

# Let mentors spice up innovation!

The occasional INNOVERSITY Column by Susanne Justesen, INNOVERSITY, May 2005

**Most of us probably already know that mentoring plays an important role in many organisations when it comes to career development, retention and talent management. But did you ever think about mentor - programs as a means for sustaining innovation?**

Most of us are already aware of the fact that we can no longer look to past behaviours and wisdom to explain things as they take shape today and will do tomorrow. We also need to look to the future itself and the people holding it when looking for answers.

I certainly acknowledge the importance of both experience and history, but firmly believe that we always will - whether we want to or not - rely on past experience and need no further encouragement to do so – and in the rare case where we fail to do so, I am sure that someone else will make sure that we do. The 'been there done that' effect.

What we DO need encouragement to do is to be better at listening to the future, and non the least the people holding the future, and very often they are already at your doorstep or even within your organisation.

Mentorship...

Although the notion of mentorship has existed since ancient Greece (Mentor was the friend with whom Odysseus trusted the education of his son), it is only recently that we have come to recognise how critical mentorship can actually be in forming, shaping and none the least LISTENING to the future.

Many organisations have realised the benefits of mentoring both in terms of helping out with career issues, but also in terms of just general advice and facilitation. But certainly also as a means for introducing new employees to the workplace culture and routines. But how can mentorship – usually seen to preserve the existing at the expense of the young and new – be any good in innovation?

How can mentorship programmes usually centred on history; on transferring experience from the more experienced to the less experienced, from the older to the younger; from the more established to the less established; from mentor to mentee be of any value in rethinking and renewing what you do and how you do it in your organisation? I claim that we should turn mentorship upside down and make use of reverse mentorship.

Reverse mentorship programmes...

Reverse mentorship is a rather new way of thinking about mentorship, in terms of it being mentorship on the reverse, where it is early-career professionals offering guidance to more experienced colleagues. It is a great way of welcoming the future, the new, the young and the unknown.

Reverse mentorship programmes are not entirely new, they first appeared in a handful of large organisations who saw the coming of the internet and the increasing importance of IT-skills among top management; and the resulting need for top managers to be coached by younger employees.

Jack Welch at GE was one of the first to set in motion a reverse mentorship programme at General Electric. He told his immediate business directors to seek out a young, technically literate executive to act as a mentor, and see how they could use these new skills to expand their existing businesses into e-commerce-related ones. He was looking

for new ways of doing things, he was looking for the future ... and today I guess we can say that he found it.

I do not in any way suggest for traditional mentorship programmes to be completely replaced by reverse mentorship programmes, on the contrary. We certainly need for newcomers to be able to learn from more experienced colleagues. But what I do suggest is for reverse mentorship programmes to co-exist with traditional mentorship programmes, thereby ensuring the transfer of both 'new' and 'old' expertise.

Reverse mentorships and innovation...

By setting up a reverse mentorship programme in your organisation you are opening up the vital venes of your organisation to let the blood of innovation flow freely; and you allow for occasional blood transfusions to replace old with new when the old no longer serves it's purpose.

There are different ways for you to make use of reverse mentorship in your organisation. I have identified the following three different approaches - maybe one of them could be a way to spice up innovation in your organisation, department, team or group.

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Make newcomers be sought out as mentors to 'older' employees who will this way become mentee's or protégé's, for them to make use of all the good ideas and insights new employees have to offer but never get to share. Often when you start out in a new company, you have so many ideas for how to improve things, but you often don't want to share these ideas until you are more 'settled in'.

But what usually happens is, that after some time, when you feel that you HAVE settled in and learned 'how things are done around here', you no longer remember those brilliant ideas. Reverse mentorship is an effective way to get hold of these new ideas and put them into use.

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Seek out mentors among traditionally non-heard voices within your organisation. Make representatives of the diversity you already have become mentors to management. Be that diversity professional, demographic, ethnographic, attitudinal etc, make such diversity available to the organisation by turning 'the diverse' into a mentor to the organisation, to management - to on how to make the organisation more open towards incorporating different viewpoints, ideas and suggestions.

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Seek out mentors among traditionally non-heard stakeholders / customers outside your organisation, both to get new inspiration, but certainly also to assist with the implementation of new ideas, products and processes. Volvo has done this when hiring in the controversial Danish artist Michael Brammer.

Mentorship is about guidance, having someone asking the right questions to the right person. By providing such guidance within your organisation in an untraditional bottom-up-down approach to innovation.

With reverse mentorship you make way for improving both ideation (idea generation and selection), and the implementation of those ideas. It is an easy way for your organisation to make use of the diversity of knowledge already there - and thereby strengthen innovation.