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Reverse mentoring cracks the old workplace code

By Alizah Salario



The word “mentoring” tends to conjure an image of a wizened top executive bestowing knowledge upon a nubile young employee.

But that’s so last century. Reverse mentoring, where younger employees mentor older executives — generally about technology, social media and current trends — is gaining traction in many fields.

“Why are we still in this mindset that you have to be mentored by someone with more experience?” says Jay Olshonsky, Society of Industrial & Office Realtors and president of NAI Global, a network of commercial real estate firms where reverse mentoring is common practice.

The most effective reverse mentoring programs have a mix of both formal and informal elements, and pair people in positions where rapid innovation tends to occur — in tech, for instance — with leaders or senior employees who wield more influence, explains Olshonsky.

“Don’t assume just because I’ve got the 30 plus years that I’ve got the best thoughts. That’s a really bad assumption,” he adds.

Reverse mentoring isn’t necessarily about age or years of work experience, either. For instance, reverse mentoring can take place between someone who has advanced technical skills and someone who has no technical skills, Olshonsky explains.

A shift in workplace culture

Greater acceptance of reverse mentoring reflects a shift in traditional workplace hierarchies. The proverbial ladder is being replaced with a horizontal career structure — and an understanding that learning and growth happen at all stages of one’s career.

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For instance, when Olshonsky first started out in the real estate business, memorizing the physical attributes of different properties was simply par for the course. Today, everything he needs to know about a given property is a few clicks and swipes away — a shift that younger digital natives might take to more naturally. Olshonsky that being open and curious about new technology and trends — and accepting that younger, less experienced employees might be more adept at certain aspects of the job — is key to making reverse mentoring work.

“Essentially, the younger or less experienced but better technical person can answer a question in ten seconds that would’ve taken the older person a couple days to get the same information,” he says.

A lot of traditional workplaces are also using their junior staff to help educate more experienced members on trends and social media usage, says Kristen Morgan, director JRT Realty Group.

In real estate, reverse mentoring can help more seasoned employees “recognize cooler, more artisanal boutique brands over big box retailers for certain locations, especially in emerging markets” and “recognize what the younger demographic of employees or residents want in certain neighborhoods,” she says.

Whether it’s in real estate, marketing or media, taking time to create an environment where reverse mentoring is valued is key to its success, says Olshonsky.

“You’re not just sugarcoating this, and saying, ‘This is your job and this is the way we do it, and if you don’t like it, go find another job.’ You’re kind of empowering them to reach beyond what they’re currently doing. It’s a huge positive reinforcement.”