

Mentoring Across Generations: Design Considerations and Content

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This paper addresses the use of mentor programs to explore the Post COVID-19 work environment. Changed working conditions such as remote and hybrid platforms, a rapid wave of leadership retirements, reconsideration of work priorities, and enhanced focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion have altered work approaches. Furthermore, younger generations of workers bring dramatically different approaches and value sets to the work world as they enter it. While all these changed conditions are susceptible to disagreements and conflicts, reflective conversation rooted in mentorship programs, can be a crucial tool for future planning. This paper explores the designs within mentor programs that serve across generations.

Keywords: mentor programs, post Covid-19, work conditions, generations

Introduction

Mentors and mentees have much to talk about career and leadership success in the third decade of the 21st century: To commute to work or not to commute? To lead, or to simply fulfill duties? These two questions bedevil the work world following the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the quickening retirement wave of the Baby Boomer generation from leadership roles across the business, government, and nonprofit sectors. During the 2010s, organizational leadership grappled, though somewhat passively, with the issues of “telecommuting” and a coming retirement wave among workplace leaders (Kerrigan, 2016; Nilles 1994). Traffic congestion and a rising interest in “work-life balance” led organizational scholars and practitioners to debate the possibility of a four-day work week and remote platforms for office workers. Whatever disagreement prevailed, the question was resolved comprehensively at the beginning of the pandemic as, within weeks, we moved to “virtual” work environments if the tasks allowed it. With regard to the retirement wave, millions of previously uncertain elder business leaders moved the “Silver Tsunami” and “Great Resignation” forward during 2020 and 2021 (Flynn, 2022). The work world changed rapidly to remote business platforms and to a much younger promotional pool of organizational leaders.

While the possibilities within changed organizational structures and leadership were ubiquitous, the time for reflection on these new trends was fleeting in the face of fast-paced organizational demands. In the precursor to this paper, Burke (2022) advocates for reflective leadership conversations about the implications of post-COVID norms through mentorship practices. The earlier paper recommends discussions through the lens of organizational culture (Khademian, 2002; Schein, 1992), the unspoken nature of work and one’s motivation to pursue it in contrasting settings. Within different organizational cultures, their “artifacts”—rule structures, daily customs,

leadership (and follower) actions, and physical designs of the workplace are all subject to personal interpretation and judgment (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Positive assessments of organizational culture can be a powerful motivating force for workers; uncertain, negative, and confusing cultures can derail organizational progress. Burke contends that one of the most important factors underlying contrasting interpretations is the workers’ placement in one of five historical generations (Gerhart et al., 2023; Twenge, 2023).

Mentor-mentee relationships can facilitate the conversation and emerging strategies within the post-pandemic workplace. Mentor programs have evolved to highlight mutual learning between the mentor and their charge (Nakamura & Shernoff, 2009); mentors pass on the tradition of the profession or organization, while mentees transmit new customs and practices that might not yet be part of the shared organizational environment. To this end, mentor program designs, and the training provided to optimize two-way, adaptive benefits for participants (Heifetz 1994) may need more intentional focus when linking different generations. The point of this paper is to share design considerations that support the different ages and eras that participate in mentorship efforts. First, the paper briefly surveys some of the contrasts and potential conflicts across the generations. Second, we present three different mentor program designs offered within a comprehensive university, with a focus on structures to optimize the fortunes of mentors and mentees with different generational predispositions. The conclusion suggests linkages between mentor program design and the productive conversation linking progress and pitfalls as organizations adapt to the multi-generational workplace.

Literature Review: The Workplace Contributions from Different Generations

In recent years, the literature on society’s generations has burgeoned, becoming its own

academic subheading, at times positive and encouraging about changed society (Gephardt et al., 2023; Twenge, 2023), at other times highly critical and even divisive in its expression (Filipovic, 2020; Gibney, 2017; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Different generations derive different values and ways of living based in the nature of their upbringing and growth into adulthood. The contrasts across generations affect and alter parenting, politics, and workplace life, among other settings. Statistical study as well as case data highlights fluid differences within the Silent Generation (born between 1925-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1979), Millennials (1980-1994), and Generation Z (1995-2012). Soon we will also contend with Generation Alpha or Polars, though not yet in the workplace (Twenge, 2023).

The timeline approach for generations has wide but not universal acceptance. It is clear that these broad age groups approach life differently, but the boundaries are clearly flexible. Alternative demarcations arise, such that the contrasts in age groups may depend on the events that unfolded for individuals on their path to adulthood (Duffy, 2021), including the Viet Nam War and Watergate; the fall of Communism; 9/11 and the War on Terror; the recession of 2009; and the COVID-19 Pandemic. According to Duffy, we may be shaped more by events and how we respond and adapt to them, than the era in which we were born. Times of prosperity and relative peace likely also shape our predispositions. The Baby Boomers were born over a long time period; but most came of age during a time of political turmoil and protest. Those born in the first half of the wave grew up during a relatively strong economy. These circumstances may be responsible for the overall optimism and strong individualism of the Boomer generation. Gibney (2017) suggests that the deceptions within Viet Nam and Watergate likely led to a loose adherence among Boomers for honesty and responsibility, manifesting in current politics. Millennials came of age at the time of 9/11 and were entering the work world at the time of the 2009 recession —likely leading to some pessimism and realism in their work disposition.

In contrast, Twenge (2023) feels that an important basis for us may be the novel technologies that arise as we come of age, including television; air conditioning and home appliances like the Microwave; birth control; computers, then the Internet; then social media; and finally Artificial Intelligence. Each new innovation alters for many of us the ways that we spend our time and the ease with which we pursue activities. At the same time, innovations alter the challenges that we face and the discipline to meet needs without them. In sum, our lives and those born at approximately the same time in history are shaped by both the historical events and the new technological advancements that we bring into our day-to-day norms. Television may have formed the materialistic nature of later Boomers and Gen X youths as they

matured; but no generation has been shaped more completely than those who came of age with the cell phone. Twenge parallels Gen Z with “iGen,” the first generation with iPhones or other cellular devices from nearly the beginning of their lives. Haidt (2023) and Twenge map out concerns for safety, mental health, slow maturity, and lack of attention and acceptance of political institutions and religion among the generation currently entering the work world. However, this group is also likely to have a greater social conscience and tolerance for diversity — also because of ready flow of information within their devices and social media access.

Accordingly, it appears less important when you are born than how one emerged into adult life and the work world, and what values one brings along to pursue work. Back to the opening questions of this paper: What if historical values of promotion through merit ring true for elders within an organization, but “merit” is hollow or false for younger generations? Or in contrast, a stable, upwardly-oriented career may be an acceptable path for elders and in fact, helpful for organizational sustainability, but not of interest or importance to younger generations. There may be a normative and judgmental aspect across age groups, creating increased tension within our workplaces (Filipovic, 2020).

Generational Definitions

Other scholars have studied the validity of these generational definitions and their context within historical timelines. This research focuses more specifically on the continua that we see on several workplace value questions that prevail within current and likely future organizations:

Live to Work/Work to Live

Earlier generations came of age with a long work week, where dedication and determination held at least an aura of worth; success would come from many hours on the job. In recent times, expectations of success have changed, potentially to something unattainable in the work place (Twenge, 2023). Self-worth can come from outside activities for younger generations (made much easier if one can work remotely).

Self-service/Social Contribution

Capitalist notions shaped the earlier generations; success was in personal acquisition (Gibney, 2017). Younger generations may carve out focus and interest in humanitarian causes, attention to inequities, and climate change – and pressure their work place to consider the same interests.

Steady Career Development/ “Free Agency”

Even before the Boomers, the career norm for many resided within one or very few organizations; after the Boomers, most generations held less patience in waiting for promotions and advancement, and thus are ready to transfer out

of an organization much more quickly.

Standard Procedures/Loose Structures

The workplace customs and attire of earlier generations were stable, where the later generations experiment with innovative procedures, new technologies, revised schedules, and frequently changing working patterns (Twenge, 2023).

Widening Diversity and Inclusion

Advancements in diversity have occurred across all the generations covered in this study, but with fits and starts. Increasing comfort with racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, and disability diversity, among other differences, has become the watch word and in need of protection within younger generations (Anderson, 2021).

Bases of “Entitlement”

Perceptions of inequity are complicated across older and younger generations. Boomers and older generations perceive that they have in effect earned their achievements and can feel that the younger generations want rewards and promotions without the same pathway. The younger generations perceive an inability to achieve the same fruits as their elders — home ownership, funded retirement, even a debt-free college degree is unattainable given the narrowing of wealth held by older generations.

Mentor-mentee Discussions

The conversation regarding generational contributions in the workplace can be fruitful or frustrating, depending on the level of engagement, the openness of the participants, and the desire for collective learning. Terms and titles of the discussion within leading texts highlight the antagonistic element within the conversation. Witness Gibney’s (2017) caustic but still worthwhile critique of Boomers, *A generation of sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers betrayed America*. Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) highlight the increasing sensitivity of Generation Z and possibly late Millennials to threatening discourse at universities but disparage this overall trend as “Witch Hunts” against academic leaders. All generations are in danger of falling for the framing presented by profiteering and attention-seeking mass media and social media; productive conversation is more likely to come at a granular level, between individuals and small work groups across generations. Mentor-mentee discussions provide a first line of helpful reflection on assets and liabilities within contrasting age cohorts at work.

Methodology and Findings: Three Mentoring Programs Across and Within Generations

Mentors and their apprentices, proteges, or mentees have built successful fields throughout history, mostly initiated outside of academia;

mentorship programs provide a crucial component of experiential learning within universities in this century (Nakamura & Shernoff, 2009). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, mentoring had developed into a field with its own journal, through the University of New Mexico’s Mentoring Institute, focusing on such issues as career success, acclimation or socialization for new entrants into organizations (including First-Generation college students), programs to address inequity in high-school age youths, and a mutuality between mentors and mentees. Since the pandemic, new possibilities have arisen in the mentoring field. What does career success look like in remote settings? What is the linkage between mentoring and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs? Can we build resilience and mindful presence within organizations through mentoring? (Burke 2022)

With the increased sensitivity to respond to different generational needs, the design of mentoring programs may benefit from intentional adjustments to acknowledge cohort contrasts. How do current mentorship programs, with different generational stakeholders, shape themselves to their contrasting participants? We build from three quite different mentor options provided at Suffolk University, a private, non-profit educational and community support organization located in the center of Boston, Massachusetts, through assessment of program documentation and interviews with mentor program leaders and stakeholders. Suffolk was founded in 1906 by Gleason Archer, a lawyer who recognized the need for legal training accessible to working class citizens. From Archer’s living room, Suffolk grew to eventually include a Law School, College of Arts and Sciences, and the Sawyer Business School. Suffolk’s student body now totals approximately 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students, plus several hundred students pursuing Certificate degrees across several skill areas. Since its founding, Suffolk has held close links to the Boston area’s business and public service communities.

University-wide, comprehensive mentoring: Suffolk’s RAMP Program

RAMP stands for the Ram’s (Suffolk’s sports team identity) Alumni Mentoring Program. Suffolk has over 80,000 alumni, most of whom stay in the Boston or eastern Massachusetts regions, and many who are committed to their university and its community. RAMP was started 18 years ago to coordinate mentoring by alumni with current Suffolk undergraduates, graduate students, and law students. RAMP is administered through the university’s Center for Career Equity, Diversity, and Success, which received a large increase in staffing in 2020, growing from five to 21 staff. The largest component of the growth was in a dozen individual specialized career-focused “Career Community Coordinators.” Each of these career specialists hosts any students who desire to develop in the specific career area served by each community.

Over time, a designated mentor coordinator has served to link students with career advice and guidance through the RAMP program. The center of the process has been to take in student applications for mentees, who are then matched with specialists in their field of choice from among the alumni base. RAMP mentors guide their students through career development by holding ongoing meetings over the course of the academic year.

Several components of the RAMP experience have been tweaked to acknowledge generational needs in recent years: 1) the platform for meetings now includes on-line Zoom-based meetings between mentors and mentees. This has several benefits. It can widen the applicant pool for mentees, who can link with distant mentors now, especially if the student has international interests. At the same time, remote mentoring eases the commuting difficulty within Boston, one of the most congested cities in the world. Participation among mentees has grown in the RAMP program as the online option has grown. 2) RAMP advising is careful to acknowledge and plan for different communication modes across their participants; mentees and mentors are asked to plan for preferred communication modes (phone, text, e-mail, other communication apps). The pairings, which likely come from different generations, need to agree upon a mutually comfortable mode of communication with one another. 3) Patience with contact is part of the mentoring training; mentees need to respect the “busyness” of an in-career mentor and tolerate limited delays in response. Mentor-mentee pairings are asked to form agreement on response times. 4) The mentor may be expected to show the mentee their place of employment, but is also asked to share exposure to volunteer participation options as well, in keeping with the social change interests of current college students. The RAMP planning process asks that mentors and mentees come to agreement on experiential activities within and beyond the main workplace. 5) Mentors are prompted to gain their comfort level with varied forms of diversity, as mentees are asked to be comfortable with identities different than their own. 6) The plan between mentor and mentee is suggested, not mandatory, allowing for flexibility within the experiential gains for the participants. However, commitment by both participants is a required base line.

RAMP emphasizes the two-way nature of its mentor pairings; both mentees and mentors identify learning areas to discuss with their partner in the relationship. The mentor is in a lead role only on occasion. They are directed not to serve as a job recruiter for the mentee, but they may share contacts from their own network for informational interviews and possible intern recruitment. Mentors receive a small amount of training to refer the mentee to mental health and Title IX discrimination resources should these needs arise; the mentor should not attempt to

solve issues that arise in these topic areas without professional guidance. RAMP leadership integrates a flexible approach to matches, doing their best to honor mentee requests for mentors who share an identity, but they are also open to difference between the paired participants.

At-risk youth mentorship: The iWorks Collaboration

Suffolk’s Moakley Center for Public Management administers the iWorks Program, a collaboration between the Center, the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF), and a non-profit agency called Communities for People, which supports the well-being of youths in DCF protection. iWorks fosters progressive growth among youths aged between 14 and 21, giving them summer placements in local workplaces, and mentor counseling along the way. The desired outcome is to support a better planned future for teenagers who otherwise have limited aspirations or expectations to pursue business or public management careers. Each summer, the program holds a “graduation” ceremony as the summer job placements come to an end. iWorks students offer their own testimonials about the experience—seeing new possibilities for their work lives, initiating a new network of career aspirants and potential employers, and gaining a swath of self-confidence in facing future options.

The budget expense for iWorks splits between the subsidy of work payment (these are paid summer internships) and the mentoring support of the youths in the program. iWorks funds three “job coaches,” who each supervise 15 youths as an indirect support outside of the business work supervisors. The job coaches check in on the workplace relationships, counsel the students on proper and improper job behavior, and provide an ear for the youth workers as they meet the new demands of a work schedule, co-workers, and productivity and client service within the job.

Job coaches and their assigned iWorks students operate in a “peer-to-peer” mentorship relationship. All of the students are exposed to a range of trainings prior to and during their job placements, including Professionalism (Appearance and Habits); Resume Building; Money Management and Savings Plans; and Interview Skills/Practice. These are new topics for the youths, so provide a basis for the mentor or coaching relationship to develop. For those students who remain with the iWorks program beyond the Summer, further trainings on Stress Management, Computer Skills for the Workplace, and exposure to several career options with in-career experts are offered throughout the academic year.

Job coaches, as mentors, and iWorks students as mentees collaborate most actively throughout the summer work experience. The job coaches are college-age students themselves. This past summer, they were one undergraduate, one Masters student, and one recent bachelors degree recipient (Moakley’s staff director for the

program). These are all the same generation as the iWorks students, and thus have credibility and understanding of shared challenges and assets. The training curriculum provides a bridge to Suffolk alumni and professors, who come from the range of other generations (Millennials to Baby Boomers). Job coaches are able to share the lessons of growing into responsibility in real time, creating trust and authenticity within their mentoring role. Trust and respect within the iWorks students is far from automatic. Job coaches, as mentors, learn about patience, active listening, forgiveness, and transformational leadership.

The key to success within the iWorks program resides in a balance between targeted planned training experiences and flexible but focused job coaches. As mentors, the job coaches can work from a low-impact but relevant training plan, and then demonstrate those lessons through their own professionally based interaction with their mentees. The older leadership of the non-profit and DCF partners are fully able to empower Gen Z job coaches as the linchpin of the iWorks mentor arrangement. The coaches work through diligence and heartfelt stewardship of their charges befitting a mutually beneficial mentorship model.

***Two-tier, multigenerational mentorship:
The Moakley Center's Certificate in Local
Government Leadership and Management***

For over twenty years, Suffolk has offered an intensive management development option for nonprofit, municipal, and state middle managers to advance in the public service. The education goes beyond a bachelor's degree but short of the Master of Public Administration degree. Each Certificate is offered through a partnership between a Massachusetts based nonprofit or state human resource development organization. For the purposes of this article, we focus on one certificate: The partnership between the Massachusetts Municipal Association and the Moakley Center.

A certificate involves five courses, the equivalent of Masters-level skill-based courses, each of which are offered over five full Fridays for a total of 25 weeks. The courses include content on finance, human resources, analysis, and leadership. They are the equivalent of Suffolk's courses within its accredited Master of Public Administration program; the main differences between MPA and Certificate courses are the five-week time line, which is designed to enable their in-career participants (public works directors, librarians, town accountants, town managers, and the like) to attend courses on Fridays, with their employers agreeing to allow students to fulfill their work duties over four weekdays from Monday through Thursday. And, instead of regular Suffolk tenure-track professors, the certificate courses are taught by seasoned leaders, retired town managers, experienced human resource or finance directors, and other "pracademics," academically inclined municipal professionals.

The goals of the Moakley Certificate are four-fold—impart knowledge, train on skills, facilitate networking, and engender confidence within leadership roles. The latter two focuses are enhanced through a two-tier mentoring strategy. Certificate cohorts average 24 students, who are in the care of a single instructor for five full Fridays in a row. The instructors do share their knowledge and skills, but in a mindful way—with self-critiques, reflection, and historical context of lived experience (frequently, their lessons derive from personal case studies, change management where they were the central protagonist). This functions as networked mentoring, as the instructors reveal the same experiences that they would with a single mentee—but instead, to a group of 24. Students then share their own professional challenges as well. The certificate instructors frequently hold further individual dialog and coaching with their students, outside of class hours or during the other months of the overall certificate time line.

In addition to this "networked mentoring" experience, between late- or post-career Boomer or Gen X instructors and mostly Millennial students, a "peer-to-peer" mentoring relationship develops. Over the course of a single 7-hour day of class, leadership splits between instructor-led lectures and discussions, and small group exercises—simulations, work groups, and team exercises. Within the group time, students share more of their workplace challenges with each other, in a less intimidating and more private context than the arena of the full class group. Students alternate between questioning and leadership roles within the small groups; all learn to actively listen to peers and apply the lessons gained from instructors and their materials. Over the course of 25 intensive Fridays, there is much counseling between students, to the end of developing network skills and confidence as professionals.

This two-tier mentoring process models leadership development in a self-reinforcing way. First, student mentees learn a reflective practice approach (Argyris & Schon, 1996) from their instructors; then they use the method frequently over the course of a full academic year with increasing trust in their (same generation) peers. The Moakley certificate mentor design does not derive from a rule book or procedures manual; it is central to a long developing organizational culture that crosses the 20-year history of the certificates. As Schein (1992) contends, culture arises through repeated rituals that are handed down over time. The certificate partnerships are enduring, as they have produced over 2,000 graduates who form the leadership ranks of the Massachusetts public service profession. The instructional base for the certificates changes at the margins, with new instructor mentors adding gradually as senior instructors retire. New instructors are socialized to this unique experiential education approach. Students buy in quickly to the method each year as their intensive courses get under way.

Summary

This paper continues the discussion initiated in Burke (2022), supporting the increasingly important role of mentoring as a form of experiential education and reflective learning within organizational settings. The first paper developed exercises for mentor pairings based in Schein's (1992) approach to productive analysis of organizational culture. This second paper is a sort of "prequel," exploring the ways that mentor programs can be structured intentionally to facilitate participation across and at times within generations. The design strategies of Suffolk University's three successful mentor programs herein include intentional consideration of generational differences; platforms to ensure trust between mentors and mentees; identification of shared goal interests for participants; and an understanding of the motivations within and across different generational participants. Among the case studies, only the conventional RAMP program would likely function with mentors and mentees from two different generations. The iWorks and Moakley Certificate programs both rely on a large amount of single-generation mentor-mentee partnerships. But the latter two programs do consult and link their discussions to other participants from different generations.

Active and fully vested mentors and mentees can create successful mentoring programs tailored to varied needs of the sponsoring organization. From there, both the externally oriented outcomes, namely the underpinnings of the partners' career progress, as well as an internal focus, improvement of the organizational hosts, are equally well served. Consider four of the post-COVID 19 pandemic challenges, and their need for thoughtful and trusting dialogs within organizations: (1) Integration into the changed workspace (workplace, university, lab, etc.) and its protocols: Are we coming to grips with the grand advantages and hidden downsides of both parts of hybrid work? Are we integrating new technological solutions into work while understanding any unintended negative consequences? (2) Preparation for changed duties, through changed technologies: Are new methods planned into a system of existing protocols? or we recognize the limits within the new methods? And do we process and grieve the loss of earlier traditions of work? (3) Motivation for leadership success: Do we discuss the work outcomes, in tandem with personal goals? Are we replacing earlier methods systematically or steadily expanding the range of practical and technological approaches to lead? (4) Advancement of inclusion and equity in workplaces and communities: Can this be a process of education with false starts and forgiveness for mistakes, but with steady advancement of worthwhile business and societal goals?

A starting point can be the stories, observed anecdotes and cases offered by seasoned mentors and newly recruited mentees, that inform the

answers to these questions. Heifetz (1992), in his exploration of mutuality in leadership strategies, calls this "getting on the balcony" removed from the contentious and busy day-to-day action. Mentoring puts both participants on that balcony, to make worthwhile observations of the action on the floor.

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