Reverse Mentoring: Are We Ready for Global Acceptance Yet?

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BACKGROUND

- A type of mentoring that has garnered much attention from scholars and practitioners in recent years is the notion of reverse mentoring. This is a non-traditional form of mentoring relationship whereby the newcomers in an organization are paired up with more seasoned employees preferably in leadership roles to help the more experienced person learn new knowledge (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Murphy, 2012). Although reverse mentoring is gaining traction in practice, there are very few empirical studies that have examined this practice (Cotugna & Vickery, 1998; Leh, 2005) and no study has explored how this concept of reverse mentoring might align with different national cultural preferences.

- Many organizations are riding on the success wagon of reverse mentoring including General Electric, where it first started, soon followed by Procter & Gamble, Ogilvy & Mather, Citi bank, Target, United Health Groups etc. However, most of these organizations are headquartered in the West. In spite of prevalence of reverse mentoring programs in many western countries and its overwhelming success, it is not common to hear about organizations adopting reverse mentoring in the eastern hemisphere.

- Given that there is an increased emphasis on studying how certain cultural factors may impact the dynamics of mentoring and its outcome (Gentry, Weber, & Sadry, 2008; Mezias & Scandura, 2005; Ramaswami, Huang, & Dreher, 2014), we attempted to explore the possibility of reverse mentoring being embraced by different cultures across the globe. In spite of prevalence of reverse mentoring programs in many western countries and its overwhelming success, it is not common to hear about organizations adopting reverse mentoring in the eastern hemisphere.

- We have witnessed an upsurge of societal culture research in the past few years especially through the lens of cultural dimensions (Kim & McLean, 2014; Rurkkhum & Bartlett, 2018). Surprisingly, not much mentoring research has applied the societal culture dimension as the theoretical framework (Gentry et al., 2008). Cross-cultural studies around reverse mentoring could provide a solid grounding for the future success and acceptance of reverse mentoring practice.

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTION

- The purpose of this study is to identify the factors driving the success or lack of reverse mentoring programs across cultures.

- Specifically, we considered the power distance dimension of culture in four countries/regions including India, Korea, USA, and UK (Europe). This cultural dimension reflects the extent to which power is distributed in a particular country or society (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2001).

- The research question guiding this study is: How do cultural preferences in regards to power distance impact the implementation of reverse mentoring in different countries?

METHODS

- We conducted in-depth interviews with consultants, human resource directors, learning directors, and employees at leadership levels who are often tasked with executing mentoring initiatives in their respective organizations.

- Total 9 professionals participated in the interview (India 1, Korea 2, USA 3, UK 1, and Netherlands 2).

- The interviews lasted from 60 to 75 minutes and were recorded for data analysis purpose.

- The interviews were mostly conducted in English except the ones from Korea, which were transcribed verbatim in English.

- The interviews started with an open ended question where participants were asked to share experiences with rolling out mentoring initiatives.

- More focused questions were asked thereafter about perceptions around acceptance of mentoring practices that entail seniors to learn from juniors like in reverse mentoring.

- We used an inductive coding approach to detect patterns or recurring themes in the interviews and placed labels (codes) to identify how cultural trends might be affecting the receptivity to reverse mentoring (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

- Our findings indicate that more than national culture, cultures of certain industry or profession (i.e., whether the profession is known to have a hierarchical or bureaucratic culture such as the police force) are more prone to be resistant to reverse mentoring.

- For instance, male dominated professions were reported to be less accepting of reverse mentoring where the notion of "old boy network" is still very prevalent. Interestingly, one of the participants opined that reverse mentoring might be considered a deficit model of mentoring for seniors in such professions.

- In Netherlands, due to lose hierarchy of relationships, senior leaders did not hesitate to acknowledge that there are skills which they lack and which can be learned from somebody junior. Learning could become dysfunctional if junior members are viewed as threats.

- In Korea, age does not matter when employees should learn about new services and products in a bank industry. When new services and products have recently developed for clients, learning about the services and products is required for all employees. In the majority of cases, junior members are experts in specific services and products and seniors have no reluctance to learn from juniors.

- However, the cases are not for one-to-one mentoring relationships, but for group lectures. Considering conservative organizational culture, it is a challenge to initiate and implement reverse mentoring programs. In particular, older male subordinates feel uncomfortable to learn about something from younger female branch managers. Although female managers actively share tips and methods with male subordinates to improve performance of the branch, male subordinates are more likely to feel burdened.

- To design and implement reverse mentoring, it is very important for successful reverse mentoring programs to clarify (a) why reverse mentoring is critical (b) how to join revise mentoring programs, (c) how to make and maintain mentorships between partners because it is not natural that younger people provide a guide to older people in Korea.

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

- This study emphasizes global perspectives on reverse mentoring by comparing the practices across culture. The results of the current study could serve as evidence establishing further exploration and robustness for understanding reverse mentoring in different cultural contexts.

- This study could be illuminating in unearthing biases, stereotypes, facilitators, and inhibitors for practicing effective reverse mentoring across multinational organizations as they cross national boundaries.

Practical Implications

- Practitioners in the field could use reverse mentoring to prepare and develop knowledge and relationships for their employees. By working with different stakeholders, practitioners could use the finings of reverse mentoring from this study to incorporate reverse mentoring design into their practices to create greater outcomes.

- Reverse mentoring can be used as a tool to collect information and feedback from employees to enhance their motivation and knowledge, improve relationships with different cohorts, and reflect learning activities in their respective work contexts.

- Role modeling from the leadership of an organization is crucial for the success of reverse mentoring initiative.

- The nature of the project can also dictate the success of reverse mentoring initiative.

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