Reverse Mentoring
Ci Virtual Roundtable - Wednesday, 19th September 2012

This roundtable set out to explore the impact and potential of Reverse Mentoring and share ideas about how to make it happen.

PART 1: INSIGHT
Most organisations represented have traditional mentoring programmes, but few had experience of Reverse Mentoring (RM). Most participants agreed that much mentoring (including some RM) occurred outside formal schemes and was hard to quantify.

The discussion identified a number of applications for RM:
- Technology skills transfer
- Intergenerational understanding
- Gender and other diversity perspectives
- Cultural understanding
- Understanding of Gen Y customers

The discussion identified barriers to RM:
- Cultural reluctance to reverse roles
- ‘Breaking the ice’ in the first meeting
- Impact measures / business case
- Formal vs informal approach
- Self-awareness needed to be a mentee

PART 2: INNOVATION
Provocateurs Prem Kumar (Gen Y mentor) and Ross Smith (Baby Boomer mentee) from Microsoft described their 4-year mentoring relationship. The benefit for Ross was in understanding the perspective of the many Gen Y members of his team, from someone outside his formal management structure. The experience highlighted for him the importance of understanding life stage differences as well as generational differences.

Adopting formal mentoring roles had helped them initially. Meeting in Prem’s office space reduced any feeling of intimidation in meeting a more senior manager. They shaped the agenda for discussion together, with Ross as mentee playing an active part. They also recognised that it takes time for a (younger/junior) mentor to develop confidence in giving advice to an (older/more senior) mentee.

Another participant described an initiative which used RM to embed new technology in an organisation which was resistant to technology change. Using new graduate hires as champions of change, new collaborative tools were introduced. These early adopters are now coaching more established employees. Alongside this, the organisation revised its competencies to include competence in technology, reinforcing the change through performance management.

Participants agreed that measuring impact was key, but difficult to do. Where RM supports technology skills transfer, uptake of new tools could contribute to measurement. Otherwise mentoring is likely to contribute to retention, engagement and manager capability.

PART 3: IMPACT
Ideas for introducing RM approaches included:
- Starting with groups that have a specific need, where impact could be measured.
- Changing the ‘label’ (language) to convey the idea of skills transfer rather than a senior/junior relationship.

One participant suggested involving ‘colleague councils’ (diversity and inclusion) and asking them to choose a name that works for them, and their part of the world.

Introducing RM into other mentoring approaches, such as mentoring circles could also be useful. Mentoring circles typically have one or two experienced mentors and a group of mentees. Could this be reversed?

It was noted that mentors often find they are learning from their mentees, so an element of reverse mentoring takes place in traditional schemes unrecognised.

Finally several participants have traditional mentoring schemes and have experienced an over-supply of mentors. What can be done?