



# REVERSE MENTORING AT WORK: FOSTERING CROSS- GENERATIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPING MILLENNIAL LEADERS

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*Reverse mentoring is an innovative way to encourage learning and facilitate cross-generational relationships. It involves the pairing of a younger, junior employee acting as mentor to share expertise with an older, senior colleague as mentee. The purpose is knowledge sharing, with the mentee focused on learning from the mentor's updated subject or technological expertise and generational perspective. In addition, there is an emphasis on the leadership development of the mentors. Reverse mentoring is situated in the mentoring literature as an alternative form of mentoring, with unique characteristics and support functions exchanged that distinguish it from other developmental relationships. A model is developed that focuses on key variables to consider and how reverse mentoring may benefit individuals and organizations. Generational differences are also presented, and the ways in which reverse mentoring capitalizes on millennial capabilities and preferences are highlighted throughout. Finally, theoretical and practical contributions are discussed, including essential components for creating a reverse mentoring program. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

*Keywords:* reverse mentoring, mentoring, developmental relationships, millennials, generations, leadership development

## Introduction

Executives are beginning to realize that knowledge isn't a one-way street. It's in everyone's best interest to share expertise.  
(Greengard, 2002)

**T**his article introduces reverse mentoring as an opportunity for human resources practitioners to facilitate cross-generational knowledge sharing and builds a theoretical foundation

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for academic studies. Research has established that mentoring is beneficial for both individuals and organizations (Allen & Eby, 2007; Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Traditionally, mentoring relationships have consisted of an older, senior executive providing advice and counsel to a younger, junior colleague (Kram, 1985). Reverse mentoring turns this formula on its head.

Reverse mentoring is defined as the pairing of a younger, junior employee acting as mentor to share expertise with an older, senior colleague as the mentee. General Electric's former CEO, Jack Welch, is generally

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credited with introducing a formal reverse mentoring program in 1999 when he ordered 500 of his top managers to find young employees who could teach them about the Internet (Greengard, 2002). Since then, reverse mentoring has become a "best practice" among several large corporations, including Dell (Harvey & Buckley, 2002), Procter & Gamble (Greengard, 2002), and Time Warner (Hewlett, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2009b). For organizations, tapping into the expertise and technology savvy of young work-

ers is a clear benefit of reverse mentoring. However, reverse mentoring also holds promise for building the leadership pipeline, fostering better intergenerational relationships, enhancing diversity initiatives, and driving innovation. For individuals, reverse mentoring is an opportunity for learning by both participants and a creative way to engage millennial employees.

As the youngest cohort of workers, members of the Millennial Generation, born from 1978 through 1999, currently constitute 76 million employees and comprise the fastest-growing segment of the workforce. The other three generations are generally defined as: veterans, or the "Greatest Generation," born before 1945; baby boomers, born 1946–1964; and Generation X, born 1965–1978 (Lancaster &

Stillman, 2005; Smola & Sutton, 2002). Millennials and the baby boomers are each roughly twice the size of Generation X, and both groups rank high-quality colleagues as the most important reward for their work, beyond compensation (Hewlett, Sherbin, & Sumberg, 2009a). Since these two generations will emerge as a large majority of the workforce when the economy recovers, finding ways to develop relationships between these groups should be a top priority for organizations. Reverse mentoring is an innovative and cost-effective professional development tool that capitalizes on building bridges between generations (Harvey & Buckley, 2002; Hewlett et al., 2009b; Meister & Willyerd, 2010).

While reverse mentoring has clear practical application, there has been little academic interest and no empirical work on reverse mentoring in the management field (for educational studies, see Cotugna & Vickery, 1998; Leh, 2005). This article begins to fill this gap by creating a theoretical basis for conceptualizing reverse mentoring, how it is similar to and different from traditional mentoring, and the potential benefits and challenges of reverse mentoring relationships for individuals and organizations. The framework for understanding how these relationships can thrive is developed drawing on the literatures on mentoring, social exchange theory, high-quality connections, and work-based learning. Reverse mentoring characteristics are presented and a model developed highlighting key antecedents and consequences of this process to assist HR practitioners in designing programs. In practice, while reverse mentoring is not new, it holds particular promise for fostering cross-generational learning and the leadership development of millennial employees, who will be critical to the future success of organizations. Finally, the discussion includes theoretical contributions and actionable steps for creating a successful reverse mentoring program.

## Theoretical Background

Research and interest in mentoring and developmental relationships has steadily

increased over the last 30 years (Chandler, Kram, & Yip, forthcoming). With the increasing number of millennial employees entering the workplace, researchers and practitioners alike would be well advised to renew their focus on the potential of mentoring for attracting and retaining young talent. Most importantly, millennials want personalized opportunities to contribute immediately and to have their voices “heard” (Twenge, 2006). Reverse mentoring provides a forum for millennial employees to have immediate impact and develop strong work relationships with organizational leaders (Hewlett et al., 2009a). To build a foundation for understanding reverse mentoring relationships, HR academics and practitioners can draw upon a long history of research in the areas of mentoring and social exchange, as well as more recent work on high-quality connections and learning.

The classic qualitative work by Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978) and Kram (1983, 1985) defined mentoring as a work relationship between an older, more experienced adult (mentor) and a young adult (mentee or protégé) that enhances career development. Kram (1985) found that mentors provided both career and psychosocial support resources important for the career success of mentees. Subsequent studies link having a mentor and the support provided by such a developmental relationship to several positive career outcomes, including salary (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Dreher & Ash, 1990), promotions (Scandura, 1992), job satisfaction (Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001), learning (Lankau & Scandura, 2002), and organizational commitment (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000), among others. In addition, mentors themselves may benefit from increased visibility, learning, and a loyal base of support (Allen & Eby, 2003; Ragins & Scandura, 1999).

Reverse mentoring is defined here as the pairing of a younger, junior employee as the mentor to share knowledge with an older, senior colleague as the mentee. This is the opposite relationship structure from traditional mentoring relationships. Harvey, McIntyre, Heames, and Moeller (2009) suggest that reverse mentoring is an excellent

tool for senior organizational members to acquire technical knowledge, learn about current trends, gain a cross-cultural global perspective, and understand younger generations. It also gives junior employees insight into the higher levels of the organization to enhance their understanding of the business (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). While to date there has been no empirical management research on reverse mentoring, two case studies in the education literature report positive results (Cotugna & Vickery, 1998; Leh, 2005). In Cotugna and Vickery’s (1998) study, college students were paired with professionals to teach Internet skills. Mentees indicated that they were very comfortable in this role and enjoyed learning from student mentors. In Leh’s (2005) study, graduate students were paired with faculty to support their new technology use in the classroom. Findings indicate that mentees found the customized training valuable and the experience raised mentors’ self-esteem.

The study of mentoring has been related to social exchange theory due to its focus on dyadic relationships (Ensher et al., 2001; Noe, Greenberger, & Wang, 2002; Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993; Raabe & Beehr, 2003). From this perspective, individuals develop mentoring relationships if they perceive that the benefits outweigh the costs (Allen, 2007; Ensher et al., 2001; Olian et al., 1993). Social exchanges involve a series of interactions characterized by rules and norms (i.e., reciprocity or *quid pro quo*), resources exchanged, and the relationship that may emerge (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Correspondingly, mentoring scholars emphasize reciprocity and the relationship that develops as an important element for individuals’ growth in their careers (e.g., Kram, 1983, 1985; Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006). In addition, social exchange resources have economic (e.g., information, services) and/or symbolic (e.g., love, status) value (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Foa & Foa, 1980), which aligns with the two

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mentoring exchange categories of career (i.e., instrumental/economic) and psychosocial (i.e., symbolic) support (Allen et al., 2006; Kram, 1985).

Social exchange theory has been extended into the leadership domain, with leader-member exchange theory (LMX). High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by respect and trust (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), in which leaders exchange resources including strategic advice, social support, and feedback with members, who reciprocate with commitment and cooperation (Sparrowe & Liden, 2005). LMX relationships overlap with traditional mentoring relationships in the inclusion of the psychosocial support function (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994). This is likely to be consistent with reverse mentoring relationships as well, with the difference being that strategic advice is more likely from the mentee than the mentor.

Most recently, research in the area of positive organizational scholarship has identified high-quality connections as key for accomplishing work (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). Successful relationships between mentors and mentees serve as examples of positive connections at work that enable the thriving of individuals and organizations (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007). The concept of high-quality connections is informed by an exchange lens as well as a learning lens (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), which aligns with the relational perspective described by Ragins and Verbos (2007). This relational perspective moves beyond a social exchange perspective in suggesting that the development of close mentoring relationships may rely on communal rather than exchange norms (Ragins & Verbos, 2007). According to Ragins and Verbos (2007), under communal norms, benefits are provided for the needs of others or to demonstrate a general concern without creating a repayment obligation. When traditional mentoring relationships move from exchange to communal norms, they are then classified as relational mentoring relationships, which enable mutual learning, growth, and development.

Learning is an important outcome, particularly in formal mentoring programs

which are often designed with learning as a key goal for mentees (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). According to Wanberg, Welsh, and Hezlett (2003), three types of learning may result from mentoring relationships, including (1) cognitive, which enhances strategic or tacit knowledge; (2) skill-based, which improves technical or motor skills; and (3) affective-based, which can be attitudinal or motivational. For example, traditional mentors share their perspective on organizational issues, convey organizational processes and routines, and teach the norms and values of the organization (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001). Mentors transfer skills by providing training, feedback, and coaching (Noe, 1988). Finally, mentors may alter mentees' attitudes by affecting changes in self-awareness or improved tolerance for diversity, and alter motivation by improving self-efficacy or goal-setting (Wanberg et al., 2003). Individual learning translates to organizational learning when individual mental models (i.e., explicit and implicit knowledge of how and why the organization works) become incorporated into the organization through shared mental models (Kim, 1993). Thus, mentoring relationships can be considered a strategic tool for creating shared mental models that enhance organizational learning.

### **Reverse Mentoring as a Cross-Generational Leadership Development Tool**

Developmental relationships play a key role in the learning and growth of leaders. In particular, the opportunity to interact one-on-one with members of senior management helps newer employees develop a more sophisticated and strategic perspective on the organization (Day, 2000). Developing millennial leaders should be a major strategic goal for organizations, as this group is the second largest in population following baby boomers and represents a major source of talent and new ideas. Recent studies on generational value differences (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge, 2006; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010), generational identities (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010), and

generational leadership differences (Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal, & Brown, 2007) support the idea that, overall, members of different generations exhibit differences in work values, personality, collective memories, and behaviors in the workplace. The prototypical reverse mentoring relationship discussed here is between a millennial mentor and a baby boomer mentee. This does not preclude reverse mentoring relationships composed of other generational members, but they are less likely due to demographic trends and the content/technology expertise necessary in the mentor role (Hewlett et al., 2009a, 2009b; Twenge, 2006).

Much of the writing on generations is derived from consulting and popular press articles, which categorize generations according to birth year (e.g., baby boomers). This is rooted in Mannheim's (1952) work, which suggests that generations are distinguishable by their shared experience of a time period and a "distinctive consciousness" based on important events of that time (see Joshi et al., 2010, p. 397). Joshi et al. (2010) suggest that these generational differences are due to distinct age-based and cohort-based generational identities. The age-based view builds on Mannheim's (1952) idea that different age groups recall different events as formative experiences, which create collective memories (Joshi et al., 2010) or mental models (Kim, 1993) representing shared attitudes and values. The cohort-based view is rooted in social identity theory, such that members share a collective identity with the cohort group based on common experiences and outcomes for individuals (Joshi et al., 2010). Therefore, millennials, the newest generation to enter the workforce, are distinct from previous generations in several ways (see Table I for a more complete summary of generational characteristics).

For example, millennials tend to be more individualistic and self-focused than baby boomers and place a higher value on leisure time and extrinsic rewards (Twenge et al., 2010). This emphasis on leisure time manifests itself as prioritizing work-life balance in the workplace (Twenge, 2006; Twenge et al.,

2010). Millennials are characterized as technologically savvy, globally concerned, comfortable with diversity, highly innovative, and willing to try anything (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009; Twenge, 2006). As employees, they tend to learn best through collaboration (Twenge, 2006).

Reverse mentoring capitalizes on generational similarities and differences by encouraging organizations to recognize, understand, and build on the strengths of generations. It is expected that the development of one-on-one relationships should help reduce assumptions and negative stereotypes and even highlight similarities. For example, both millennials and baby boomers share a strong desire for high-quality colleagues and access to new experiences and challenges (Hewlett et al., 2009a). A reverse mentoring relationship has the potential to fulfill both of these preferences. Perhaps more than traditional mentoring programs, reverse mentoring has a dual focus on the leadership development of both mentor and mentee. Millennial mentors have the opportunity to demonstrate capabilities as leaders through their coordination of tasks and goals in this relationship. In addition, as one executive explained, "The mentors are getting access to more senior people, and they get to go behind the scenes, so to speak, to see how leaders think and offer insights" (Meister & Willyerd, 2010, p. 2).

Investing in high-quality relationships is important for individuals, as research shows that effective leaders drive results through networks (Cross, Cowen, Vertucci, & Thomas, 2009). Thus, reverse mentoring is a useful leadership development tool for both mentors and mentees that enhances their individual networks and builds intergenerational bridges across the organization.

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TABLE I Generational Characteristics\*

Generation	Key Events/Issues	Typical Characteristics
Veterans, or the "Greatest Generation" Born before 1945 75 million (25% still in workforce)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>World War I</li> <li>Great Depression</li> <li>World War II</li> <li>FDR's New Deal</li> <li>The Cold War</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loyal to institutions; stay due to loyalty to clients and customers</li> <li>Value job stability</li> <li>Patriotic with a high work ethic</li> <li>Take care of possessions and responsibilities</li> </ul>
Baby Boomers Born 1946–1964 80 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>John F. Kennedy assassination</li> <li>Vietnam War</li> <li>Martin Luther King assassination</li> <li>Watergate</li> <li>Woodstock</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Want to put their stamp on institutions; stay to make a difference</li> <li>Value individuality, self-fulfillment, and integrity</li> <li>Embrace a psychology of entitlement, expecting the best from life</li> <li>Strengths in building consensus and effecting change</li> <li>May experience simultaneous pressures of caring for children and elders</li> </ul>
Generation X, or Baby Busters Born 1965–1978 46 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>End of the Cold War</li> <li>First Gulf War</li> <li><i>Sesame Street</i> and MTV</li> <li>AIDS worldwide</li> <li>Dual-career households</li> <li>High divorce rates</li> <li>Personal computers/video games</li> <li>Worldwide competition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are skeptical of institutions; stay to build a career</li> <li>Value independence and advancement opportunities</li> <li>Accustomed to immediate feedback</li> <li>Comfort with diversity, emphasizing similarities rather than differences</li> <li>Technically competent</li> <li>Value stable family life</li> </ul>
Millennials, or Generation Y, Nexters, Generation Me Born 1978–1999 76 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rapid technology advances</li> <li>Globalization</li> <li>High immigration</li> <li>Internet and social networking</li> <li>9/11/2001</li> <li>Iraq/Afghanistan wars</li> <li>The Great Recession</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Judge institutions on their own merit; stay for praise and rewards</li> <li>Value work-life balance, education, and innovation</li> <li>Wired or connected 24 hours/day</li> <li>Comfort with global issues</li> <li>Desire to be "heard," have an immediate impact</li> <li>Prefer working in teams</li> <li>Close relationships with parents</li> </ul>

\*Primary sources: Smola and Sutton (2002); Twenge (2006); Twenge et al. (2010).

## *Developmental Relationships in Organizations*

Approximately 70 percent of Fortune 500 companies offer formal, traditional mentoring programs (Gutner, 2009). Beyond traditional mentors, other sources have been identified that offer support to enhance career development. Alternative developmental relationships may include both intraorganizational and extraorganizational relationships. Allen and Finkelstein (2003) found that coworkers, educational sources, professional associations, supervisors, subordinates, and family members were commonly cited sources of alternative mentoring support. These relationships may also be considered part of one's developmental network, the constellation of relationships that individuals rely on for career development (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Research findings on developmental networks show that individuals receive support from various relationships at work, which may include supervisors, upper-level managers, coworkers, and subordinates, as well as family, friends, and community members (Murphy & Kram, 2010).

While there is consensus that developmental relationships are important, scholars have distinguished traditional mentoring relationships from others, including alternative mentoring (Allen & Finkelstein, 2003), peer mentoring (Kram & Isabella, 1985), coaching (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999), peer coaching (Parker, Hall, & Kram, 2008), and developers (i.e., relationships in one's developmental network; Higgins & Kram, 2001). These distinctions are generally based on structural characteristics and the content exchanged in the relationship. For example, peer mentoring is defined as a relationship between two coworkers with similar status in the same organization who may provide a full range of developmental functions, whereas peer coaching is similar in structure but is specifically focused on career learning (Parker et al., 2008). Structurally, reverse mentoring is unique because it is a relationship between a younger, junior employee as mentor and an older, senior colleague as mentee that offers the full range of developmental

functions. In addition, reverse mentoring may be considered a type of alternative mentoring or a developer in one's developmental network. Reverse mentoring relationships are distinguished by several unique characteristics that facilitate an exchange process and functions that are detailed in Table II and discussed below.

## *Reverse Mentoring Characteristics*

While there is certainly overlap in the content of reverse mentoring with traditional mentoring and alternative mentoring, there are different emphases due to its structure and purpose. Reverse mentoring relationships are characterized by several elements, including (1) unequal status of partners with the mentee, rather than the mentor, the senior member in the hierarchy of the organization; (2) knowledge sharing with the mentee focused on learning from the mentor's technical or content expertise and generational perspective; (3) emphasis on professional and leadership skill development of mentors; and (4) commitment to the shared goal of support and mutual learning. Organizations as well as participants must be aware of these structural and content-based characteristics in order to effectively manage reverse mentoring relationships. As these characteristics are discussed, the prototypical reverse mentoring relationship between a millennial mentor and baby boomer mentee is used to illustrate.

### *Unequal Status of Partners*

By definition, a reverse mentoring relationship is composed of a younger employee in the role of mentor and an older, more experienced employee in the role of mentee. Participants' unequal status is reinforced by differences in hierarchical rank in the organization, where

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**TABLE 11 Reverse Mentoring Compared to Traditional Mentoring\***

<b>Reverse Mentoring Exchange</b>	<b>Reverse Mentoring Functions</b>	<b>Traditional Mentoring Functions</b>	<b>Traditional Mentoring Exchange (Kram, 1985)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shares technical or content expertise and enhances understanding of generational trends</li> <li>• Provides guidance and feedback on training and mastery of new skills and knowledge</li> <li>• Collaboration on projects and research that create contact with each other's colleagues</li> <li>• Demonstrates technology savvy and identifies opportunities to apply knowledge</li> <li>• Generates new approaches to problems and suggestions for implementing solutions</li> <li>• Teaches about social networking sites and social media; introduces to peers/colleagues to increase social integration and social capital</li> </ul>	<p>Career Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Knowledge sharing</b></li> <li>• Coaching*</li> <li>• Exposure and visibility</li> <li>• <b>Skill development*</b></li> <li>• <b>Challenging ideas</b></li> <li>• <b>Networking*</b></li> </ul> <p>Psychosocial Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Support and feedback</b></li> <li>• Acceptance and confirmation</li> <li>• Friendship</li> <li>• <b>Affirmation and encouragement*</b></li> </ul> <p>Role Modeling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>New perspective*</b></li> <li>• Behavior to emulate</li> <li>• Identifying with values</li> </ul>	<p>Career Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sponsorship</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• Exposure and visibility</li> <li>• Protection</li> <li>• Challenging assignments</li> </ul> <p>Psychosocial Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role modeling</li> <li>• Acceptance and confirmation</li> <li>• Friendship</li> <li>• Counseling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public support for advancement in the organization</li> <li>• Enhances knowledge and understanding of how to navigate effectively in the corporate world</li> <li>• Create opportunities to demonstrate competence through contact with other senior managers</li> <li>• Shields mentee from untimely or potentially damaging contacts with other senior managers</li> <li>• Assigning challenging work, supported with training and ongoing performance feedback</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitudes, values, and behavior provide a model for mentee to emulate</li> <li>• Provides support and encouragement that enables mentee to experiment with new behaviors</li> <li>• Social interaction characterized by mutual liking, understanding, and informal exchanges about work and nonwork experiences</li> <li>• Enables mentee to explore personal concerns that may interfere with a positive sense of self in the organization; talk openly about anxieties/fears</li> </ul>

\*Reverse mentoring functions that differ from traditional mentoring are in bold. Asterisks indicate overlap with alternative mentoring functions (see Allen & Finkelstein, 2003).

the mentee has higher status and power in the organization relative to the mentor. For senior executive mentees, who tend to be baby boomers, this structural role reversal presents unique challenges, including the need to give up some control of the process and demonstrate their willingness to learn from their mentor. According to one executive, "It's difficult not to slip into our traditional roles, but this arrangement is building relationships" (Meister & Willyerd, 2010, p. 2). Fortunately, millennial employees tend to be less concerned with status differences than previous generations, perhaps due to their close relationships with their parents, many of whom are Baby Boomers themselves (Hewlett et al., 2009a; Twenge, 2006). Thus, it is likely that mentees and mentors approach their unequal status from different perspectives, an intergenerational difference that may be a source of learning in and of itself.

#### Focus on Knowledge Sharing

Learning from the mentors' expertise through knowledge sharing and skill development is the main focus for mentees in a reverse mentoring relationship. Ensuring that both parties understand this goal is essential, as senior-level mentees will be more likely to seek information when it is considered appropriate and when they perceive that their mentors are competent (Mullen & Noe, 1999). While mentees also learn from mentors in traditional mentoring relationships, this expertise is usually based on accumulated experience (Kram, 1985) rather than the current topic/technological expertise of millennials based on recent educational experiences or a different generational perspective. Wanberg et al. (2003) define three types of learning through the knowledge exchanged in mentoring relationships, including (1) cognitive learning, which enhances declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, strategic or tacit knowledge, knowledge organization, or cognitive strategies; (2) skill-based learning, which improves technical or motor skills; and (3) affective-based learning, which enables attitudinal or

motivational changes. Beyond the mentors' expertise and generational perspective upon which the reverse mentoring assignment is based, they may share other declarative knowledge (Wanberg et al., 2003) about technology trends, subject-matter advances, social media, generational interpretations of issues, a global perspective, and new ideas (Harvey et al., 2009; Piktialis, 2009). Mentees may share declarative knowledge about the company's history or politics, procedural knowledge about how to get things done in the organization and how different roles and responsibilities fit together in integrated systems, and cognitive strategies such as planning, problem solving, or decision making (Wanberg et al., 2003).

#### Emphasis on Leadership Development

Reverse mentoring capitalizes on the assumption that much of leadership development is personal development (Parker et al., 2008) and providing support to nurture leaders to grow (Spreitzer, 2006). In traditional mentoring relationships, personal learning, a combination of interpersonal skills (communicating, listening, problem solving, and developing relationships) and relational learning (understanding the interdependence of one's job to others), is an important outcome for protégés (Lankau & Scandura, 2002), whereas only relational learning is a significant outcome for mentors (Allen & Eby, 2003). In a reverse mentoring relationship, leadership development in the form of personal learning is particularly important for mentors because it can reduce role ambiguity and increase job satisfaction (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). This is especially helpful for millennial employees who tend to be uncomfortable with ambiguity and have a desire for clear direction and immediate feedback in their professional experiences (Gerdes, 2007; Johnson & Romanello, 2005; Twenge, 2006). In addition, the development of relationships that enhance leadership skills, cross-generational communication, and professional understanding will benefit both participants as well as the organization.

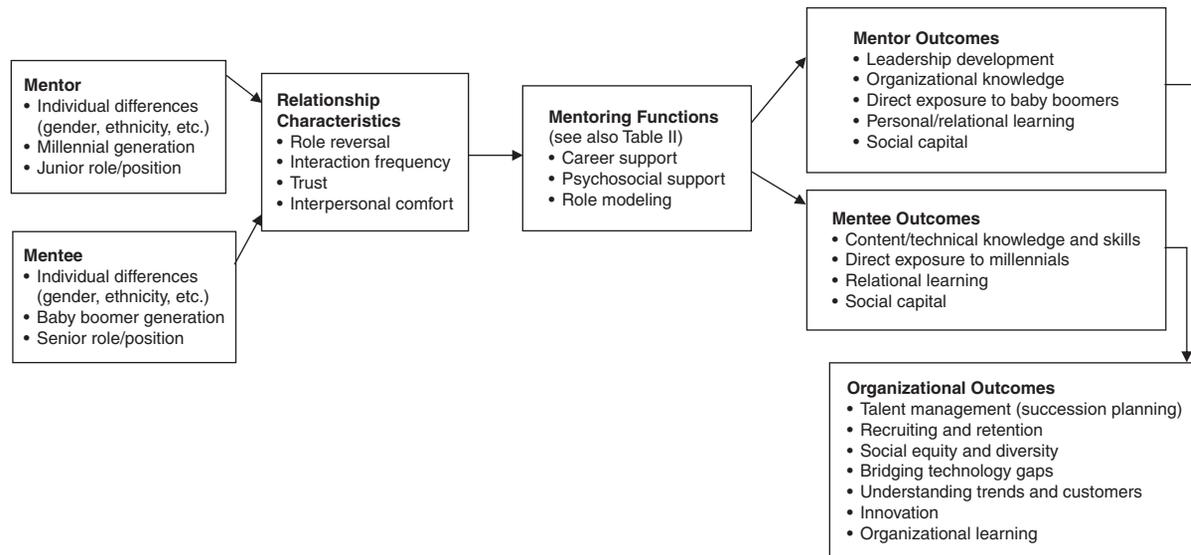
### Mutual Support

Both mentors and mentees must make a commitment to the shared goal of mutual support and learning. While this is important for any mentoring relationship, it is especially crucial for reverse mentoring participants due to the unique dynamics of this relationship, which includes generational differences among other antecedents detailed in Figure 1. To enhance reverse mentoring outcomes, participants should be encouraged to share knowledge, positive meaning, and emotions in the creation of a positive connection (Spreitzer, 2006). Mutual support for learning is more likely to occur if participants develop a close mentoring bond (Ragins & Verbos, 2007), which is essentially the high-quality connection that characterizes relational mentoring. High-quality connections have greater strength than others, as indicated by higher emotional carrying capacity, tensility (the capacity to withstand strain and function in many circumstances), and generativity (openness to new ideas/influences and ability to deflect negative processes) (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). By explicitly supporting one another’s learning, both participants may experience positive meaning through their relationship and encourage the

authentic expression of positive emotions to create opportunities for growth (Spreitzer, 2006).

It is important to acknowledge that the organizational context in which reverse mentoring relationships are embedded plays an overarching role in participants’ motivation to participate in this process (Wanberg et al., 2003). Research on work-based learning suggests that if knowledge creation and utilization is valued by the organization, then learning becomes everyone’s job (Raelin, 2000). Thus, an organizational culture that supports continuous learning through mentoring is likely to be most conducive to high-quality reverse mentoring relationships (Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Wanberg et al., 2003).

The model presented here is parsimonious in its inclusion of key variables for human resource managers to consider for formal reverse mentoring relationships and programs. It is noteworthy that the general relationships among antecedents, mediators, and outcomes follow the model suggested by Wanberg et al. (2003) for formal traditional mentoring relationships; however, there are several differences. Specifically, a majority of the outcomes are different, as the goals of the relationship are distinct and the inclusion of generational differences, role reversal, and



**FIGURE 1.** Key Variables in the Prototypical Reverse Mentoring Relationship\*

\*Refer to Wanberg et al. (2003) for a comprehensive model of formal, traditional mentoring relationships.

trust as relationship antecedents is new. Importantly, although the broad mentoring functions of reverse mentoring are similar to traditional mentoring, the particular subfunctions and exchange process are quite different.

### Reverse Mentoring Functions

Reverse mentoring relationships are developmental relationships in which several types of support are important for the growth of both mentee and mentor. These relationships may include support typically associated with traditional as well as alternative mentoring relationships. Since many organizations have traditional formal mentoring programs and a vast majority of empirical studies on mentoring at work are based on Kram's (1985) study (Allen et al., 2004), the subfunctions are compared to traditional mentoring relationships.

Studies on traditional mentoring relationships, those in which older, more experienced mentors are paired with junior mentees, have generally confirmed that mentees receive the broad functions of career support and psychosocial support (Allen et al., 2004; Kram, 1985; Noe, 1988; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). Career support includes sponsorship, coaching exposure and visibility, protection, and challenging assignments. These functions are possible because of the senior person's experience, organizational rank, and influence in the organizational context. In contrast, psychosocial support includes role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship. These functions are based on an interpersonal bond that fosters mutual trust and increasing intimacy (see Kram, 1985, p. 23). Recent work has found that role modeling is a distinct broad function (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2005; Scandura, 1992), rather than a subfunction of psychosocial support (e.g., Kram, 1985; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Reverse mentoring relationships have the potential to provide all three broad functions, including several subfunctions in common with traditional relationships. In addition, several alternative developmental

subfunctions identified by Allen and Finkelstein (2003) are relevant, including skill development, support, affirmation, networking, and new perspectives. In the process of reverse mentoring, it is likely that both parties benefit from each function through dynamic exchange processes, as outlined in Table II, although the importance of various subfunctions may vary for each individual depending on their needs and role in the relationship.

Due to the structure and goals of a reverse mentoring relationship, the career subfunctions are the most distinct from traditional mentoring relationships. The primary career function is the sharing of knowledge in terms of technical or topic expertise and generational perspectives. The expectation is that the mentor shares his or her expertise on topics such as technology, subject-matter advances, generational trends, diversity, risk taking, or understanding a global perspective (Harvey et al., 2009; Piktialis, 2009). In return, the mentee may also share expertise on such topics as organizational issues, job responsibilities, or career planning and development. Thus, some of the knowledge sharing provided by mentees fulfills the traditional subfunction of coaching, which enhances a junior person's understanding of how to navigate the organization (Kram, 1985) and may be the most important function that mentees provide to mentors. Both parties may receive exposure and visibility among each other's peers whom they would otherwise not come in contact with during regular work interactions. In contrast, protection and challenging assignments are unlikely because the junior person is in the role of mentor rather than mentee. Rather, skill development may occur through mentors actively teaching mentees or collaboration on joint projects that enhance the learning of both parties.

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As new organizational members with distinctive generational identities (Joshi et al., 2010), mentors are likely to challenge stereotypes and assumptions of mentees, while both parties may offer each other insight into their respective generational attitudes and values. Mentors' comfort with technology and building networks online may also enhance networking opportunities for mentees, whereas mentees may connect mentors with established intraorganizational contacts. Finally, sponsorship may still happen, although in reverse, whereby the mentee nominates the mentor for desirable lateral moves and promotion (Kram, 1985), although this is not a goal of the relationship and thus is not included in

the framework presented.

*Younger mentors offer new ways to understand problems, learn, and develop ideas. In contrast, more experienced mentees model appropriate professional and interpersonal skills, and demonstrate the career benefits of a commitment to continuous learning.*

As the relationship develops, both parties exchange psychosocial functions through the process of mutual sharing, open discussion, and learning from one another's life experiences. Developing a friendship makes the interaction enjoyable and allows the mentor to feel more like a peer or colleague than a junior employee (Kram, 1985). In addition, friendship is a strong motivator for millennial employees (Trunk, 2007). Cross-generational friendships reinforce similarities and respect for differences as well as foster understanding across managerial levels or divisions in the organization.

Gibson and Barron (2008) show that older employees tend to find role models at higher hierarchical levels regardless of age, which suggests that it is the position that the role model occupies that affects identification with a role model. In reverse mentoring, the organization designates the younger employee in a position as expert mentor in the relationship, thus sanctioning the role reversal. Developing a strong bond will enable both mentor and mentee to identify with each other and find positive aspects of the other upon which to model his or her future behavior.

Younger mentors offer new ways to understand problems, learn, and develop ideas. In contrast, more experienced mentees model appropriate professional and interpersonal skills, and demonstrate the career benefits of a commitment to continuous learning.

### Key Antecedents for Reverse Mentoring

While there are many potential benefits of reverse mentoring, both individuals and organizations need to be attentive to a few key challenging antecedents. As with any interpersonal relationship, it is important to be sensitive to individual differences among participants in reverse mentoring relationships. In particular, the structural role-reversal requirements of reverse mentoring may be challenging for both mentor and mentee. Finally, thoughtful time management and commitment to building these nontraditional relationships is necessary for success.

### Individual Differences

Individual differences such as gender, race/ethnicity, and personality have long been acknowledged as a potential challenge in mentoring relationships (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Individuals tend to be attracted to those they see as similar to themselves (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), thus cross-gender and cross-race mentoring relationships may be challenging. Individuals' growth may be limited due to gender barriers, including a lack of diversity in senior management, intimacy concerns, stereotypes, and power dynamics (McKeen & Bujaki, 2007). Cross-race relationships are similarly complex, including a potential lack of trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Blake-Beard, Murrell, & Thomas, 2007). In reverse mentoring, these issues may be magnified when younger and less experienced members of the minority are in the role of mentor instead of mentee. The personalities of participants will also affect the development of reverse mentoring relationships. According to research by Turban and colleagues (Turban & Dougherty, 1994; Turban & Lee, 2007; Wu, Foo, & Turban,

2008), personality traits that reflect comfort in social situations, such as extraversion, are associated with the successful initiation of mentoring relationships. In addition, certain personality characteristics are likely to make mentors more attractive to mentees, such as ability, competence, and willingness to learn. Therefore, consideration of these individual differences is important in the selection of participants, particularly mentees, who will need to be sensitive to such issues.

### *Cross-Generational Differences*

Generational cohorts are united by a collective mind-set, with each generation having a unique set of values, ideas, and culture resulting from shared experiences (Strauss & Howe, 1991). In the workplace, millennial employees tend to be more assertive with a desire to “be heard” and to have an immediate impact (Twenge, 2006). Reverse mentoring capitalizes on these values by giving young employees the responsibility of developing their mentees’ skills. In traditional mentoring relationships, for mentors “a primary benefit is the sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from fostering the development of a younger adult” (Ragins & Scandura, 1999, p. 20). While this may benefit reverse *mentees*, they will also learn how their millennial mentors prefer to teach and learn, as well as the way they approach work and life generally. Likewise, younger mentors will learn about baby boomers’ perspectives on work and gain an understanding of how to interact with more experienced professionals.

### *Role Reversal*

Reverse mentoring provides an opportunity for early-career employees to participate in a challenging professional development experience. In their role as mentors, junior employees gain exposure to senior-level executives, however, it is likely that they are inexperienced in managing a mentoring relationship in a professional context.<sup>1</sup> Mentees may also be thrown off balance by this role reversal, as one Procter & Gamble mentee explained, “This is not a boss-subordinate relationship. This is one where, particularly in reverse mentoring, you’re the

student again. And that is a little bit difficult for some of us, where we’re used to running organizations of up to 20,000 people and calling the shots” (Solomon, 2001). In order for experienced executives to embrace learning from younger, less experienced colleagues, they also must be willing to question their own assumptions and consider alternative ways of thinking about their role in the organization (cf. Argyris, 1991). This role reversal challenges both mentee and mentor to openly communicate their developmental needs and determine how each might contribute to the success of their relationship. Thus, there is a vulnerability required of each participant in acknowledging their lack of experience and familiarity with such a process.

### *Interaction Frequency*

The time and energy involved in developing and nurturing a mentoring relationship is a potential challenge for both mentors and mentees (Ragins & Scandura, 1994). For mentors at the start of their careers, managing multiple unfamiliar job and organizational demands along with learning how to facilitate a reverse mentoring relationship may feel overwhelming. For mentees in senior organizational roles, creating the time to devote to a reverse mentoring relationship is likely in addition to an array of compelling demands. Building a meaningful and successful relationship takes time, as illustrated by several studies of traditional mentoring in which the duration of the relationship is linked to support received, satisfaction, performance, and other positive outcomes (e.g., Chao et al., 1992; Turban, Dougherty, & Lee, 2002). In addition, formal programs that create opportunities for frequent interactions between mentors and mentees are more successful (Gibb, 1999; Ragins et al., 2000). Leh (2005) found that reverse mentoring relationships flourished when adequate time was allocated by the mentees, whereas mentors expressed frustration when they spent more time figuring out a schedule with their mentee than on actual training. Participants must dedicate the time necessary to build a meaningful and productive reverse mentoring relationship.

### Trust and Interpersonal Comfort

Building trust and rapport in reverse mentoring relationships is critical since knowledge is absorbed faster and more completely when the connection between mentee and mentor is high-quality (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). According to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995, p. 712) trust is “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party . . . irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that party.” Thus, individuals are more willing to take risks, such as asking “dumb” questions in the learning process, in relationships characterized by trust (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). To maximize mentor-mentee interactions, it is critical to build in opportunities for reflection, both individually and together, to increase self-awareness, trust, and learning (Argyris, 1994). Trust may come more naturally in mentoring relationships in which participants also feel a high level of interpersonal comfort. Interpersonal comfort refers to the ease with which mentees relate to their mentors and is often based on overlapping identities (e.g., same-sex, same-race) and shared experiences (Allen, Day, & Lentz, 2005). Research has demonstrated that interpersonal comfort is positively associated with developmental support exchanged (Allen et al., 2005).

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### Outcomes of Reverse Mentoring

A successful reverse mentoring program offers several benefits for individuals’ learning and professional development. Many of these positive proximal outcomes have been discussed throughout this article, so they are summarized briefly here. The positive distal outcomes for organizations that extend from individual participants are numerous. For organizations, reverse mentoring is an innovative tool for

talent management, recruiting and retention, improving social equity and diversity, bridging technology gaps among employees, understanding trends and customers, and driving innovation. In addition, the individual learning of participants may extend to organizational learning and promote a culture of continuous learning.

### Mentor Outcomes

For mentors, the primary benefit of participating in a reverse mentoring relationship is their own *leadership development* and the experience of managing a professional mentoring relationship. Through interactions with seasoned executives, young professionals gain *organizational knowledge*, such as insight into the leadership hierarchy of the organization and learning how to navigate and get work done in the organization. The *direct, one-on-one exposure to baby boomers* in the workplace challenges mentors to understand differing work values and approaches and to communicate effectively. Through the process of reverse mentoring, mentors should increase *personal learning* in terms of improved interpersonal skills such as self-disclosure, active listening, empathy, and feedback (Kram, 1996; Lankau & Scandura, 2002). In addition, increases in *relational job learning* are based on a greater understanding of the “interdependence or connectedness of one’s job to others” (Lankau & Scandura, 2002, p. 780). Finally, reverse mentoring should expand mentors’ intraorganizational network thus increasing their *social capital* in the organization, which is the ability to gain access to the resources of others through social ties (Hezlett & Gibson, 2007). Mentors who develop strong ties with their mentee, typically an executive with whom they would otherwise be unlikely to interact, may also gain access to their mentees’ network both within and beyond the organization.

### Mentee Outcomes

For mentees, the primary benefit of participating in a reverse mentoring relationship is the opportunity to learn the newest *content knowledge or technical skills* and gain exposure

to the perspective of new organizational entrants. Through *one-on-one interactions with millennial* mentors, mentees also hone leadership skills through an increased ability to understand and communicate across generations in the workplace. In the process of reverse mentoring, mentees are reintroduced to employees on the front lines of the organization, and through *relational learning* they gain a fresh perspective on the network of relationships in which their job is embedded (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). In successful relationships, mentees develop a strong tie to their mentors as well as learn the newest technologies and social networking media. This process should enable mentees to expand their network and enhance their *social capital* through an increased intraorganizational base of loyal support (Kram, 1985).

## Organizational Outcomes

### Talent Management

While organizations may use a variety of tools to identify high-potential employees including performance appraisal, personality instruments, cognitive ability measures, competency ratings, or situational judgment inventories, the reliance on such assessments for leadership development is still relatively rare (Konczak & Foster, 2009). Instead, organizations tend to rely on the subjective judgment of higher-level managers to identify future leadership talent. Reverse mentoring increases the frequency and quality of interaction that these high-level managers have with young employees, which should improve the accuracy and reliability of subjective assessments. In addition, young employees have an opportunity to demonstrate their competence in the content that is shared (e.g., technology, subject matter, generational trends) as well as interpersonal and teaching skills. Thus, reverse mentoring may lead to earlier identification and development of high-potential employees, also known as “talent management” or “succession planning.”

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### Recruiting and Retention

Reverse mentoring is one of several tools for organizations who provide developmental opportunities as a strategy for recruiting and retaining talent. In particular, millennial employees want personalized opportunities to contribute in the workplace and to feel that their ideas are being heard (Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Twenge, 2006). As one millennial mentor explained, “When you work in a large corporation and you’re one of the younger individuals, it’s nice that people see value in your capabilities and they come to you and you have a feeling of expertise and knowledge” (Cohen, 2003, p. 1). Reverse mentoring provides an opportunity for newer employees to be stimulated and challenged in a meaningful way that expands their network and benefits their career. This process is also helpful in early layers of management. For example, Procter & Gamble’s “Mentor Up” program, which pairs mid- or junior-level female managers with senior-level male executives, is credited with significantly reducing turnover among female managers (Zielinski, 2000). DiBianca (2008) suggests that reverse mentoring is a way to develop common ground between generations and to uncover motivations and disincentives that should inform recruiting and retention policies. Therefore, reverse mentoring should be a useful tool for organizations to recruit and retain early-career employees.

### Social Equity and Diversity

As a formal initiative, reverse mentoring has the potential to enhance the access of young women and minorities to individuals in powerful organizational positions (Harvey et al., 2009). Informally, traditional mentors tend to select mentees who are viewed as younger versions of themselves, and

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mentees select mentors who are role models (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). Research indicates that individuals tend to choose same-sex or same-race role models or career referents (Gibson & Lawrence, 2010). However, mentoring studies show that similarity (i.e., demographics) is more important for shorter-term relationships. For example, while gender dissimilarity may be harmful early in the relationship, it is beneficial in terms of the amount of support received in longer-term relationships (Allen, 2007; Turban et al., 2002). Formal reverse mentoring programs might purposely

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*Developing interpersonal comfort and trust in a long-term cross-gender or cross-racial reverse mentoring relationship will support the mentors' success and the success of the organization.*

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pair individuals with different backgrounds who would otherwise be unlikely to connect with one another. The development of a deeper professional relationship in which the younger mentor has the opportunity to demonstrate his or her knowledge and skills should mitigate perceptual biases of senior mentees and increase the promotability of individuals with different backgrounds (cf. Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009). Intel suggests that nontraditional formal mentoring relationships lasting six to nine months work best (Warner, 2002). Programs of this length should be adequate for building strong relationships as Watson, Kumar, and Michaelsen (1993) found that diverse pairs performed better after only 17 weeks (see also Turban et al., 2002). Thus, developing interpersonal comfort and trust in a long-term cross-gender or cross-racial reverse mentoring relationship will support the mentors' success and the success of the organization (Allen et al., 2005; Murrell, Blake-Beard, Porter, & Perkins-Williamson, 2008).

### Bridging Technology Gaps

Millennials have been characterized as technologically sophisticated with a strong preference for multitasking (Sacks, 2006; Twenge, 2006). Since technology is so salient to this group, reverse mentoring will likely involve some discussion of technology even if this is

not the primary focus of the relationship. Both individuals and employers increasingly use online social media, such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook (Zeidler, 2009) for multiple purposes, such as sharing information, networking, keeping in touch, and entertainment, among others. Through a reverse mentoring relationship, mentees will be exposed to the full range of uses and possibilities for technology as well as current and emerging trends. As one baby boomer mentee noted, "It's a situation where the old fogies in an organization realize that by the time you're in your forties and fifties, you're not in touch with the future the same way that the young twenty-somethings are. They come with fresh eyes, open minds, and instant links to the technology of our future." (Starcevich, 2001). For example, Booz Allen created an information and social networking site for its workforce and found that millennial employees are encouraging Baby Boomers to join and teaching them how to use it effectively (Hewlett et al., 2009a). Thus, mentors gain experience teaching about technology and work toward bridging intergenerational gaps in utilization of these new mediums.

### Understanding Trends and Customers

In the process of reverse mentoring relationships, senior members of the organization are exposed to the worldviews and desires of their younger colleagues. Recent college graduates and young professionals tend to be highly conscious of new trends and part of the target market for early adoption of new products. For example, at Bharti Airtel, India's largest cellular services company, reverse mentoring is being used to help high-level managers understand the demands of young cell phone users (Rai, 2009). The advantage of reverse mentoring is that while mentee needs dictate the topics that are addressed, mentors drive the agenda in terms of the material covered. Mentors will naturally present topics from their own perspective and experiences, representing the very customers that corporations spend millions in marketing budgets trying to analyze and understand.

### Driving Innovation

In reverse mentoring relationships, mentees and mentors serve as sounding boards for one another's ideas. Since participants are not directly evaluating one another in terms of performance, the capacity to openly brainstorm should be encouraged. This unique dynamic has the potential to engage both participants in a creative process that generates new approaches to problem identification, research efforts (data collection and analysis), solution generation, and implementation (cf. Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Thus, bringing together millennial mentors, who tend to be entrepreneurial and have a fresh perspective on products, services, and organizational processes, with baby boomer mentees, who understand how to get things done in the organization, creates new opportunities for driving innovation. The key is to tap into the creativity of mentors as newcomers before they get socialized into the organizations' old ways of thinking (i.e., old mental models) (Rollag, Parise, & Cross, 2005).

### Organizational Learning

Individual learning is transferred to the organization through mental models (Kim, 1993). Mental models are defined as "the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world" (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 1994, p. 235). Mental models are usually tacit, affecting what we see and how we behave (Senge et al., 1994). Because reverse mentoring challenges participants to learn outside their typical roles, they may be more open to new interpretations or changing and revising their mental models. Organizational learning is defined as "increasing an organization's capacity to take effective action" (Kim, 1993, p. 40). Individuals influence organizational learning through changes in shared mental models. The process of sharing knowledge and active reflection increases the likelihood of retaining what has been learned and the motivation and capacity to apply new knowledge in practice (cf. Bandura, 1977). Understanding

and utilizing reflective practice (Argyris, 1991, 1994) enhances the likelihood that both mentor and mentee will demonstrate a commitment to continuous learning beyond their participation in reverse mentoring, which benefits their careers and the long-term success of the organization.

## Discussion

### *Theoretical Contributions*

Reverse mentoring is an innovative and cost-effective approach for organizations to foster cross-generational relationships and develop millennial leaders. The model created here builds on the foundation of research on traditional mentoring relationships (e.g., Allen et al., 2004; Kram, 1985; Ragins & Kram, 2007) and integrates ideas from social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), positive organizational scholarship (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007), and learning (Kim, 1993; Wanberg et al., 2003). Reverse mentoring is classified as an alternative mentoring relationship (Allen & Finkelstein, 2003) or another developer in one's developmental network (Higgins & Kram, 2001). The key difference from traditional mentoring is the structural role reversal, with the mentee, rather than the mentor, in the senior position in the hierarchy of the organization. It is a unique mentoring relationship in its explicit focus on knowledge sharing, including current topic/technology and generational perspectives, and the leadership development of the mentor. Because of this, the developmental functions exchanged also differ from traditional and other alternative mentoring relationships. This article contributes to the mentoring and social exchange literatures by delineating reverse mentoring functions, exchange processes, and consequences for

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*Understanding and utilizing reflective practice enhances the likelihood that both mentor and mentee will demonstrate a commitment to continuous learning beyond their participation in reverse mentoring, which benefits their careers and the long-term success of the organization.*

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individuals and organizations, as well as highlighting antecedents that are critical considerations for the success of a reverse mentoring program.

While there is little academic research on generations and generational differences (see for exception, Hewlett et al., 2009a; Joshi et al., 2010; Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009; Sessa et al., 2007; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge, 2006; Twenge et al., 2010), the perception that these differences matter is rampant in the popular press and consulting (Hoover, 2009). The value of including generational differences as a key antecedent for reverse mentoring is that it addresses the age-based or cohort-based differences (Joshi et al., 2010) upon which these perceptions are built in the workplace. Reverse mentoring is a relational tool for capitalizing on millennial employees' updated content and technological knowledge for the benefit of senior management and the organization. In addition, organizations that use a relational approach tend to be more successful at integrating newcomers and helping new hires to establish information networks that enhance their productivity (Rollag et al., 2005).

Reverse mentoring programs, similar to traditional mentoring programs, should be designed with learning as a key goal for both participants (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). Organizations that encourage high-quality connections in the form of relational reverse mentoring relationships will create opportunities for three forms of learning—cognitive, skill-based, and affective-based (Wanberg et al., 2003). For example, mentees may benefit from direct exposure to mentors' tacit generational knowledge (cognitive), updated content or technical knowledge (skill-based), or attitudinal/motivational issues (affective-based) that mentors share. Mentors may benefit from access to strategic knowledge (cognitive) due to their mentees' experience and more senior roles in the organization, technical knowledge (skill-based) of internal systems or processes, and sustained motivational (affective-based) strategies. As illustrated, learning from reverse mentoring is most likely from high-quality relationships characterized by mutuality, a key component

of relational mentoring (Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy, & Kram, 2012; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Ragins & Verbos, 2007). When learning among reverse mentoring pairs encourages new shared mental models in the organization, we may expect increases in knowledge sharing and cross-generational communication that facilitates organizational learning and innovation.

While reverse mentoring is presented as a new phenomenon, it has certainly occurred throughout time informally. In fact, the alternative mentoring relationships with subordinates as the mentor and supervisors as the mentee identified in Allen and Finkelstein's (2003) study may have been reverse mentoring relationships. The assumption in this article is that by formalizing reverse mentoring relationships, organizations may capitalize on generational demographic trends and preferences to engage their employees in knowledge sharing and leadership development. In practice, organization may use a variety of mentoring relationship structures (e.g., traditional, reverse, peer) effectively. An extreme example of this is Intel's program that electronically matches employees with mentors based on topics and skills they want to learn about regardless of hierarchical position or geographical location (Warner, 2002). Thus, reverse mentoring is one of many relational tools to encourage employee development.

### *Practical Implications: Creating a Reverse Mentoring Program*

Successful mentoring relationships are built on the principles of reciprocity and respect (Kram, 1985). As with most workplace initiatives, fostering good reverse mentoring relationships requires thoughtful planning and attention. The more that the dynamics of formal mentoring relationships mimic informal relationships, the more successful they should be in terms of support exchanged, participant satisfaction, and evaluations of program effectiveness (Allen et al., 2006; Ragins et al., 2000). Research on formal mentoring programs suggests that management support, participant input into the matching process, and training are key features (Allen et al.,

2006; Parise & Forret, 2008). Given the unique dynamics of reverse mentoring, it is also important to encourage the use of technology, as both participants are likely to learn from utilizing and discussing technology in their relationship. Thus, organizational leaders who pursue the creation of a reverse mentoring program must consider the up-front resources required and how to manage the process to best support participants' professional development.

### Leadership Support

Reverse mentoring initiatives require the advocacy and active support by executive leadership. Visible and sincere support by upper management signals the significance of the program and that it serves a valuable role in the organization (Parise & Forret, 2008). Participants need to feel that the program is important and worthy of their time and efforts. The lack of such support is consistently cited as problematic by participants in formal mentoring programs (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004). In particular, leaders and managers can positively influence the allocation of resources for training and development, flexibility for arranging meeting times and coordinating schedules, and recognition for participation in the reverse mentoring program. The ongoing support by leaders at all levels of the organization is necessary to encourage the commitment of participants to the process of reverse mentoring.

### The Matching Process

Research shows it is important that participants in a formal mentoring initiative feel they had input into the mentor-mentee matching process (Allen et al., 2006; Ragins et al., 2000). Generally, the more data-driven the matching process, in terms of what information that program administrators gather about participants, the more successful the results. Data may include a program administrator's personal knowledge of participants, interviews of participants, soliciting choice lists from participants, mutual activities, and/or standardized assessment tools (Blake-Beard,

O'Neill, & McGowan, 2007; P-Sontag, Vappie, & Wanberg, 2007). For a reverse mentoring program, selecting mentees with good interpersonal skills is especially important for women and minority mentors, who report mixed results with formal, traditional mentoring relationships (Ragins et al., 2000). Therefore, attention to understanding participants, their skills, and their needs is important for the matching process.

### Training and Development

Training for a reverse mentoring program is critical for increasing the personal competence of mentors, who are unlikely to have significant prior professional mentoring experiences in the role of mentor to draw upon. Mentees also need to understand the challenges of this role reversal from the perspective of both participants, and consider how they can best learn from this experience. Training can assist participants in getting the relationship started, help participants understand their roles and responsibilities, and enable both participants to manage their expectations (Parise & Forret, 2008). Two key reasons that formal mentoring relationships fail are a lack of commitment and misaligned expectations between mentors and mentees (P-Sontag et al., 2007). Effective training will give participants a better understanding of the purposes of the program, guidelines for setting clear goals and expectations, and raised awareness of the benefits of this experience. In addition, effective training has been linked to improved commitment to mentoring, support exchanged, and perceived program effectiveness (Allen & Eby, 2008; Parise & Forret, 2008). Finally,

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*As with most workplace initiatives, fostering good reverse mentoring relationships requires thoughtful planning and attention. The more that the dynamics of formal mentoring relationships mimic informal relationships, the more successful they should be in terms of support exchanged, participant satisfaction, and evaluations of program effectiveness.*

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training will also allow the organization to put the reverse mentoring program into perspective as one of many tools for employees' ongoing professional development.

### Using Technology

Electronic media are increasingly used in both personal (e.g., Facebook) and professional (e.g., LinkedIn) contexts, and employees of all generations need to be technically competent in the workplace. Studies on virtual mentoring indicate that technology can play a positive role in the development and coordination of mentoring relationships (Allen et al., 2006; de Janasz, Ensher, & Heun, 2008; Murphy, forthcoming). It is likely that reverse mentoring relationships, particularly due to the technology savvy of millennial mentors, will benefit from the use of a combination of face-to-face meetings and electronic media. As part of reverse mentoring, organizations should encourage the discussion of current media communication trends and their effectiveness among mentors and mentees. This is also a growth opportunity for mentees to ensure they are maximizing their time and appropriately tapping technology resources. It is likely that the use of technology as a supplement to regular meetings will enhance the communication and frequency of interaction in reverse mentoring relationships.

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*Certainly reverse mentoring has the potential to bridge generational differences in other regions around the world, although the addition of cross-cultural differences would further complicate these relationships.*

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### Limitations and Future Research

This article discusses the prototypical reverse mentoring relationship between a millennial junior employee as mentor and a baby boomer senior employee as mentee. However, in the era of protean (Hall, 1996) and boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) careers, with employees moving in and out of organizations and frequent career changes, age is no longer necessarily correlated with experience. The key for consideration as "reverse" mentoring

is that participants are placed in nontraditional roles. Thus, any newcomer to an organization with relevant knowledge to share may be considered for the role of mentor, which could certainly include Generation X or baby boomer mentors. Future empirical research is needed to explore the impact of generational differences as well as other individual differences on the process of reverse mentoring.

This article focused on generational differences found in the United States that likely have limited global generalizability. Recent research on generational differences in China found that although younger generations retain some traditional cultural values, they are moving more toward Western-style values and behaviors (Yi, Riddens, & Morgan, 2010). Thus, as businesses and technologies become increasingly global and as young people have increasingly similar experiences and media exposure to the same events, we may see a convergence of generational values and behaviors across the globe. Certainly reverse mentoring has the potential to bridge generational differences in other regions around the world, although the addition of cross-cultural differences would further complicate these relationships. Empirical research on reverse mentoring in global organizations would shed light on the importance and generalizability of generational differences.

Finally, this article did not address negative or dysfunctional reverse mentoring relationships. Traditional mentoring relationships may run the gamut from dysfunctional to relational (Ragins & Verbos, 2007), and reverse mentoring relationships may also become negative for mentors or mentees. A relationship may become dysfunctional or unhealthy with costs such as becoming an energy drain, being more trouble than it's worth, or reflecting poorly on either participant (Ragins & Scandura, 1999). The opportunities for research on reverse mentoring are tremendous, as this is a fairly recent phenomenon in organizations. Empirical work is needed to validate relationships in the proposed model and to inform practicing human resources managers.

## Conclusion

Reverse mentoring programs pair younger, junior employees as mentors with older, senior colleagues as mentees to share knowledge. The objectives of these relationships are learning and leadership development. Since much of our knowledge and experience is filtered through a generational lens (Twenge, 2006), reverse mentoring relationships also expose participants to different generational perspectives and build on the strengths of participants. This article identifies the characteristics, functions, antecedents, and consequences of reverse

mentoring relationships and suggests key considerations in creating a reverse mentoring program. Reverse mentoring is an innovative tool for organizations looking to foster cross-generational learning and to develop their current and future leaders.

## Note

1. Although young professionals may have participated in mentoring relationships through their educational experiences in either role, this is likely their first experience as mentors in a professional context.

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