

# WISDOM OF THE YOUNG

Can older, more senior employees and executives learn something from younger staff? **Dr Liz Alexander** takes a look at the benefits of 'reverse mentoring'



**W**HAT DO Dumbledore of the Harry Potter books, Obi-Wan Kenobi of *Star Wars*, John Keating of *Dead Poets Society*, and Jean Brodie of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* all have in common, apart from being fictional? Each of them characterises the 'wise and trusted counsellor' or 'mentor' archetype we've seen in storytelling for centuries.

They're also considerably older and more experienced than their mentees - a notion turned on its head in late 1999 by General Electric's then-Chairman and CEO, Jack Welch. After hearing the head of their global finance company in London describe how he kept up to speed in his business by having a mentor under the age of 30, Welch returned to the US insisting hundreds of GE senior executives find young, bright juniors to mentor them on embracing the internet.

Ger Driesen is Co-Founder of the Challenge Leadership Development Academy in the Netherlands, and Practice Leader for Reverse Mentoring. In 2010 he formed the Reverse Mentoring LinkedIn group, whose members are interested in an approach embraced by global brands including Edelman PR, Time Warner, and Procter & Gamble, as well as Tesco in the UK, CitiGroup in the US, Deutsche Telecom, Belgium's Janssen Pharmaceutica and Dutch technical product wholesaler Van der Peijl Groep.

"It's tempting to read case studies showing the results achieved by such organisations and become enthusiastic about adopting reverse mentoring," says Driesen. "But you

should always take a step back and ask: what is the problem or question you want it to answer? If you're looking to develop a market approach that better matches the needs of Millennial customers, for example, exposing senior management to the insights of Millennial mentors might be one reason to initiate reverse mentoring."

Dr Katharine Brooks, the Executive Director of top US university Wake Forest's career centre, and author of *You Majored In What? Mapping Your Path from Chaos to Career*, believes companies looking to become more innovative can benefit from accessing the entrepreneurial mindset of junior employees.

"I was working with a student the other day, and showed him some software I'd been thinking would be useful for my work. He took it out of the packet, downloaded it, played around with it for a short time then began talking to me about applications I hadn't even seen, let alone considered. Senior executives across industries could benefit greatly from the confidence, connectedness and adaptability of Millennial or Gen Y mentors."

## Emotional connection

Not everyone is a proponent of reverse mentoring, however. Rene Petrin, who founded Management Mentors in 1989 in Boston, Massachusetts, advocates structured mentoring programmes as part of an organisation's professional development strategy. He believes many reverse mentoring programmes, however, are really about reverse coaching and distinguishes the two approaches by saying that coaching is short-term →



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and task-oriented while mentoring should be long-term and relationship-oriented.

Petrin questions whether Millennials, in particular, who tend to want to do things quickly and seem to prefer interacting through technology rather than face to face, have the right skills and understanding for reverse mentoring to work effectively. Mentoring shouldn't simply be about helping older mentees become tech savvy, he says. “There needs to be an emotional attachment between two people who are mature enough to establish the trust necessary to open up and fully share how they think and feel about the issue being considered.”

Which is why reverse mentoring must be part of a structured and supported initiative, not run ad hoc, says Mick Miles, CEO of Elite Training, who was approached about reverse mentoring by one of the UK's largest police forces, following some traditional mentoring courses he ran for them.

“Reverse mentoring can help bring a company up to date with modern thinking and new perspectives. But mentors need to be trained in listening, communication and how to build a rapport with someone from a different generation. And older mentees must recognise they don't have all the answers, and be willing to open up and admit to weaknesses in the area being targeted,” says Miles.

Even structured programmes need ongoing modifications. For example, UK-based leadership consultancy Brightlife was brought in to help improve the effectiveness of Cisco's existing reverse mentoring initiative across Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Russia. Since the

### The Hartford

Founded in 1810 and headquartered in Connecticut in the US, the Hartford Financial Services Group offers property and casualty insurance products to individuals and businesses, along with employee benefits solutions and mutual funds. Some years ago the leadership recognised consumers' purchasing habits of insurance and financial products were changing. To remain relevant they needed to be more fluent in social media, mobile and cloud computing, and emerging technologies.

Simultaneously, a group of junior employees, frustrated by this lack of understanding among senior management, was meeting informally to discuss ways in which technological innovations could help them in their work.

Both groups helped launch the Hartford's formal reverse mentoring programme, the focus being to use social media and emerging technologies to drive innovation. Crucially, mentees included the company's Chairman and CEO, together with leaders in business units like law, operations and claims. Mentors were selected from among top performing junior employees - the best and brightest early adopters of communication technologies - and were thoughtfully paired with mentees multiple levels above them in the corporate hierarchy who worked in different areas of the business.

Within a year, 11 of the 12 first-wave programme mentors were promoted. Both sides reported gaining new ideas that supported the programme's stated aim, resulting in two patents being filed. As Boston College's Sloan Center on Ageing and Work's report about the Hartford programme concluded: “Perhaps the most important gift of reverse mentoring... is the affirmation in all sectors of a company and across generations that the next big idea can come from anywhere.”

mentoring focus was to be inclusion and diversity, the Cisco employees were paired with more junior employees with a different cultural background, ethnicity or gender.

The previous year, mentors reported they'd ended up carrying out the actions discussed during their sessions. Brightlife's subsequent interventions provided volunteer mentors with workshops and materials to help establish the trust and intimacy Petrin believes is missing from many reverse mentoring programs, and to learn to assert themselves so that perceived barriers of status and position don't get in the way.

Above all, says Brightlife founder Kate Warren, Cisco's initiative was successful because inclusion and diversity are embedded in the company's DNA. “The cultural foundation needs to be there,” she explains. “Otherwise it will be harder and take longer to experience benefits if executives aren't really interested in the programme and mentors aren't sure their interventions are welcome. There needs to be a formal structure, strategic purpose and clear guidance to ensure success.”

Brooks feels reverse mentoring is a misnomer, however, because it doesn't fully describe the broad-based advantages to mentors, mentees and organisations: “Gen Y and Millennials have a very different relationship with employers than previous generations. They want opportunities to establish their value more quickly and will leave if they don't get them. Mentoring upwards offers junior employees ways to make valuable connections within the company hierarchy and perhaps influence company strategy.

“There are also considerable career advantages for senior executives in being exposed to new ways of thinking that enriches their work experience, helps them re-engage with long-standing roles and makes them more marketable. Done well, this approach positions an organisation to guide change rather than have change forced on them.” ■

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