

Leverage Reverse Mentoring to Positively Impact Your Organization

Employees' mentoring senior managers not only teaches the managers new skills it also builds the mentors' confidence and communication acumen.

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When I started QA InfoTech in 2003, my goal was twofold: To help my clients build quality products to meet and exceed end-user expectations, and to internally build a quality organization founded on a core team of motivated individuals.

In my humble opinion, the first objective is accomplished more easily than the second. Since setting this goal, my management team and I have taken on as one of our key result areas the task of building this intangible yet indispensable “human” asset.

One technique we have used is the “reverse mentoring” program: a program where managers are mentored by employees who work for them directly or indirectly. You may already be doing this with skip-level meetings (meetings with employees who work in your organization but do not directly report to you), smaller group-level trainings, etc. We have formalized this mentoring technique to create a win-win situation for both our employee base and the company. Here's a look at how we have conceptualized and implemented reverse mentoring in a generic form that most organizations can leverage.

Adopt a push-pull mechanism where senior management sends out a company-wide email soliciting reverse mentoring on specific topics. These can include technical and software testing topics or anything else that is core to your company's DNA. An open invitation can be extended to the company at large, asking employees to reach out to specific people from the management team and invite them to a presentation on a relevant and interesting topic. Such a pull mechanism makes the program successful because the employees volunteer to be mentors, and it helps identify driven and motivated individuals. Giving employees the freedom to choose the topic also helps bring out their best—because the ideas are their own.

Often, reverse mentoring programs start off with a bang but are soon punted due to lack of time. Once team members understand the importance of this program, you will see them make room in their schedules for mentoring sessions. It is important to remember that it is not only senior management

that has a busy schedule but also employees who must take time away from their packed projects to prepare for these meetings. The respect for each other's time and the value reaped from these meetings will soon become driving factors that help convene these sessions regularly.

Some additional things managers can learn from these sessions include:

- How motivated is the individual, and can you get a sense of his happiness quotient as your employee?
- What is going well, what can be done better, pain points, challenges from project and work environment standpoints
- The individual's potential and readiness to step into a bigger role
- Input about the client on whose project the mentor is working

You soon will see in the mentor community not just a sense of pride but

also the commitment to delve into the details of the discussion topic, given that they are mentoring the senior management team. This program provides excellent learning potential for the mentors—not just in their technical skills but also to groom their communication, presentation, and articulation skills.

As a senior person in your company, this is an excellent opportunity for you to subtly help the mentor think big and outside the box. Asking questions about trends and examples related to his topic will help him think strategically and add more value in his client assignments. Help the mentor capture topics of interest to the community at large in print form, which you then can use in your company's blogs, white papers, case studies, and conference material. This helps the company establish itself as a thought leader in its domain and provides an avenue for objective career progression for your employees. These contributions should be taken into account in the annual performance appraisal, helping provide tangible returns to those in the mentor community who have gone beyond their call of duty.

Here are two concrete examples where reverse mentoring

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has helped us expand our portfolio of offerings and, in some cases, even helped us be better corporate citizens:

- Our team mentored us on the various techniques to adopt in accessibility testing, which gave us a chance to brainstorm various programs with team members. As a result, we have engaged visually impaired people to provide realistic accessibility feedback to our clients, which they are finding very useful. In addition to the product value this initiative provides, we are proud of creating job opportunities for the visually impaired in the software testing discipline.
- Our team’s mentoring in the areas of security testing and automated compatibility testing has forced us to invest more in these areas, including a focused R&D effort and a dedicated lab, which is empowering the team to perform better.

One may ask, “What are the challenges of implementing this program?” and “Can’t all of this be done at a project level or even an all-hands meeting?”

Like any other initiative, reverse mentoring is not free of implementation challenges. As a team, you need to be committed to succeed in this program and not to use the mentoring meetings to whine or complain about other individuals.

If the mentors do have such feedback, use other modes and programs to share this feedback with the management. Once you build such objectivity into the program and a sense of trust has been established among all entities, including the mentor’s hierarchy of managers, the trust will be a guiding pillar in the program’s success. Although other meetings can be convened to encourage knowledge sharing, they do not reap all the benefits described above. While all hands and team meetings are valuable in their own right, implementing the reverse mentoring program with the specific goals outlined above offers its own unique benefits.

In a nutshell, the goal of this program is to promote a positive impact to all entities—your management team, your employee base, the organization at large, and, indirectly, even your clients. The positive energy is viral, and you will be happy about how contagious it is! Reverse mentoring is not rocket science and can be easily replicated in any industry, domain, or organization regardless of scale. Gaining the support and trust of your entire organization will make this program withstand the test of time. With every passing year, you can continue to improve on it to make it even more meaningful and valuable to you and your organization. **{end}**

This article originally appeared on TechWell.com.

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