

Connect to Collaborate

Mentoring, collaboration and knowledge sharing across functions and locations promotes innovation, solves problems in real time and facilitates development.

By Randy Emelo

Diversity is a key innovation driver and a critical component for global success, and senior executives increasingly recognize that diverse experiences, perspectives and backgrounds are crucial to develop new ideas.



On the Web

Frans Johansson, author of *The Medici Effect*, says leaders should be action-oriented and execution-focused when working with a diverse team: talentmgt.com/materials/view/14/.

Knowledge sharing communities are an ideal breeding ground for novel ideas to rise organically in response to organizational problems or issues employees are facing. Individuals in a different functional or geographical area, or from a different department or age group, may view situations and issues differently. Their experiences and focus areas give them a unique perspective, and this fresh take on a situation can produce innovative solutions.

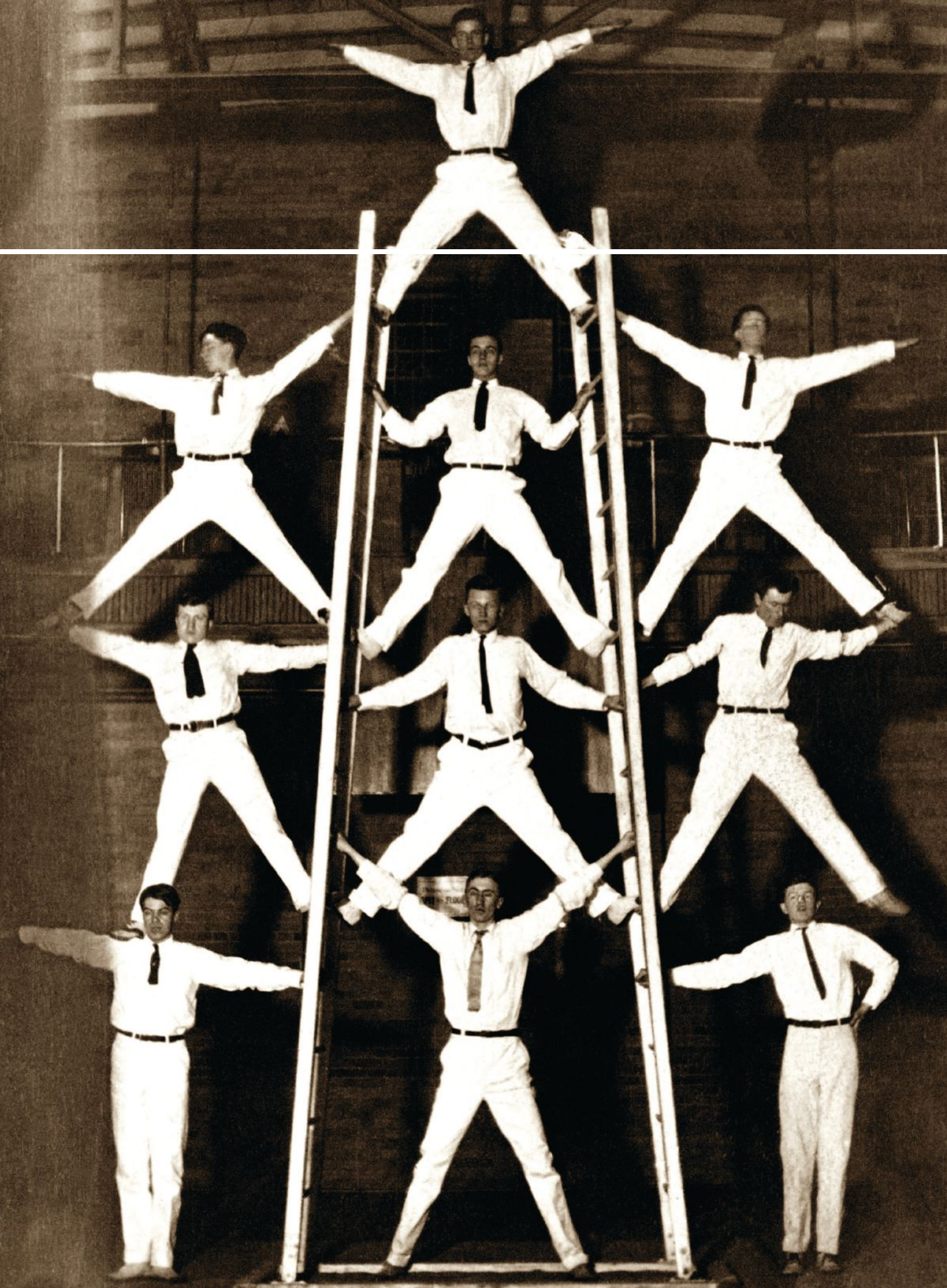
According to a 2011 Forbes study, “Fostering Innovation Through a Diverse Workforce,” 85 percent of respondents agreed that a diverse and inclusive workforce is crucial to encourage different perspectives and ideas that drive innovation. The top three ways companies aim to develop diverse or inclusive talent are through professional development programs (62 percent), diversity-focused mentoring programs (61 percent), and employee resource/networking groups (61 percent).

Sodexo, a global food services and facilities management company, uses a combination of these three methods. Its Spirit of Mentoring program connects employees throughout the company so they can engage with one another as learners and advisers; transfer knowledge related to their experience, competencies and needs; and collaborate with colleagues about training, career development, on-the-job productivity and learning groups.

“The Spirit of Mentoring program provides a platform for diverse knowledge sharing across the organization, which has proven to be a catalyst for creating a culture of inclusion for Sodexo,” said Texanna Reeves, vice president of corporate diversity at Sodexo.

Innovation and Inclusion

The Web-based platform drives cross-cultural understandings, cross-functional



collaborations and bridges gender differences. Some of the company's employee network groups also have used the program to reach out to colleagues across locations, generations and functions. Some of these include:

- **iGen** — an intergenerational roundtable knowledge sharing group.
- **HONOR** — a military network group that uses a mentoring buddy system to help transition former military personnel into civilian and corporate life.
- **PRIDE** — a GBLT group that connects members with non-GBLT colleagues in reverse mentoring and topical groups.
- **WiNG** — a women's network group that uses topical mentoring in mentoring circles to share, learn and collaborate with colleagues.

“The opportunity to connect individuals based on mutual interest to fulfill development needs as well as strategic business objectives, on-demand, is highly beneficial to the individuals and the organization,” Reeves said. “In fact, we encourage individuals to connect across difference as a way to become more culturally competent and provide opportunity for reverse mentoring. Ultimately, our employees are aspiring to accelerate their development on select competen-

Used within the energy and construction division of URS to create large-scale learning connections, nearly 40 percent of the entire division participates in the company's Knowledge Network, accounting for roughly 2,900 employees across seven business groups. Participation continues to grow at 5 percent each month. “This inclusive audience reinforces our commitment and need to develop our talent for the global marketplace, optimizing execution and operational excellence,” Kaminsky said.

URS has some metrics for its program. In 2012, 12 people connected per learning engagement on average, three out of seven business groups were represented in each engagement, five of seven business groups were represented in several engagements and numerous international connections were made.

“Business groups are exchanging technical knowledge and creating communities to solve business problems,” Kaminsky said. For example, 45 topical groups are active in the system, with 15 more ready to go. These connections come from various business groups, functions and locations, but they all have similar goals: to solve real work problems.

“Smaller worksites with limited development resources are now connecting to a vibrant network of advisers and peers. Employees are starting to see the URS Knowledge Network as

By giving people a way to branch out and connect with co-workers for collaboration, companies can plant the seeds so innovation can thrive.

cies, and they have found that Spirit of Mentoring offers a means to do so.”

This drive for innovation via a more diverse and inclusive workforce can be seen across all types of companies. Consider URS, an integrated engineering, construction and technical services company with associates in nearly 50 countries. URS' global team wanted to increase its overall operational effectiveness and innovation through accelerated knowledge transfer, and to develop international expertise across the enterprise to meet the needs of an expanding global presence. The company identified knowledge sharing and mentoring to help accomplish these goals, and using software built the URS Knowledge Network to create a career development platform that would enable global knowledge sharing.

“The focus and impact of our knowledge sharing program is to connect, share, learn and perform,” said Andy Kaminsky, senior vice president of human resources at URS. “We are enhancing our global reach, breaking through silos and connecting people across business groups, geographic regions, functions and levels.”

a way to get just-in-time knowledge and solutions from multiple perspectives. This program is becoming a key resource in developing our talent and in connecting critical knowledge across our organization, allowing us to actively reinforce our learning culture across the enterprise,” Kaminsky said.

Fostering Diversity of Thought

As more organizations strive for innovation in a global market, the focus inevitably turns to diversity. How companies address it may vary, but the need to take action does not. Sodexo uses mentoring as part of its performance management process to address diversity awareness as a competency.

“Our managers have found value in leveraging the mentoring relationship to understand and value differences, and to address their unconscious bias in order to better manage their teams,” Reeves said. “Employees are building meaningful relationships with individuals they would not have otherwise met. It has been a win-win; mentees gain confidence in their abilities and achieve their goals, and mentors become better leaders.”

The top three ways companies develop diverse or inclusive talent are through professional development programs, mentoring and employee resource/networking groups.



The push for companies today is not just for more diversity based on age, gender, race or ethnicity. It's to foster more diversity of thought by bringing together people from different functions, locations and divisions. This is what will drive innovation. People will bring their various experiences, work styles and insider knowledge, which they can share with their colleagues as they work to solve real business problems.

Further, by helping people connect with colleagues outside of their own business units or departments, companies can help alleviate groupthink. Leaders can put this into action by:

- Leveraging technology that helps people make connections with colleagues they would otherwise not know or meet.
- Using pre-existing internal programs to assist people with making broader connections, such as through employee resource groups.
- Removing organizational barriers so knowledge can flow.
- Establishing cultural norms that set expectations for knowledge sharing across functions, locations and divisions.
- Modeling behavior through broad knowledge sharing networks to show the importance of cross-functional connections.

When people are too entrenched in their own teams, they create deep-rooted behavioral norms within the group that can stifle dissent and creativity. This is often a byproduct of siloed functionality in a company where people are cut off from other areas and only interact with the small group of co-workers in their department. By giving people a way to branch out and connect with other co-workers for collaboration, companies can plant the seeds so innovation can thrive.

URS and Sodexo are accomplishing this with knowledge sharing and mentoring software. URS uses its Knowledge Network to help people connect before and after specific events, such as high-potential programs or classroom training, creating a full-service learning package for employees.

"The ability to keep a group connected as they apply the learning concepts allows peer groups to speed up learning by asking each other questions, collaboratively solving prob-

lems and reinforcing concepts learned in the classroom," Kaminsky said.

By harnessing the power of diversity of thought through knowledge sharing and mentoring, companies also can see an impact on their bottom line through employee engagement. "Both anecdotal and quantitative measures indicate that mentoring is resulting in increased employee engagement and promotional rates," Reeves said.

Sodexo has incorporated a top-down, middle-out and bottom-up approach to support its program that includes strong leadership commitment, middle management engagement and grassroots efforts. "Our nine employee network groups and the Cross-Market Diversity Council are leading much of these efforts, and we hold all managers accountable through a diversity scorecard index," Reeves said.

One of the measures on the scorecard is engagement and involvement, which requires leaders from the mid-manager level to the executive team to participate and report on their diversity activities. "They completed more than 4,300 activities, which is remarkable. Mentoring is one of the strongest engagement and involvement activities, which demonstrates the organization's commitment to employee development at all levels," Reeves said.

Creating a culture where it is expected that people will connect, collaborate and share knowledge with colleagues across all areas of the company is an accomplishment since Sodexo has more than 400,000 employees in more than 80 countries. "Diversity is a business imperative for our organization, and we consider our people to be our greatest asset," Reeves said. "Research has proven that diverse teams provide innovation, and it is through the power of our people that Sodexo is a leader in the marketplace and a profitable organization.

"My advice to other organizations is simple: You can leverage your talent through mentoring and cross-organizational knowledge sharing. It is a very high-impact way to develop your people, enhance organizational learning, and with the use of software, empower employees to make meaningful connections easily." «

Randy Emelo is president and CEO of Triple Creek, an enterprise mentoring and knowledge sharing systems company. He can be reached at editor@diversity-executive.com.