

Media Article



Vocational Guidance Services

COMPUTER DRIVEN CULTURAL CHANGE

You know the scenario – the older manager who is resisting the IT revolution so the boss thinks ‘appointing’ a mentor to ‘coach’ the manager on IT is a good idea. In many ways, IT has driven a cultural change through the workplace yet there are still managers who only use the company provided computer as an office ornament.

Like it or not, the younger generation will be the mentors in this area, not the other way around, and it does scare me that my younger brother (in his early 20’s) is so much more advanced in this area than I am, and yet he feels the same way about his teenage friends. So this is an area where fathers swallow pride to be mentored by sons; yet where older managers tend to resist change the youngsters embrace it. In the workplace it is also common to see the ‘reverse mentorship’ relationship as a potential minefield of stubbornness, inflexibility and suspicion.

We all know there is no returning to the predigital age – and we’ll have to move on or commit career suicide. Simple – the computer keyboard is the new ABC of literacy. So at heart the idea of appointing IT mentors is not a bad one, but this is a new type of mentoring based not on years of experience, but on specific skills. It will be important that the ‘old guard’ or IT-phobes are allowed to choose their own mentors, and that the personality fit is right. The younger IT mentor should not be easily intimidated.

There are some ways that the mentoring relationship can be helped along – firstly the two managers must appreciate that the organization requires a combination of old and young skills to succeed. An acceptance of a new mind-set is key, and it is important that the pair show courtesy and appreciation of each other’s time and effort. Ideally this should be a voluntary relationship, not ‘delegated’ from above, as pairs who feel most comfortable with each other will transfer the most knowledge. Time for ‘sessions’ together should be mutually agreed upon.

However, just as there is a lot to gain from this relationship, it can easily turn explosive. A lot of this can be put down to the wrong attitude. Resentment of the younger manager ‘climbing’ the ladder so fast (whilst it might have taken the others 20 years work) and now earning the same as them after all this time can creep in. Older managers may resist being ‘mentored by younger, more junior managers. Older managers must not play the ‘age tool’ of ‘you were in nappies when I joined this firm!’ Younger mentors must not be condescending and must encourage (without sniggering) silly questions to be asked. The younger mentor should stoke enthusiasm for IT, and not use their knowledge to intimidate. However, the boss cannot expect to completely ‘delegate’ this mentoring relationship, especially to a new and young team member. At the worst case, frustrations on both sides of the IT mentoring relationship can lead to both mentors and ‘mentees’ wanting to quit.

But without doubt if the parties respect they both have unique strengths, this relationship can be used to strengthen the team by diffusing the ‘us vs. them’, ‘age vs. IT’ mentality and IT can be seen as a tool for collaboration. Eventually the pair should aim to understand each other, not judge, and work together to harness each other’s strengths. But this is often a hard ideal to find, not helped by ‘techies’ generally not being known for their people skills!

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