



# Conversations

By Helen Eckmann and Sarah Fraenzimmer



# That Matter

**Today's workforce is composed of four generations who, historically, have been better at misunderstanding each other than working together. But well-organized mentoring programs such as the ones mentioned here can change that.**

**T**he 21st century has introduced an historical first: The workforce is now composed of four different generations. This broad generational divide has intensified and deepened the pre-existing problem of intergenerational miscommunication. As experienced workers retire, valuable knowledge is quite literally leaving the building, confined within the brains of the nation's retirement-aged population, because the generations do not know how to talk to each another. For businesses, these missed opportunities to have meaningful conversations can result in exponential losses of time and money.

As organizations attempt to retain their corporate knowledge, many are investing millions of dollars in capturing information in databases. Too often, however, the knowledge in these databases is collected but never used. As a consequence, they become, in the words of David DeLong of MIT's AgeLab, "graveyards." A major U.S. airline painstakingly recorded and cataloged exit interviews with retiring workers, only to find that nobody used the tapes. Measures like these, which focus on capturing knowledge rather than building relationships, are rarely successful. Why? Because when it comes to learning, many would rather interact with another person than listen to an audiotape or scour a database for a single worthwhile insight.

In the United States, baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, currently make up at least a third of the workforce. As the 76 million to 79 million boomers are rapidly approaching retirement age, organizations are facing an epidemic of lost knowledge. San Francisco-based Taleo, a talent management

consultancy, projects that 500 of the largest U.S. organizations will lose 50 percent of their senior management over the next five years. Now, more than ever, organizations need to train these retiring workers to be effective mentors, to create an environment where valuable corporate knowledge is passed from one generation to the next.

Over the last six years, Helen Eckmann, Ed.D., an instructor in the internationally acclaimed Supply Chain Management Institute at the University of San Diego, has conducted personal interviews with supply chain vice presidents at more than 40 organizations, asking, "What is the biggest problem you face?" Whether at Hilton Hotels, Sony Corporation, Hewlett-Packard or the United States Marine Corps, each business leader expressed alarm about managing the huge surge of retirements happening in the next five years. The essence of their concern was: "Half of my supply chain knowledge is going to walk out the door in five years, and I don't know how to begin to capture it."

To examine the problem more closely, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven supply chain and operations vice presidents and directors from Clorox, Delta, Goodrich, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, SAIC and Qualcomm. Among those interviewed, some had recently retired and others were planning on retiring in the next five years. Each of those interviewed were referred by younger workers in their organizations who stated, "I work with a person who I can learn from; you should talk to them." Eckmann, a baby boomer herself, enlisted the help of Sarah Frauenzimmer, a recent graduate from the global leadership master's program at the University of San Diego, to provide a Generation X (those born between 1960 and 1980, sometimes called the "baby bust" generation) perspective to the research. Together, they surveyed 75 younger workers in Generations X and Y (those born between 1980 and 2000, often called "millennials") to confirm their findings and develop a practical intergenerational mentoring model for the supply chain organization.

The research unveiled that the single most effective (and perhaps least expensive) way to retain corporate knowledge is for retiring workers to actively mentor their successors, passing on what they know before they retire. The interviews and survey revealed three key areas for successful mentoring relationships: traits and behaviors of effective mentors; traits and behaviors of effective learners (traditionally an individual from a younger generation); and the formal and informal structures needed to build mentoring relationships.

## Seven Keys To Being A Successful Mentor

- 1) **Be flexible.** Information cannot be effectively passed on if the sender is watching the clock or is stuck adhering to old-fashioned formality. Investing in the younger worker requires flexibility in timing and format.
- 2) **Recognize that you're not immortal.** Someday you will be gone, so it is vital to share what you know through on-the-job mentoring and by

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encouraging younger workers. Mentor through their mistakes and teach practical problem-solving skills. Do not assume that the processes you have been using are the best available. Additionally, successful mentors are often candid about the fact that the younger worker is more skilled at technology and are willing to become the student themselves when it comes to technological issues. For instance, in the study, the successful mentors often asked the younger worker for better ways to save, store or categorize data.

- 3) **Focus on the organization's success, not your own.** Good mentors do not resent the younger workers or believe that their own knowledge is too sacred or hard-earned to share. They want to make things easier for others. Do not perceive retirement as a time to hoard discoveries.

A vice president for a major airplane manufacturer risked his own job to

pass on his knowledge. He opted to announce his retirement plans and focus his attention on mentoring his successor in his final years at the company. Many of his colleagues warned him against this plan, fearing the choice would be a "career ender." He ignored their warnings because he knew his choice was the best one for the company.

- 4) **Focus on your younger colleague's success, not your own.** More than any other attribute, selflessness will lead an older worker to seek out ways to share knowledge with a younger colleague, with the understanding that the younger worker's future with the company is more valuable than personal gain. Be as willing to discuss your failures as you are to discuss successes. Encourage new ideas from the younger generation and embrace the more collaborative style of Gen X and Gen Y.

A vice president in the aerospace industry confessed that he "didn't care" if his younger colleague used the information he was sharing to gain a faster promotion.

- 5) **Learn to adapt to your audience.** Sharing information well requires an awareness of the learning styles of the younger worker and the willingness to adapt teaching modalities to match. Take note when a younger worker is "not getting it" and try another approach. If telling a story isn't working, then try to draw a diagram or take the younger worker for a walk to see if activity will stimulate thought.

A chemical manufacturing vice president initially met a younger worker through one of the company's formalized knowledge-sharing programs. While the program itself wasn't particularly successful, this vice president continued to pursue a mentoring relationship with the younger worker, meeting for coffee and in venues that were more conducive to knowledge-sharing than the formal structure established by the company. Of the experience, the vice president said, "I just saw something special in him and I wanted to find a way to reach him."

6) **Check your ego at the door.** Effective mentors are in touch with their own failings and keep their ego in check. Having no illusions about the gaps in your own knowledge lends authenticity to your interactions with younger workers. For example, successful mentors didn't try to pretend they were technology experts, they just asked younger workers for help.

7) **Think beyond the immediate challenges.** Mentors need to be more interested in teaching problem-solving skills than on solving the problem. Teach the

younger worker how to find his or her own solutions. Use connections with long-term, systems thinking to teach the techniques younger workers will need to solve the problems once you are gone.

The airline manufacturing vice president saw that his younger colleagues were exceptionally bright and technically savvy, but were inexperienced problem-solvers. He felt that he needed to help them to take a longer view because, as he said, "the big picture isn't in the computer."

## Seven Keys To Learning From A Mentor

1) **Be humble.** Real learning can't happen if you are unwilling to admit that you don't have all the answers. Your mentor may lack your technological savvy, but assuming that deficiency negates their ability to teach you anything is a mistake. Just because he or she can't build a spreadsheet in Excel doesn't mean that your mentor doesn't have valuable problem-solving skills to teach you. Acknowledge that you still have a lot to learn.

## What's On Their Minds?

**W**hat do Generations X and Y really think of their older colleagues? We surveyed 75 younger workers to find out. The results were encouraging: 97 percent of those surveyed believed that their older colleagues had something of value to teach them. The bad news is that only 5 percent described their organizations as "very focused" on creating an environment that encouraged knowledge-sharing. So how do you share knowledge with a Gen X/Gen Y worker? Some of the answers:

**Seek out relationships.** In response to the question, "How can one generation share their knowledge with the next?" one respondent was particularly adamant: "Relationship, relationship, relationship. For all the books written in the world, nothing can or ever will replace relationship." A former fighter pilot, this woman witnessed "countless examples of wasted time and energy because the incoming generation ignored the lessons learned by the previous generation, and the previous cadre failed to take the time to pass on the information before they departed." Her recognition of time is important: Relationship-building cannot happen overnight, nor can truly effective information-sharing. The quality of information-sharing, however, improves exponentially through relationship.

**Resist the temptation to lecture.** Generations X and Y have a low threshold for pontificating, so they need to respect you before they will believe you. Two of the biggest turnoffs are assuming that they know nothing and believing that seniority equates with having all the answers. Next on the list of pet peeves are monopolizing the conversation and failing to answer the question. One survey respondent cited these among the motivators to leave her present position: "not enough opportunities for my voice to be heard and for management to listen" and "too many egos and too much micromanagement." Mentors need to stay humble and focused: Make sure that you answer the questions asked of you and remember to ask the younger worker some questions, too.

**Accept new technology.** Generations X and Y are "wired" generations, accustomed to collaboration and remaining connected through technology. Several respondents cited e-mail as a first choice for receiving information from a colleague, primarily because it was timely and they could refer back to it later. This need, however, is predicated on relationships, because most also expressed a desire for the sender to be available to meet and discuss follow-up questions. It is important to note that members of the preceding generations must be open to the value of technology, whether or not they choose to use it in their personal lives. No matter how foreign it may seem to older workers, the younger generations do maintain strong, authentic relationships via e-mail, social networking sites or text messaging. Older workers who scoff at the emergence of technologically linked relationships and suggest that these aren't "real" connections will quickly lose the ear of younger workers for whom wired relationships are second nature.

**Embrace collaborative efforts.** We found that almost every younger worker likes working in groups. Often they are less focused on getting the credit themselves than their baby boomer counterparts. Collaboration is second nature to a generation that is accustomed to sharing videos on YouTube and tagging one another in photos on Facebook. This collaborative spirit isn't limited to private life, but seeps into their work lives, too. The Linux computer operating system, originated by Linus Torvalds, is perhaps the best-known result of this collaborative attitude. Linux provides a basic framework, but unlike Microsoft, the source code for the programs isn't proprietary and programmers freely share their programs and improvements. The open-source model, like the Linux operating system, represents the way that today's generations prefer to work. One younger worker surveyed articulated this need by citing "group brainstorming" as his preferred way of learning.

A younger worker from a large defense contractor explained, “I need to have a meeting every morning with my mentor so I can try to know what he knows.”

- 2) **Be curious and ask questions.** The best learners aren’t just attracted to challenges; they live for them. The only way to learn from a mentor is to follow your innate curiosity, ask questions and pursue answers. In your questioning, consider who has the critical information that you need and seek them out. When an airline executive was retiring after 24 years, she made it clear to her coworkers that she was available to answer their questions, but did not force the issue. Instead, she waited for the younger workers to ask for advice. She understood that what she knew wouldn’t really be passed on in any lasting way if the receivers weren’t actually curious enough to ask the question.
- 3) **Speak up when the teaching style isn’t working for you.** Receiving information in lasting ways requires the willingness to have a dialogue and the desire to explore new ideas, but if your mentor isn’t speaking to you in a language you understand, the relationship ceases to be a useful one. Let your mentor know when you need to have information shared in a different way. If he or she is a natural storyteller but you’re not an auditory learner, you must be willing to ask your mentor to draw you a picture (if you are a visual learner) or take you through the problem (kinesthetic learning) so that you really understand him or her. One of the younger workers in the study mentioned that he immediately realized that he “needed” his mentor, but it was up to him to make sure he understood what was being said.
- 4) **Stay focused on your goal.** What are you really hoping to learn from your mentor? A person who keeps a specific goal in mind is in a better position to retain what he or she learns than one who is counting the minutes until quitting time. This is particularly true when your focus is on the success of the project and not just your résumé or stock

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portfolio. Learn to separate the “field” from the “focus” of what needs to be accomplished. It is also important to bear in mind recent research that found that your IQ drops 10 percent when you are in communication overload. When you’re talking to your mentor, put down the BlackBerry and send that e-mail later. Recognize that time spent with your mentor requires your complete concentration.

- 5) **View a problem from both sides.** Part of the learning process requires the ability to objectively balance two seemingly incompatible outcomes, such as time versus quality. “Tension thinking” is the ability to look at a problem from differing perspectives without needing to pass an immediate judgment. Abraham Lincoln was known for bringing in political rivals to argue in front of him so that he could make up his mind. Cultivate your ability to hear both sides of an argument before choosing one.

- 6) **Be candid about past failures.** The best learners have experienced a failure or two. Failures are enormously educational because they check your ego and remind you that you don’t have all the answers. An airline manufacturing vice president discovered that his most receptive younger colleagues were the ones who had fallen on their face at least once. Those who had not experienced failure continued to believe they knew it all already, and didn’t need him.
- 7) **Keep an open mind.** To learn anything, you need to be open: open to input and open-minded enough to suspend judgment when someone demonstrates a new alternative. You are not in a mentoring relationship just to learn the answer to the problem, but to learn the art of problem-solving. One vice president at an aerospace manufacturer explained that she encountered plenty of younger workers whose very demeanor communicated that they were totally unwilling to learn from her. As a result, she didn’t even attempt to develop a relationship with them. Be aware of the verbal and nonverbal messages you are sending.

## Structures That Foster Mentoring Relationships

Organizations can do many things to ensure that these cross-generational “conversations that matter” are taking place. The structures that foster strong mentoring relationships fall into one of three areas: cultural, physical or hierarchical. What follows are some of the organizational changes that will make a difference.

### Cultural Structures For Mentoring

**Establish a culture where older workers are expected to mentor a successor.** Only two vice presidents at the organizations interviewed were involved in the process of choosing a successor and mentoring them for a period between six months and two years. In both cases, their choice to equip their successors for the future was perceived as a risky, career-killing decision. Organizations need to

foster a culture where sharing retirement plans and planning for the future is the norm and does not mean that older workers are made to feel obsolete.

**Take organizational focus away from purely result-driven rewards.**

Instead, establish a focus on knowledge-sharing. The success of the Human Genome Project, a collaborative effort to map the human genome, provides an excellent model for knowledge-sharing. From the outset, Francis Collins, Ph.D., the project director, encouraged scientists to share their successes and failures. As a result, the project was completed ahead of schedule and under budget.

**Allow for flexible schedules that adapt to needs of both the mentor and younger worker.**

As boomers approach retirement age, many are willing to continue working as long as their schedules afford them some of the flexibility that retirement would. Similarly, Generation Xers who are parents, particularly fathers, are increasingly demonstrating that they value jobs that allow them to be at home with their kids. Organizations that allow telecommuting and flexible working hours will find that their mentoring relationships are more successful in the long run.

**Integrate new technology to encourage communication.** Generations X and Y are “wired” and think nothing of communicating vital information via e-mail, text messages and postings on social networking sites. Organizations that are willing to embrace new technology will keep the interests of younger workers. Boeing has used the social networking site Facebook.com to recruit and to keep interns connected once their internships are over. This communicates willingness to embrace the prevailing culture and facilitates communication on the younger worker’s level.

**Recognize that creativity often comes from mistakes.** Retail giant Target has stated that it is acceptable to have only 60 percent of its new products be a success. Corporate culture needs to be able to handle failure if it wants to foster a spirit of cooperation and sharing.

**Physical Structures For Mentoring**

**Create a workspace architecture that provides informal meeting places.**

A vice president at a major chemical manufacturer who often met with a younger colleague over coffee believes that organizations should actually create internal coffee-shop spaces where people could meet and exchange ideas. If a barista isn’t in the organization’s budget, consider how the office layout could be changed to facilitate coffee-break conversations.

**Establish an open floor plan.** Closed doors can suggest conspiratorial “back-room” dealings (even when they aren’t happening), create physical boundaries and stifle collaborative thinking. Even at the company headquarters, Jim Sinegal, the CEO of Costco, has a doorless office in an open space, and he answers his own phone.

**Rethink the physical structure of a team.** Collaborative learning can still happen when team members do not share a physical space. Especially in this age of global business, be open to the options provided by telecommuting, videoconferencing, voice-over-Internet protocol and other resources. Frauentzimmer, a member of Generation X herself, completed a master’s degree through distance learning and worked on numerous group presentations and papers with teammates on three continents, having only met once. The success of the experience completely redefined any preconceptions of team identity.

**Hierarchical Structures For Effective Mentoring**

**Recognize the limits of the organizational chart.** Being at the top does not mean you have all the answers. Assuming that you do will hinder productive relationships.

**Create permeable boundaries.** The entry-level buyer should be able to present an idea to a vice president of supply management without fear. An example of permeable boundaries occurred when a Florida sanitation worker came up with an idea for a more efficient way of collecting garbage in his city. He proposed the idea, it was adopted and his innovation saved his city

millions of dollars. This type of innovation and mentoring can only occur in an organization with permeable boundaries. Without them, great ideas have nowhere to go.

**Cultivate cross-functional teams to gain fresh perspectives.**

Cross-functional teams demonstrate that every team member is valued, regardless of their place on the organizational chart. In a cross-functional team, the person in positional authority may actually end up as the lowest in “rank.” One organization had the general manager answer the phone when all others were dispatched to solve a mission-critical issue. During that time period, the general manager was the only one without a mission-critical role, so it made sense to have him handle the phone. Scenarios like this enable everyone to see their value.

The current organizational concern over brain drain brought on by retiring baby boomers creates an opportunity for organizations to reassess how they share and retain their corporate knowledge. Some of the most critical business knowledge cannot be found on a spreadsheet, or effectively captured in a database or a recorded exit interview. What is most vital can only be preserved through person-to-person mentoring. Fostering effective communication among the generations requires thoughtful planning. Forward-facing organizations will begin to target retiring workers who are the most flexible, humble and selfless in their organizations to work as mentors. They will pair these retiring workers with younger workers who are humble, curious and responsive-tension thinkers. These organizations must then look at their own cultural, physical and hierarchical structures to ensure that they are creating an organizational landscape that will allow honest and productive conversation to emerge. **ISM**

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