



# Reverse Mentoring

## WHAT IS IT?

Also known as “upward mentoring”, reverse mentoring turns the traditional hierarchical approach to mentoring on its head. Rather than having a senior player take a less experienced player “under their wing”, reverse mentoring relationships place the more senior person as the primary learner and emphasise the experience of the junior person.

The objective of reverse mentoring is primarily to enable leaders and senior managers to stay in touch with their organisations and the outside world. But the advantages go both ways as more junior personnel have an opportunity to understand and be heard by more senior and experienced people.

## WHEN & WHY SHOULD IT BE USED?

There are two main objectives that reverse mentoring has proven successful in achieving.

Advance the technical skills and understanding of senior management.

Executives are increasingly required to make strategic decisions in response to technological changes. It is difficult to capitalise on opportunities presented by burgeoning social media sites or cloud computing technologies if you are unfamiliar with how they are being used.

Companies such as General Electric, Ogilvy & Mather and Cisco Systems have all addressed this dilemma by implementing reverse mentoring programs, whereby junior staff members more literate in the latest technologies help executives to brush up on their skills. As well as providing a safe environment for senior management to learn, these relationships also give junior players a sense of purpose and belonging.

## EDUCATE LEADERS ABOUT DIVERSITY ISSUES

It is easy for executives to declare that the organisation is “committed to the advancement of women” or “encourages a diverse workforce”. But it can be

difficult to make a meaningful difference to gender and diversity issues from the ivory tower position of a corner office.

When a division of Procter and Gamble wanted to reverse a growing turnover amongst women in junior and middle management posts they recognised that the traditional hierarchical approach to mentoring would only reinforce a potentially patriarchal culture that may be at the heart of the problem. Instead they implemented the “Mentoring Up” program that matched senior male managers with junior female mentors, who were tasked with providing informal, non-threatening feedback on issues specific to women. In other words, their job was to help management to understand diversity issues at a human level. The program enabled women to develop quality relationships with senior executives, to become more visible within the organisation, and to be heard: not surprisingly retention rates amongst women increased.

## HOW TO MAKE IT SUCCESSFUL?

1. Be very clear about the purpose of the program. Clarity about the broad organizational goals will help participants to take the process seriously.
2. Train both parties for their role. Junior participants need training in how to confront and challenge more senior participants, while senior participants must learn how to be open to these challenges.
3. Review relationships regularly to ensure they are on track. It is all too easy for both junior and senior participants to fall back into a hierarchical pattern of behaviour. In our experience only training and regular review can establish a pattern of effective “upward” learning.
4. Track issues or concerns that recur in multiple relationships. These concerns may be indicative of more widespread diversity issues that need to be addressed at an organisational level.
5. Start small. Developing safe and positive reverse mentoring relationships can be tricky. It is best to start with small pilot programs and then use pilot participants as a steering committee for roll out of the program on a wider scale.