

What If Millennials Ran Your Mentoring Program?

BY RANDY EMELO

Mentoring programs would be open to everyone enterprisewide, virtual and leveraged as a collaborative space where the free exchange of ideas could feed creativity while transferring knowledge.



Following the kick-off motivational speech by a gray-haired mentoring expert, a hand went up in the back.

“I don’t understand. Why are we just targeting high potentials in this mentoring program? Doesn’t everyone we hire here have potential? Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate being invited into this program, but I know a lot of people who could get more done if they had access to some of the wisdom and knowledge in this room — even if it were for a few hours and not for a whole year like this program.”

At the head table, a senior leader elbowed the manager in charge of the mentoring program and whispered, “Who is that kid? Hasn’t anyone explained to her what a career-limiting move is? I like her guts, but make sure you assign her to a mentor who can handle a firecracker like her.”

While this scenario may seem extreme, many of the young people currently participating in formal mentoring programs are likely thinking, if not saying, these exact things. This begs the question: What would the mentoring program look like if the manager turned the design and execution over to that audacious kid in the back or to millennials in general?

Mentoring for the Ages

There is a lot of debate today about whether generational differences are caused by age or shaped by the meta-events of peoples’ lives (Figure 1). It is likely a bit of both, but major events, especially the dominant media available during formative years, have a large impact on peoples’ overall outlook on life and the ways they interact socially.

Generational influences also shape prevailing perceptions about work, authority and mentoring. While not representing every individual, some generalizations can be made. For example:

- Traditionalists are hardworking, loyal to their organizations and respectful of those in authority. They

view mentoring as an obligation to the generations that follow them.

- Boomers believe in participative management and work hard for personal gain. They view mentoring as a way to get ahead and advance in their careers or in the organization.
- Gen Xers are skeptical of those in authority and seek a better work-life balance. They view mentoring as a way to collaborate directly with those in charge.
- Millennials are hopeful, multitasking web surfers. They view mentoring as a way to create learning connections with those who share their interests or know how to get things done.

In the past 40 years, these generational perceptions of mentoring shaped the practice. In the 1980s and ‘90s, traditionalist leaders who saw the value of passing wisdom down to the next generation developed formal mentoring programs for boomers. The major debate at that time was the relative value of formal mentoring programs to the informal mentoring that happens naturally between two people. Mentoring was assumed to be a one-to-one relationship between a more experienced mentor and a more junior mentee created to boost career satisfaction and advancement.

Over the past two decades, the influence of social network research and the emergence of the Internet as the dominant communication medium changed the way mentoring has been used and viewed. Ten years ago, Gen Xers began pushing boomers to experiment with virtual relationships and electronic media communication due to the growing use of websites, e-learning, email and video conferencing. Today, millennials are challenging the conceptual framework of mentoring itself, advocating the free exchange of ideas in a virtual environment as foundational to an effective workplace.

“Millennials challenge the thinking of current leadership (baby boomers) in a positive way that makes the work environment more effective and efficient,” said Dennis Brennan, director of inclusion at McDonald’s Corporation.

FIGURE 1: SHAPING OF GENERATIONS

TRADITIONALIST (1922-1945)	BABY BOOMER (1946-1964)	GENERATION X (1965-1980)	MILLENNIAL (1981-2000)
INFLUENCED BY			
The Great Depression	The civil rights movement	MTV	Globalization of information
World War II	Television	AIDS	The Internet; the iPod
The Cold War	Economic prosperity	Personal computers	Social networking

Source: Triple Creek, 2011

FIGURE 2: MENTORING, THEN AND NOW

MENTORING PROGRAM	BOOMER-RUN	MILLENNIAL-RUN
Purpose	A career-advancement strategy	A primary learning strategy
Value	Mentees/learners gain understanding of culture, politics and some skills needed	Rapid dissemination of knowledge and learning across organizational, geographical and generational boundaries
Audience	Primarily senior leaders and high potentials	Open to anyone in the organization
Mentors/Advisors	People with higher status and knowledge	Anyone who has some knowledge a learner needs; will be known as an advisor
Design	One-to-one mentoring, longer-term relationships	Networked view, multiple relationships, length determined by needs
Method	Most relationships are face-to-face with some phone or distance communication occurring	Most relationships are virtual with communication via phone and technology

Source: Triple Creek, 2011

A productive work environment allows room for millennials to follow passions and interests in ways that may seem inefficient to boomers, but as Brennan said, “Boomers play with a purpose. Millennials will learn from this exploratory play and discover great new things.”

Though millennials are not in formal power yet in many organizations, many have already shaped the world of communication and commerce through their invention and adoption of social networking technology. Given their influence, the way they view mentoring will dominate the future of this practice as a learning and development method.

Through Millennials’ Eyes

A foundational shift in the conception and practice of mentoring will occur as millennials leverage their influence (Figure 2). Several key areas will be affected.

Purpose and value: While boomers embraced mentoring as a career advancement tool, millennials see it as a simple way to learn what they need to know now. “We are now an information society where everyone wants instant responses from their customers,” Brennan said. “In mentoring, we bring that same on-demand nature to our advisor and learner relationships. Learners want instant connections to advisors, and advisors want instant learning to take place.”

For millennials, mentoring is also a way to quickly and effectively meet pressing learning needs. Career advancement may be an outcome, but it is seen as a by-product of excellence in their areas of passion and

expertise. Millennials’ desire for an open environment to explore and connect with people who have the knowledge, experience and wisdom they seek will have tremendous business value when disseminating learning across organizational, geographical and generational boundaries.

Audiences and advisors: Millennials want an organization-wide, egalitarian virtual environment for their mentoring programs so that anyone can take part. They see mentoring as a way to learn by interacting with others from different locations and functions or with people who have different backgrounds and perspectives. “The extreme benefit of mentoring in a virtual environment is that everything is open to you,” Brennan said. “The free exchange of ideas, guidance and learning is at your convenience in this new model.” Because they believe they can learn something from almost anyone, the old question, “Who is qualified to be a mentor?” makes little sense to a millennial, many of whom believe everyone has something of value to share.

Design and method: Millennials’ core beliefs will have a huge impact on the design and implementation of future mentoring programs. “Current leaders are baby boomers who want things face-to-face, but face-to-face has changed,” Brennan said. “It’s gone from a physical environment to a virtual one, and that virtual environment is the millennials’ environment.” Millennials don’t make distinctions between conversing face-to-face, on a phone or via text. They’re communicating, period. For them, it’s completely reasonable to

expect to connect with and learn from someone they will never meet in person. Indeed, millennials want to use technology to find and manage these mentoring relationships just as they do their social relationships.

Millennials also are pushing to abandon the single-mentor methodology of many formal boomer-run programs. “Boomers think linearly while millennials are more circular and fluid,” Brennan said. In their networked world, millennials see mentoring as a

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way to build an informal learning network of many collaborators and advisors who share their passions or interests. These relationships will span a spectrum of duration and intensity, from long-term career mentoring to need-oriented situational mentoring to interest-focused topical mentoring — or whatever they need at exactly the time they need it.

How to Make It Work

The practice of mentoring will expand dramatically in the coming years. Millennials are literally demanding it. The audacious kid in the back will be running the program soon, so here are a few steps learning leaders can take to start moving in this direction today.

1. Add large, open mentoring programs to pre-existing small, targeted programs. Learning leaders don't have to abandon the small, formal mentoring programs traditionally associated with high-potential development. However, to be effective in today's business environment, they need to allow high potentials to have multiple mentors of their own choosing and allow them to mentor others as part of their experience. This builds the culture of mentoring as a shared, collaborative social responsibility in the organization, and it helps millennials engage in mentoring in the same way they want and need to accomplish their daily work: by collaborating with others across functions and locations. Further, if learning leaders don't offer some kind of mentoring experience for all employ-

ees, millennials will see individuals' exclusion from formal programs as a social justice issue in the organization, and they won't be shy about sharing their opinions with their peers inside and outside the organization. To address this, leaders should create an open mentoring culture where people learn from each other in a wide variety of formal and informal relationships on an enterprise level. This allows everyone to reap the benefits of mentoring.

2. Use technology to make it easier to get started, connect with others and expand the mentoring experience.

“The attraction of an open environment in mentoring is the vastness, but it can be scary because of that,” Brennan said. “People can get stuck on start. Some boomers struggle with the online aspect of mentoring and feel the personal touch is gone.” This does not mean all face-to-face mentoring relationships should be replaced with virtual ones, but it does mean organizations can begin using technology to help people forge new relationships across traditional boundaries in order to expand learning networks. Using technology to help people sign up and get connected can enhance the personal nature of the learning experience. Mentoring is people-centered learning — technology just makes it easier.

3. Do something now. As has been talked about endlessly over the past few years, the more experienced boomers are rapidly nearing retirement age, and their accumulated wisdom and expertise could soon be walking out the door. In addition to this reality, millennials are actively asking for more mentoring opportunities. They would love nothing more than to have access to the wisdom and understanding of the leaders around them. Instead of parceling out a bit of this knowledge to a select few of the younger generation, organizations would greatly benefit from launching larger open initiatives that remove barriers to information flow across the enterprise. This information exchange is not intended to act as a brain dump of data from boomers to millennials. Rather, it is intended to create fertile ground for the birth of new ideas and approaches to an organization's most pressing issues. Bringing together boomers' experience and millennials' creativity can lead to groundbreaking innovations.

So what if millennials ran the mentoring program? They will be sooner or later. The sooner organizations embrace millennials' values of openness, access and exchange, the sooner organizations will benefit from the rapid multiplication of learning across the enterprise. **CLO**

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