

Five tips on how to be a good mentor to someone twice your age

May 7 2019, by Julie Nyanjom



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Plato and Aristotle. Barbara Walters and Oprah Winfrey. Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. In each of these famous relationships it was the older person with more experience acting as mentor, guiding the much younger "mentee" in their career.

But changes in the modern workplace suggest we will increasingly see more circumstances in which [mentors](#) may be younger – sometimes much younger – than their mentees.

Think back to starting a new job. Even if your workplace didn't have a formal mentorship program – pairing you with a more experienced colleague, separate to your manager, whose role was to help you succeed – it's likely at least one person took you "under their wing" informally.

Who will do the same for the 63-year-old returning to a workplace that looks and operates differently to the one he or she left a decade ago?

Workplaces must prepare for an ageing workforce. Twenty years ago, just a quarter of Australia's population kept working after they turned 55. Now [a third do](#), and the proportion will continue to rise. As people stay in the workforce longer and change jobs more often, it's increasingly likely there will be times an older colleague might benefit from mentoring.

It isn't even necessary to be new to an organisation. Some companies that recognise the value of staying current are embracing "reverse mentoring", in which millennials can school older executives on technology and cultural trends.

But social norms and expectations about age and experience [can make it hard](#) for someone younger to be the mentor.

So how do you get it right?

Why it matters

Generalisations about [generational differences](#) are common. [Perhaps you've read baby boomers](#) (born between 1946 and 1964) value loyalty,

and gen-xers (born between 1965 and 1980) [work-life balance](#), while millennials crave innovation and change.

Such notions are more myth than fact. Stereotyping people by their membership of an age group is no less problematic than doing it according to ethnicity or gender. It can encourage [unhealthy biases](#) and create barriers to communication and understanding.



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A better term than "reverse mentoring" is "inclusive mentoring". This takes the focus off thinking there is a "natural" age order to mentoring

and puts the emphasis on simply encouraging shared learning between colleagues. Everyone has something of value to learn, or teach, in a respectful environment free from age or hierarchical biases.

The key is to be conscious of the barriers. You must be aware of [the stereotypes and biases](#) - that influence expectations and perceptions to do with age, but also of the chance that different experiences can lead to different outlooks to life.

Start out by asking your colleague about their expectations of their new role, their understanding of their tasks, their past work experience, and how they anticipate the [relationship](#) going.

It's important to remember the essentials of mentoring practice. These remain the same. A mentoring relationship is about support, sharing knowledge and insights, and being a friend. Both mentor and mentee bring something to the table.

Five top tips

1. Understand stereotypical assumptions influence the potential success of the mentoring relationship. Tension is more likely if either of you have negative perceptions of the other based on age difference. Training in how to identify your unconscious biases might be a good idea before you start
2. open and respectful communication should be the focus. Start the conversation by clarifying the objectives of the mentoring relationship between both of you. Being clear and focused is a good basis for mutual respect
3. give yourselves adequate time to settle into the relationship. Your outlook towards life and work may be different. Give yourself time to get to know one another and to find common ground
4. be open and willing to learn. You might know more about some

things, but your colleague is likely to know things you don't. Think of the mentoring relationship as a [collaborative partnership](#) where mutual learning takes place

5. it's OK to be apprehensive. You may feel challenged. Your colleague may feel just as uncomfortable. But with time and effort this apprehension will fade.

Becoming a good mentor, or a good mentee, isn't automatic. It takes [takes time and effort](#). But it is worth the effort, enriching the experience and skills of both parties, and contributing to an organisation able to compete in a changing world.

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