TWO-WAY MENTORING

How employees across generations can learn from one another in a firm.

By Peeyush Gupta, Michelle D. Steward, James A. Narus and D.V.R. Seshadri

Historically, young executives looked to their senior executives to fast-track their learning, a process known as 'mentoring'. Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, is credited with proposing the idea of pairing older executives with younger employees, to enable the former to learn new technologies from the latter. This process, which has come to be known as 'reverse mentoring', has gained popularity over the years, propelled by the ever-increasing pace of technological change. Topics discussed during reverse mentoring could cover a wide spectrum, from big technology trends in IT to more basic topics, such as how to use enterprise resource planning systems or learn what is trending on the Internet. Some early adopters of this process include telecommunications firms Nokia and Bharti Airtel. Successful reverse mentoring, which is essentially a one-way mentoring, requires an open attitude and the ability to dissolve barriers of status, power, and position.

This article, though, is about Tata Steel Ltd., a large multinational company headquartered in India, which has successfully implemented two-way mentoring. This concept is also called 'mutual' or 'bilateral' mentoring in some quarters. While the term 'mutual mentoring' turns up in some articles, the examples are typically adhoc, casual, informal, and not formally sponsored at the corporate level. Tata Steel's programme, however, is structured, large-scale, and rigorous, and achieved sound results. It has the support of the top management of the company and been carefully designed and implemented. The following is an account of its journey in conducting this programme, which should provide valuable lessons for other organisations seeking to learn from its experience.

Intergenerational conflict in organisations

For years, the media has been rife with stories of intergenerational warfare, frequently citing snarky gripes made by one generation against another, thereby implying that the prospect of different generations working together to achieve common goals is highly unlikely. Here are a few stereotypical aspersions that pundits often advance: baby boomers are profiteers responsible for climate change and ruining the economy at the expense of future generations, Gen Xers are privileged and ungrateful slackers, millennials are snowflakes that are permanently attached to their smartphones, and Gen Zers are technology addicts who fare poorly at face-to-face interactions and generally do not plan to stay in a given job for more than three years.

Whether you are a baby boomer, an X, a Y, or a Z, or some other designation, it is important to realise that each generation comes to work with different skill sets and conceptions of how work should be done. Capturing and employing these skills has thus been a challenging undertaking. This has been especially so for large companies in Asia, where hierarchy exacerbates these intergenerational challenges. Senior positions in these large companies are held primarily by those from the older generations, and senior management views and actions are supported by formal authority, rather than by consensus and collaboration—traits that younger workers expect from their employers.

Can the different generations learn to support and cultivate each other's strengths and capabilities for the benefit of the organisation and all concerned? With markets becoming increasingly complex, has the intergenerational performance gap been widening? And if so, what can be done?

We believe that formal programmes acknowledging the benefits of intergenerational cooperation and two-way mentoring are needed to break through the traditional walls of conflict. This is particularly important in Asia, given the cultural norm of deference to authority. If the different generations can cooperate in such a setting, those from other continents can take heart that intergenerational workplace harmony can work well.

Facing the challenge head-on

Many large established companies today are not only grappling with a high turnover rate among new employees, especially millennials, but are also facing acute difficulties in recruiting replacements. When asked in exit interviews why they were leaving, employees consistently claim that the organisation is too bureaucratic, top-heavy, and lacking in agility. Hence, they also see very limited opportunities for career advancement.

Furthermore, these technology-savvy staff find that their employers are lagging behind other leading-edge businesses in their digitalisation efforts. In fact, this sentiment is echoed by a range of stakeholders, including suppliers, channel partners, customers, investors, and analysts. Attitudes towards digitalisation also vary across generations. While senior management may prefer to spend long hours in the office doing business through face-to-face meetings, new employees may feel more comfortable leveraging technology from remote locations and working online. To better cater to these changing preferences through a route of curation, curiosity, and collaboration, companies may seek to digitalise as many of its processes as possible. Most notably, these would include transactions, internal and external communications, and partnership programmes. These digitalised processes, especially in mature companies, may be a welcome addition for new employees, and they usually receive a warm reception from millennials at customer, supplier, and channel partner firms.

A TWO-WAY MENTORING PROGRAMME

For companies in mature markets, an intergenerational mentoring programme could be used to excite and engage new employees and spur the development of digital offerings to complement mature products. Efforts can draw upon creative and innovative inputs from new employees, thus encouraging them to build enduring careers with the company. This attempt to help cultivate a digital mindset across generations is in sync with companies' efforts to seek growth and competitive advantage through continuous improvements in the value delivered to customers.

Called by different names—sponsor/'sponsee', advisor/advisee, or even master/apprentice—the mentor/mentee concept has had a long history in management literature. The thinking has always been that a senior with rich skills and extensive experience, while also possessing both strategic and tacit knowledge, would be in a position to tutor high-potential subordinates. Today, as the pace of change increases and the foundations upon which basic processes are based shift from paper and pencil to digital records and ledgers, the skill sets required to perform even the simplest of tasks require new techniques, and consequently mentorship.

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For a two-way mentoring programme to be successful, new employees who are seen as rising stars and technology experts can be paired with the most senior managers. The new employees can acquaint senior managers with the possibilities of digital technologies and data analytics, and inspire them to champion new ways of doing business. In return, senior managers can counsel new employees about business practices, leadership, and organisational skills, with the intention of grooming them for senior management positions in the future. This therefore offers accelerated learning opportunities for both mentors and mentees.

The above thinking was put into practice at Tata Steel, a geographically diversified steel producer that has a commercial presence in over 50 countries.

Application of the two-way mentoring programme

THE PROBLEM

Over the last decade, the global steel industry, and Tata Steel in particular, has had to reckon with a multitude of challenges including excess steel-making capacity worldwide, increasingly commoditised products, and highly volatile demand. If there were ever a time for the different generations of Tata employees to pull together to

meet these challenges, this was it. And yet, the firm was faced with issues of high attrition and dissatisfaction among the new, younger employees.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

Recognising that collaboration across the generations of employees would be necessary to successfully resolve these issues, a newly created taskforce comprising leading executives began identifying generational differences in worldviews, with the hope of successfully bridging these gaps. It quickly learned that the senior management typically comprised baby boomers and, increasingly, Gen Xers, with an average age of 50 years. On the positive side, these senior managers possessed significant wisdom and experience, understood organisational dynamics, and were well versed in the company's processes and operations. However, they tended to be 'digital laggards' with limited awareness of the potential of digital technologies and data analytics. In addition, they often suffered from inertia and had an overriding preference for doing things the old way.

New employees tended to be millennials with an average age of 27 years. They were digital natives who possessed considerable technology skills and preferred using digital tools with which they had become familiar. They tended to be well trained in data analytics, and comfortable with its use. They were also ambitious and willing to innovate. However, they lacked significant business and organisational skills, especially those related to high-level corporate strategy. They felt more at home using technology than interacting in person with other employees, senior management, suppliers, and customers.

After reviewing the skillsets of senior managers and new employees, the taskforce saw complementarity rather than a basis for contention. They concluded that the way forward was to get the different generations to share their distinctive capabilities through a two-way mentoring programme.

THE MENTORING PROGRAMME

Participation in the two-way mentoring programme was voluntary for both, the new employees and senior executives. Applications from aspiring mentors were invited from the new employees. All of them had to take an online examination on digital competencies. Over 500 aspirants applied. Following an initial evaluation, interviews were conducted. The first round of eliminations narrowed down the number of prospects to 300. This number was further reduced to 50 and then to 16. In the first round, these 16 new employees were paired with 16 senior executives. Over the course of a year, the pairs met at least once a month and as often as once a fortnight. Meetings lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours and covered a wide variety of digital technology and business management topics. After nine months, assignments were redistributed and new mentoring pairs were created. At the end of the first year, another 25 new employees and 48 senior executives took part in the programme. The company is now planning for the third round.

THE PAYOFF

Senior executives reported that they had become far more familiar and comfortable with emerging digital technologies after participating in the programme. Some of the comments they made about the programme were:

- "My new employee mentor has shown me that digital is more than just an enabler."
- "Knowledge begets knowledge. Two individuals can learn from each other through appropriate process facilitation, which is what the programme sought to provide."
- "After this experience, I've realised that digital is vital no matter what role or function I take on. So from now on, I'll be looking for opportunities to move ahead digitally."

New employees, on the other hand, said that they had gained confidence in their ability to handle uncertainty. In terms of personal skills, they had learned how to manage a work calendar and their time, present to high-level executives, sell an idea to the organisation, view situations from a strategic angle, understand senior executive thinking behind crucial decisions, establish organisational governance mechanisms, and acquire a sense of business rationality. Below are some of their comments about the programme.

- "Mentoring the managing director helped me get a peek into the professional work style of a top manager... I could correlate all that I saw about how he worked with the discussions we had during the mentoring process. I found him to be very proactive, and very keen to chart the company's digital transformation journey. He also put in a lot of effort to ensure that I was comfortable talking to him."
- "I learned time management–how to prioritise my work, handle pressure, and not to get bogged down by my short-term ambitions and instead think long-term. I also learned to look at things holistically from a strategic angle, so that I could see how the organisation was positioning itself for the long haul."

Although it is difficult to attribute all the positive changes that have occurred to a single programme, it was found that the attrition rate among new employees who participated in the two-way mentoring programme was five percent through fiscal year 2020 versus over nine percent for comparable, non-participating new employees.

Lessons learnt

Conducting the two-way mentoring programmes is not without challenges. Some mentor-mentee pairs will fare better than others. Sometimes pairs will fail to gel, the reasons for which may be a mismatch in chemistry, or the mentor was not pushing the mentee hard enough, which resulted in the perception that the mentee was not gaining much from the process.

Success and continuity of the programme is hugely dependent on the quality of mentor-mentee pairing. Tata Steel's experience reveals that the best pairing happens when the mentor and mentee are from completely different functional areas; in fact, they could be total strangers in a large company! Moreover, in a two-way mentoring process, the roles of mentor and mentee can be flexibly and seamlessly reversed, within the same session. This enables an inhibition-free relationship to be cultivated, such that the young mentor does not feel overwhelmed by the senior-level mentee. It also helps if the pair is located in the same city so

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that monthly interactions can be carried out in person (although this is admittedly difficult during the Covid-19 situation). In contrast, a phone or video call can sometimes be awkward or make the relationship more formal. However, whether it is conducted through a call or face-to-face, reducing the formality in the relationship is extremely important in creating an atmosphere of mutual humility and joint learning.

Each company needs to find its ideal number of mentor-mentee pairs. Too many pairs becomes a challenge to manage, and too few pairs could result in limited energy and interest.

Another challenge posed by the programme is that the mentees may end up being sought after by other teams in the company due to their expertise and higher profile after taking part in the programme. They may be invited to mentor others in the organisation who are trying to progress on the digital transformation front. This can take away time from their assigned day jobs, resulting in longer working hours. Thus, companies should help mentees manage such demands.

Additionally, caution should be taken not to excessively formalise the mentoring process, nor to attempt to shift the monitoring of the process to the HR function. Instead, companies may consider anchoring the bi-directional mentoring initiative to the strategy function, so that senior management support is offered and flexibility is maintained. Additionally, companies should be careful not to create a rigid set of dos and don'ts for the mentor-mentee pairs. Instead, they may opt for a simple, but formal tracking of the progress made.

For companies embracing the two-way mentoring programmes, they must recognise that there is a danger that the mentor-mentee relationship could reach a limit at some point, in the digital sense. An important part of retaining this relationship is for the mentee to be confident that the mentor continues to be the right 'go-to' person for anything digital. This puts positive pressure on the mentors to upgrade their skills and keep up with the developments in the digital world. Ultimately, it is a dynamic relationship. The programme needs to have an exit point or alternatively, the mentors need to be reassigned to new mentees to refresh the relationship.

Once a mentor, always a mentor. The network of relationships can continue as a valuable resource, while mentoring is conducted on an informal basis. These rich relationships can help the company attract and retain talent, as well as effectively create new offerings from vibrant cross-generational interactions.

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