach / coachee collusion (Pelham, 2016). RM research offers little insight as to the role of organisations in relationships (Marcinkus-

Murphy, 2012). This study showed once recruitment and matching happened the relationships quickly became private spaces with the organisation excluded. Mentors and mentees appeared to avoid organisational observation. Mentors were free to be vulnerable in their shortcomings without having to sustain energy to impression management (Feldman, 1999). Mentees sought a space insulated by superiors and immediate subordinates, allowing for private thought, experimentation and free from the pressure and accountability to always be the leader. This points to a distinctive learning space facilitated by RM. Yet the closed-loop nature of the relationship understandably poses a challenge for scheme organisers in fully articulating reverse mentoring benefits and optimising the operation of their schemes. It also presents practical difficulties when the relationship between mentor and mentee is proceeding less smoothly. It is possible a support infrastructure, such as supervision (Gray and Jackson, 2011) could help.

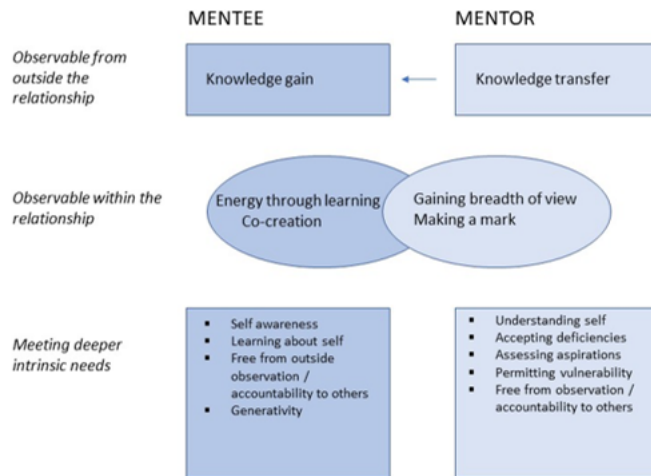
Kase, Saksida and Mihelic (2019) viewed RM through the lens of social exchange theory suggesting that participant investment in the relationship is balanced by the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits they receive in return. The study showed mentors see RM as rare, privileged and hard to replicate by other means. Mentees weigh generativity and learning satisfaction against the cost in time to participate. Contrasting with traditional mentoring (Kram, 1988), in RM it is the mentees who control the pace of relationship development as they begin to trust in and feel an attachment to their mentor. There is therefore a high-risk mentors' level of desire and motivation can exceed that of the mentee and this imbalance risks dysfunctional behaviour with mentors taking on the mentee's tasks to preserve the fragile relationship. Scheme organisers need to take note of this power imbalance, potentially working with mentees on strategies to protect against this risk.

Evolution of relationship

The study showed the characterisation of RM as transferring knowledge from young to old, to be an over-simplistic representation of what is possible through this voluntary relationship. In Figure 5 I outline my perception of RM as holding three layers. The first layer, observable from outside the relationship is the commonly understood and observable transfer of knowledge from young to old. There is of course a certain value to this stage of the relationship though it becomes quickly exhausted as the available knowledge is consumed in exchange. In the second layer lie "give and gain" exchanges that are typically understood and known by both mentee and mentor though may not be visible or indeed deliberately kept private and shrouded to those outside the relationship. This layer creates extended learning opportunities for both parties, for example mentors learning through observing and experiencing leadership thinking styles, consideration and constraints. This is the point at which the relationship starts to deepen and mature, where mentors start to see reshaping of their ideas for its learning rather than mere critique and mentees enjoy the generative action of investing in someone younger but learn through having their own assumptions and patterns of thinking challenged. In the third layer lie deeper intrinsic gains from the relationship that may not be explicitly discussed or articulated between mentee and mentor yet still provide motivation to continue the relationship. Within this third layer lie the deepest gains, for example fostering creativity amongst mentees or self-efficacy amongst mentors that are acknowledged as contributing to affective commitment (Hechl, 2017).

The study shows simple inversion of the traditional mentoring relationship to be a self-limiting construct for RM and one that constrains its potential, for in reality the deeper and more sustainable and valuable gains are achieved through relationships that are significantly more reciprocal in nature, extending far beyond exchange of knowledge to touch intrinsic motivations for mentors and mentees. These are important findings for organisations and HR professionals, achieved with relatively low cost of investment, yet highly challenging to achieve through conventional training solutions.

Figure 5: RM Relationship layers and progression



Conclusions

The reverse mentoring literature has tended to be deficiency led, focussing particularly on gaps in older leaders’ knowledge or cultural flexibility. This image of younger workers donating their knowledge to “teach old dogs new tricks” is self-limiting, over-simplistic and denies organisations significantly more valuable gains.

Developmental literature (Kase, Saksida and Mihelic, 2019) identified older leaders as gaining intrinsic satisfaction from learning but once they step away from the pursuit of promotion, organisations invest less in their learning. RM offers these leaders a unique, exploratory learning space, where privacy affords vulnerability and control. Emerging Millennial and GenZ “emerging talent” draw criticism of inflated expectations and poor organisational socialisation (Kleinhans et.al., 2015). Cultural expectations fostering impression management leaves this audience without a safe space to explore their vulnerabilities and gaps in organisational knowledge. Graduates, in particular, experience a contrast between the intellectual freedom of university life and “knowing their place” in the organisational hierarchy on joining a workforce, creating dissatisfaction and negative affective commitment to the organisation. These feelings potentially lead to unnecessary voluntary turnover, which in turn companies find costly to remedy.

The study helps HR professionals understand a mentee deficiency-led approach to RM fails to recognise the motivational benefits older leaders gain through the act of learning itself. It also risks losing the benefits on offer through the act of reciprocity that enriches mentees and mentors alike. As retirement ages rise and organisations pivot to flatter hierarchical structures, organisations need to consider how to harness years of insight vested in older leaders remaining active in the workforce.

This study showed RM cuts through hierarchical layers, facilitating rapid exchange of insight across generations that is critical in knowledge-based organisations. For leaders, RM offers a private learning space to absorb, reflect and experiment with ideas without pressure from external accountability or intrusion, fulfilling the love for learning and generative instincts commonly found in older leaders. For younger workers, RM facilitates intellectual stimulation, allowing emerging leaders to understand the complexities of organisations through the eyes of leaders and fulfilment through co-creation of significant and meaningful pieces of work with their mentee. Such benefits link to affective commitment (Ghosh et.al., 2013) influencing unnecessary and costly employee

turnover. Transfer of knowledge is an understandable starting point for RM, but the available tangible and intangible benefits are far more considerable.

RM complements rather than replaces traditional mentoring. It allows younger workers to learn without an implicit assumption they are following the pathways of older leaders. In flatter organisations it may even be a preferable form of mentoring, facilitating an inter-generational relationship that allows both parties to grow yet avoids the pitfalls of expectations of patronage or sponsorship. As Colley (2003) observed of traditional mentoring, RM pairings cannot be forced and a high degree of voluntarism is essential. Organisations may be attracted towards RM to achieve objectives such as enabling a greater understanding of race or gender across senior leaders. The research suggests that success is more likely when mentees share a true and personal belief in the learning goal. Mentees who have learning goals imposed on them can exert their power within the RM relationship to destructive effect.

RM relationships need support not merely in their formation but over time. The relatively private and closed-loop nature of RM makes it challenging to see early warning signs from outside the relationship. Supervision is considered sensible and valuable to protect participants and outcomes of traditional mentoring and coaching (Adamson, 2018). Its deployment in RM would likely help organisations understand the internal dynamics of their own version of RM, facilitating continuous improvement and focus on realising the widespread benefits it can offer.

Constructed and operated wisely, mentor, mentee and the organisation stand to gain significant value for relatively marginal cost. The multi-generational workplace is a phenomenon that appears here to stay. Inter-generational reverse mentoring, harnessed correctly, offers significant opportunity to foster “win-win” relationships.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

All studies experience limitations (O’Leary, 2013) and further research could valuable explore:

- a. Unsuccessful relationships. Understanding failed, prematurely shortened or toxic relationships (Feldman, 1999) would likely help HR professional further optimise deployment of RM
- b. Impact of scheme organisation. Considerable focus has been paid to the organisation of company mentoring schemes and participant recruitment (Zachary, 2005). This study identified variability and challenges created by choices made by scheme organisers that would merit deeper examination
- c. The role of RM specifically within the context of diversity. GenZ and Millennials are significantly more diverse in race, sexuality, religious beliefs and values than Boomers and GenX (Hobart and Sendek, 2014). It is logical for organisations to look to RM to support diversity and inclusion and this topic of growing significance may merit its own specific study.
- d. Longitudinal research. This study showed a positive impact on factors that as *affective commitment orientation* and *intrinsic motivation* and further longitudinal research would help understand the longer-term impact of RM on leadership development and talent retention, potentially by being able to describe the cost-benefit case for deploying RM in organisations.

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