

GENERATIONAL
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Cam Marston



Master to apprentice, apprentice to master

Boomers and Millennials can mentor each other, but programs must be structured carefully

Think back to an advisory practice around the year 1984. Would management ever have been dependent on the knowledge of a young new hire to ensure that core components of the business were working appropriately? Hardly.

In 1984, the senior members of the workplace were the ones who knew how to get the work done.

Educated through the apprenticeship model, the senior members

of the workplace had the most knowledge and held the most wisdom. Their instruction was heeded and their feedback sought.

In the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s, the technology necessary to run an office took off. For the first time, the apprentice model was irrelevant. The youth had the knowledge, not the seniors.

Twenty-plus years later, little has changed. The youth still control the technology.

Although those familiar with var-

ious technologies 20 years ago are certainly contributing meaningfully to their workplace, they also are well-aware that the technologies they learned and mastered may have become outdated as newer ones have taken hold or become more popular.

My experience is often that the youth in the workplace view their mastery of technology as their primary and perhaps most valuable contribution to the workplace. In

their view, their tech skills overshadow their lack of experience in the business world, their ability to lead teams and their ability to woo and serve clients.

In their view, technology trumps all the other stuff. This, to any veteran of the business world, is nonsense.

Yet at the same time, business veterans recognize the influence and efficiencies that increased technology can bring to their office.

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It becomes a stalemate between the two sides — one thinking they have the wisdom the youth want and the other thinking they have the tech skills the seniors want.

In times of uncertainty — and these times certainly qualify — smart people seek wisdom to make strategic and forward-looking decisions. They seek the counsel of those who have experienced similar environments — typically, those 50 and older.

These baby boomers keep their hand on the rudder, steering the ship toward profitability through turbulent waters.

It is the youth who fill the sails, providing the power needed to move forward. Their technological know-how creates efficiencies from which their companies and clients reap benefits.

Bottom line: They need each other. The bookend generations in today's workplace — baby boomers and Millennials — must lean on each other, perhaps more than ever.

SO WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Studies of Millennials show that development opportunities are a primary factor they look for in a job. And boomers are in the position to play a key role in that development as mentors, but they generally aren't doing so.

On the other side, Millennials can unwittingly show an attitude that senior members disdain regarding the transfer of wisdom: "You owe your wisdom to me."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Boomers earned their wisdom and are justified to think that the next generations should earn theirs too.

But in a changing and uncertain marketplace, boomers should be transferring the wisdom to a generation that understands the capability and efficiencies of technology.

Many people have related to me their stories of their failed office mentor programs.

Typically, the programs are forced on a reluctant population of boomers who don't see the importance of being a mentor and who are told that their only reward for participating will be "a fulfilling experience."

Here is how such programs should be structured:

- Management can encourage mentoring, but the relationships must happen on their own.

- The one being mentored must actively but respectfully pursue the mentor and show that what he or she is learning is helping the company.

- Leadership should publicly acknowledge a successful mentor relationship, determined by a transfer of knowledge that has led to measurable advancement in the business.

- Mentoring should happen both ways, from the senior to the junior and vice versa. This means mentors should be eager to teach and ready to learn at the same time.

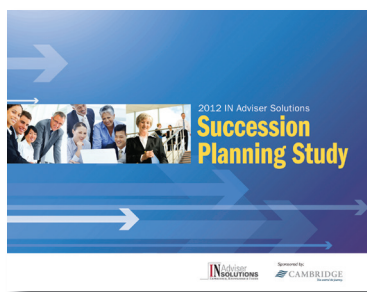
- Mentor relationships seldom last forever. Both parties must understand that when the relationship has run its course, it is OK to let go and be grateful to the other for the experience.

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