# Reverse Mentoring: Turning the hierarchy upside down

We've all heard about the importance of having a mentor in our careers, someone to help guide us, give us advice, and teach us things we need to know about the business world. Mentoring is not a new concept and has been around in some form or fashion for a very long time. But what if we decided to take a different approach to mentoring, turn things upside down and challenge the traditional approach we've always had to the mentoring relationship? That is the idea behind the concept of the Reverse Mentoring Program PwC's Greater Atlanta Market has been piloting for the last year. Reverse Mentoring challenges the traditional hierarchy and turns the traditional mentoring relationship upside down, by assigning new staff members as the mentors for more experienced, seasoned partners and principals.

"Our view is that reverse mentoring is an opportunity for us to engage our people in a conversation around the things that are most important to the firm," says Gary Price, a partner in Advisory practice who was a mentee in the Atlanta market.

For the Greater Atlanta market, the concept was born out of a desire by the Market Council leadership team to find better ways to connect with members of the rapidly growing millennial generation. Inspired by the description of Reverse Mentoring in an article about ways to mentor millennials from the Harvard Business Review, the Market Council decided it would give the idea a try. Each member of the market council was paired up with a staff member at either the Experienced Associate or Senior Associate level. These Seniors and Associates serve as the "Mentors" to the market council leaders who are the "Mentees." A few baseline parameters where established, including confidentiality and a commitment to meet regularly, but other than a few basic guidelines, the structure of the experience is left up to each pair to define.

As the Mentor, each staff member is responsible for setting up monthly meetings with his or her mentee and for driving the agenda and picking topics for discussion. The mentee is also encouraged to offer suggestions for discussion topics in areas where he or she might have questions or want the opinion of a staff member. For example, a leader "mentee" might want to some guidance from his or her mentor about an upcoming staff meeting to understand how to better communicate with the staff and anticipate any areas of concern or topics to cover in the meeting. The mentor can provide invaluable insight and an inside look directly into the morale of the practice. Each quarter the mentors come together on a call to share best practices and talk about the experience each person is having in an effort to foster new ideas and topics to discuss with the mentees in order to keep the experience growing.

Mentor/mentee relationships are important to opening a new line of communication, as demonstrated by Atlanta mentor, Vanessa Cook, a Tax practice senior associate and her mentee, Jeff Able, a partner in the Assurance practice. "I've been able to build a personal relationship with my mentee and I think that it gives me the avenue to give advice and that advice will be taken into account," comments Vanessa. Jeff appreciated the insight Vanessa was able to provide him that he would not otherwise have, "Though Vanessa has been with the firm for 10 months, and I've been with the firm for over 20 years, she knows things that I don't know that will make me better if I embrace them," he states.

One natural area that the conversations gravitate towards is technology. Many of the Mentor/Mentee pairs have talked about ways to better use technology on a daily basis to make work more efficient, whether it be by utilizing a particular App or by using technology as a means to better communicate with team members such as text messaging.

Technology is just one entry point for the discussion between mentor and mentee. As with more traditional mentoring roles, the key to success lies in the development of the relationship between mentor and mentee. The deeper the relationship and the more each mentor and mentee invest in one another, the more benefit both parties will see.

Reverse Mentoring is also a key way to increase our awareness of diversity issues. Mixing mentor and mentee pairings to reflect a mix of race and genders can create a very positive learning experience and connection that leads to personal growth and deeper level of awareness by both people. It's a great way to increase the cultural dexterity of those involved.

The goal of Reverse Mentoring at PwC is not just to increase the connectivity between our partners/principals and staff or to reduce turnover. PwC is exploring how to leverage this program in offices across the country in order to create better leaders at both the staff and partner/principal level through a shared experience that transcends differences in years of experience and provides self development for each person through the exchange of ideas and experiences.