

## **Reverse Mentoring: How Senior Team Members Can Learn from Junior Team Members**

**By John R. Nocero, Jessica Craig, Danielle Kroft and Danielle Greenidge**

Organizations in the clinical research industry require rapid proliferation of information and methods to stay competitive. One popular approach is for a senior member of a team to mentor a junior member. Mentors provide guidance, advice, emotional support, and a role model for protégés (“mentees”). Mentors are qualified by their experience in a career, an organization, an industry, a geographic region, or a technical field. For example, an experienced study manager might mentor a new study manager on how to build an effective team, how to recruit good sites, how to recognize risks specific to the mentee’s study, and how to handle the idiosyncrasies of the director of clinical operations. A mentor may also introduce the mentee to people who could be helpful in various ways.

Mentors typically have a more senior role in the organization than mentees, but that is not a requirement. For example, an individual contributor might know a lot more than the CEO about software systems, social media, popular culture, social trends, or technical matters such as regulatory compliance. Senior executives may need to get up to speed in areas that are second nature to their 20-something counterparts, whose lives have been more deeply integrated with computers and the Internet. When a junior employee mentors someone more senior in rank, it is called “reverse mentoring.”<sup>1</sup> Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, popularized reverse mentoring in 1999, when he required 500 top executives to pair with junior associates to learn how to use the Internet.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, the idea that senior executives could learn anything from junior team members goes against traditional business culture, where high rank is often equated with a degree of omniscience. However, in today’s rapidly changing world, it can be challenging for senior executives to do their jobs and also keep up with technology and other areas that are second nature to the young. In addition, junior team members can provide fresh perspectives. Ideally, the two parties can learn from each other.

In reverse mentoring, a junior team member enters into a “professional friendship” with someone more senior. They exchange skills, knowledge and understanding. Senior executives may not be comfortable revealing ignorance to subordinates. Nor do they always take kindly to advice from subordinates. Reverse mentoring therefore requires an uncommon level of trust. The senior-level mentee must be confident that their conversations will be kept confidential. The junior-level mentor must be confident that unwelcome advice or perceived criticism will not result in punishment.

Mentor and mentee enter into a professional friendship under the following rules:

- Ensure that both parties have complementary expertise and compatible personalities.
- Agree on scope and logistics (e.g., frequency and mode of communications).
- Set clear goals, expectations and processes. Review progress periodically.
- Be tactful, patient and open-minded.
- Periodically fine tune the relationship.
- Terminate mentoring when appropriate, although the friendship can continue indefinitely.

## **Reverse Mentoring in Practice**

Clinical research has recently seen rapid adoption of decentralized studies and a dramatic acceleration in the use of paperless technologies. As in other industries, there is a significant push for research teams to work remotely with previous face-to-face workflows now being done electronically. Young, technically savvy employees are leading the charge.<sup>3</sup>

Until recently, our company primarily relied on face-to-face meetings, emails and telephone calls. These communication modes have now been largely supplanted by Teams, an integrated collaboration platform offered by Microsoft, that supports chat, document sharing, and online video calls and meetings.

While many employees have taken to Teams like ducks to water, others including senior executives and highly experienced specialists, who otherwise make outsized contributions to the organization and our customers, have struggled, creating new comments instead of responding to threads, ending a meeting instead of leaving it, not muting their microphone, etc. Junior team members, serving as reverse mentors, have brought them up to speed with Teams and, as a fortuitous side effect, created new channels of communication and learning throughout the company.

## **Conclusion**

Technology is just one of the many areas in which reverse mentoring can be productive. For example, imagine yourself as a senior executive recently assigned to lead a new functional department or regional operation. Imagine yourself as an expert in yesterday's regulations or business processes supervising people with more current expertise than your own. Imagine yourself managing a multicultural workforce for the first time or interviewing potential new hires who do not share your values.

Reverse mentoring relationships can occur organically, but promoting them in a structured way with executive sponsorship and leadership by example can be very worthwhile.

## **References**

1. "Reverse Mentoring: Building Mutually Beneficial Partnerships," retrieved Oct. 1, 2020, from <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/reverse-mentoring.htm>.
2. Steimle, Josh. "Reverse Mentoring – Investing in Tomorrow's Business Strategy," retrieved Oct. 14, 2020, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshsteimle/2015/05/05/reverse-mentoring-investing-in-tomorrows-business-strategy/#4a0493f36769>.
3. Hafer, L.; Dunsy, K.; Smiles, P. "What COVID-19 Teaches Us About Conducting Clinical Research Remotely and Electronically," retrieved Oct. 14, 2020, from <https://acrpnet.org/2020/08/10/what-covid-19-teaches-us-about-conducting-clinical-research-remotely-and-electronically/>.

## **Authors**

John R. Nocero is Senior Auditor, Quality and Regulatory at Health Decisions. Contact him at [jnocero@healthdec.com](mailto:jnocero@healthdec.com).

Jessica Craig is an Executive Administrative Assistant at Health Decisions. Contact her at [jcraig@healthdec.com](mailto:jcraig@healthdec.com).

Danielle Kroft is Associate Director, Marketing and Communications at Health Decisions. Contact her at [dkroft@healthdec.com](mailto:dkroft@healthdec.com).

Danielle Greenidge is Human Resources Manager at Health Decisions. Contact her at [dgreenidge@healthdec.com](mailto:dgreenidge@healthdec.com).

Health Decisions is a specialty contract research organization for women's health and diagnostics headquartered in Durham, North Carolina. For more information, visit [www.healthdec.com](http://www.healthdec.com).