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Reverse Mentoring for Cross-Generational Knowledge Transfer

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Abstract: *The concept of reverse mentoring wherein a senior executive is mentored by a digitally fluent junior colleague creates an inversion in the direction of organisational knowledge flow and has become a strategy to deal with the increasing generational gap seen within the contemporary workforce [1,4]. As Gen Z begins to occupy an increasingly significant share of the global and Indian workforce, Indian organisations face a unique problem - senior management needs to be adaptable to new technologies, changing work culture, and inclusive practices without destabilising the power dynamics on which the Indian corporate governance system operates [13,14]. In this paper, I would like to explore the concept of reverse mentoring and its importance from a literature review perspective within the context of psychological safety framework essential for candour within the hierarchy and propose a cyclical HR framework involving six stages: pairing, psychological safety contracting, session scheduling, feedback from both sides, organisational embedding, and periodic evaluation of the reverse mentoring program. As a conceptual paper, the present literature review is solely based on industry reports, examples and published literature. Reverse mentoring is an inexpensive and effective tool to keep the executives of Indian organizations strategically up-to-date if this practice is carefully designed to bridge age-based cultural hurdles, such as high power distance and losing face.*

Introduction

Organisational mentoring for the majority of the last century took place in one direction, whereby the assumption of greater wisdom and experience on the part of senior staff was seen as passing on knowledge downwards to more junior members of the team. The concept of reverse mentoring reverses the process by bringing together junior members of an organisation who are considered to have greater technological knowledge and insight into consumer trends with senior executives in a true mentoring relationship [1,11]. Most accounts of the reverse mentoring process date back to the year 1999 when Jack Welch, who was CEO of General Electric at the time, brought together senior executives and junior staff in order for the former to gain skills on how to use the internet [11].

The urgency with which reverse mentoring programs need to be implemented arises due to the changing demographics around which the current labor market revolves. Generation Z, who was born between 1995 and 2012, makes up 18 percent of the current workforce as per the middle of the 2020s and is expected by different industry publications to occupy 30 percent of the workforce by 2030, while Generation Z along with Millennials is expected to constitute as much as 74 percent of the total workforce in 2030 [12,14,16]. Workforce data published by Deloitte, Randstad, SHRM, and the World Economic Forum point to the same general prediction, and further indicate that Gen Z employees have the lowest average job tenure in comparison to other generations and have an exceptionally high priority given to mental health care and learning [18]. More precisely, in India, the survey conducted by Deloitte in 2025 on Gen Z and Millennial workforce reveals that 94 percent of Indian Gen Z workforce considers on-the-job learning as the most important driver of career progression, which is ahead of the global average and signifies an entire workforce generation that is willing to shape and influence organisational learning practices rather than just learn from them [15]. A separate Indian workforce white paper also highlights the fact that the introduction of generative AI among other emerging technologies has changed the skills which Gen Z Indian workers wish to cultivate at the beginning of their career, thus making it all the more necessary to engage in a structured cross-generational knowledge transfer process instead of just reskilling the workforce [17]. In India, companies like Merck India and P&G India have already started implementing reverse mentoring groups where senior management personnel are mentored by Gen Z and Millennial workers on subjects like social media marketing and generative artificial intelligence [13].

In this paper, three research questions will be considered. The first question is regarding what has been established by the literature both within academia and the industries as regards reverse mentoring practices and their effects. The second research question is regarding the specific challenges that are faced by Indian organisations in conducting reverse mentoring considering hierarchical and seniority-based nature of the work environment. Finally, what kind of framework for Human Resource Management can be employed in order to increase the probability of success of Indian reverse mentoring programs? In terms of conceptual contribution, the current paper uses exclusively the secondary literature.

Conceptual Foundations of Reverse Mentoring

The original formulation by Chaudhuri and Ghosh conceptualizes reverse mentoring as a social exchange approach that is able to keep both the older workers involved and the younger ones committed, applying social exchange theory to a setting where status and knowledge move in opposite directions [1]. A general review of the existing reverse mentoring literature reveals that the social exchange approach has continued to dominate reverse mentoring research despite the expansion of the concept far beyond its initial digital literacy purpose [5]. The subsequent reverse mentoring research has underscored these dual benefits, whereby the junior mentors get an early start in visibility and leadership skills, while the senior mentees acquire digital literacy, cultural currency, and better decision-making practices [4,7]. However, Chen noted that reverse mentoring requires more in terms of role clarity and mutual respect despite being similarly structured to traditional mentoring in terms of needing trust and commitment since the mentor in reverse mentoring has less formal organisational power than the mentee [3].

In their systematic review of 54 papers that were published between 1998 and 2020, researchers observed that reverse mentoring is organised around four domains that recur across the literature on reverse mentoring, which are; employee engagement, workplace inclusion, knowledge exchange and talent development. Reverse mentoring should not be viewed as an all-curing solution but highly depends on its design [2]. More recent studies have taken the idea of reverse mentoring into the sphere of digitally evolving and AI-driven work environments, suggesting that reverse mentoring operates via mechanisms stemming from the fields of social learning theory and knowledge-based view of the firm, making the experience of juniors with new technologies a strategic advantage for the firm as a whole rather than just an interpersonal one [7]. Qualitative research involving the experience of senior executives in reverse mentoring within multinational firms working in cultures with high power distance also showed that reverse mentoring redefines intergenerational communication and is considered to be a meaningful contributor to leadership development and organizational innovation by senior executives themselves [8]. Finally, an empirical study carried out within the field of public organizations revealed that reverse mentoring helped senior employees develop change adaptation behavior through a sequential process of increased cognitive flexibility and psychological resilience [9].

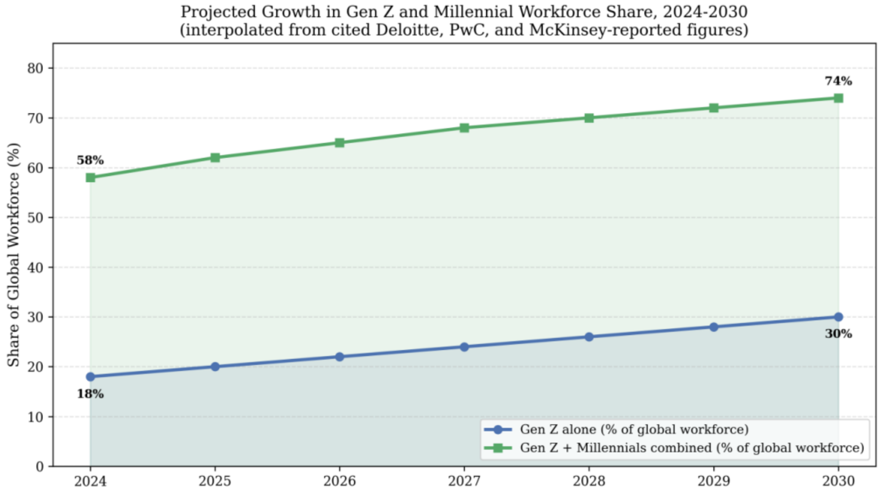

Figure 1: Projected growth in Gen Z and Millennial workforce share, 2024-2030, based on cited Deloitte, PwC, and McKinsey-reported figures [12,13,14,16].

Source: Author's own compilation, based on data from Deloitte (2025), Deloitte India (2025), and CAKE.com [12,13,14,16].

Figure 1 places the importance of reverse mentoring into context, as the proportion of Gen Z and Millennials in the world's workforce approaches three-quarters by 2030, and leaders who do not establish learning opportunities through reverse mentoring may find themselves increasingly disconnected from the workforces they are leading [12,13].

Reversing the Direction of Organisational Knowledge Flow

The conceptually unique nature of reverse mentoring lies in its distinction from the conventional mentoring approach, which it contradicts, as depicted in Figure 2 below. Conventional mentoring presupposes the correspondence of the hierarchy of knowledge and the hierarchy of power in organisations. In other words, it postulates the transmission of knowledge from people holding more power in organisations to less powerful people, since the former have more relevant experience. Reverse mentoring, on the contrary, presupposes that formal power and relevant subject-matter expertise need not coincide [1,7].

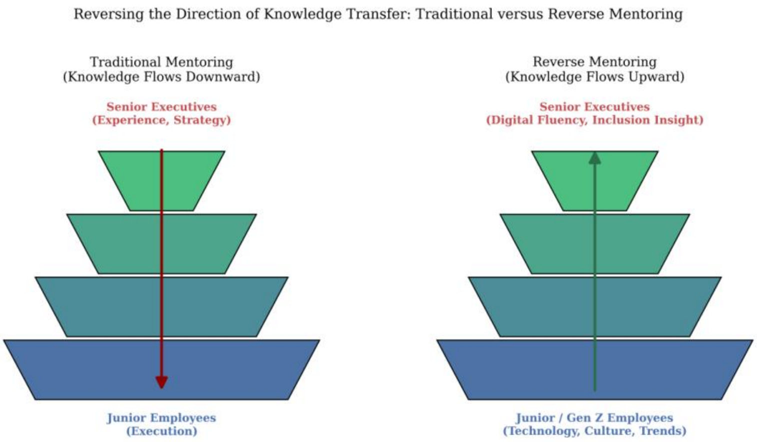

Figure 2: Reversing the direction of knowledge transfer: traditional versus reverse mentoring [1,7,11].

Source: Author's own conceptualization

This decoupling is exactly what makes reverse mentoring valuable and challenging at the same time. The value is in offering senior executives direct and unfiltered exposure to viewpoints on new technology, inclusiveness, and contemporary workplace dynamics that would have to go through several levels of hierarchy first to reach them [4,15]. The challenge comes from the fact that this type of relationship places the senior executive in an unusual structural position of learner in relation to somebody who has lower formal authority, a role reversal that may induce status anxiety on the side of the mentee or excessive deferring behavior on the side of the mentor and thus hinder the very communication that the relationship requires [8,9]. Studies that analyze how mentors and mentees define their respective positions vis-a-vis each other within different hierarchies and identities show that successful reverse mentoring relationships require a continuous renegotiation of positions rather than falling into one of the two extremes [6].

Cultural Barriers to Reverse Mentoring in Indian Organizations

The organisational culture of India is one of the cultures that has been identified by the cross-cultural management literature as having higher power distance as compared to other cultures [19,20]. This is a cultural dimension that indicates the extent to which people in lower power status within organizations accept and expect an uneven distribution of power [19]. It has been observed that such an organizational culture of India is reflected in the form of strong respect for the seniors within the organizations, formal titles and address and reluctance of the junior employees in criticizing their seniors publicly [13,14]. It is important to note that these very same principles that facilitate good workplace relationships can have a negative impact on reverse mentoring and may actually hinder the free exchange of information in reverse mentoring due to fear of losing respect of the seniors in both sides of the equation [8,13].

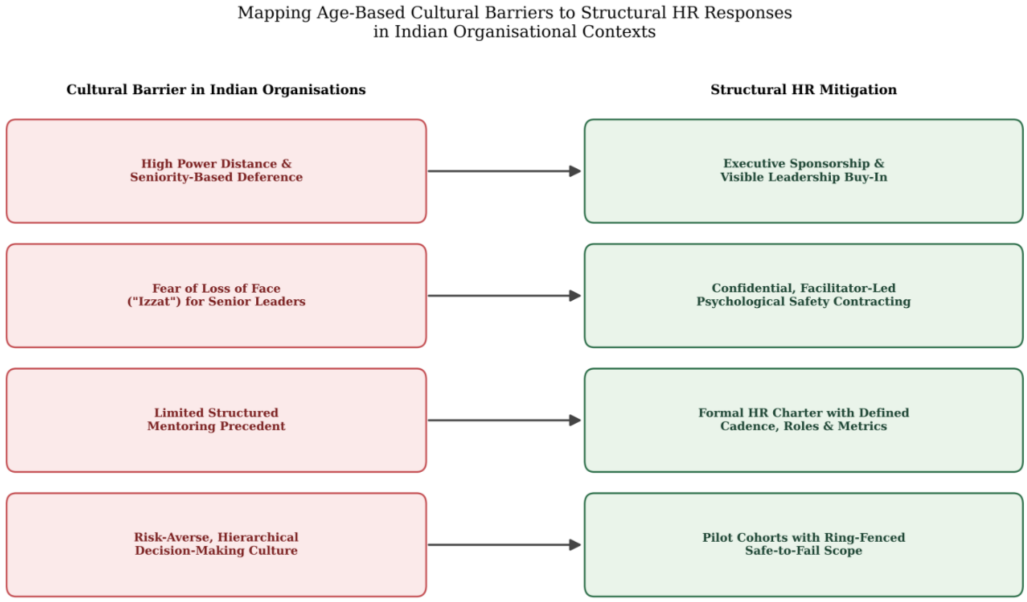

Figure 3: Mapping age-based cultural barriers to structural HR responses in Indian organisational contexts [8,13,14].

Source: Author's own conceptualization

Four such barriers, namely, high power distance and respect for seniority, fear of losing face, lack of precedence of structured mentoring programs in many Indian companies, and a risk-averse decision-making hierarchy are illustrated in Figure 3 along with the corresponding structural solutions that can be taken by HR departments to counter them. The underlying common theme of all these solutions is the use of organizational structure in lieu of building trust that reverse mentoring may take some time to build, if it builds at all, in an unstructured way [2,9]. Specifically, executive sponsorship has been widely acknowledged in the literature to be an almost universal prerequisite for reverse mentoring to succeed, because it sends a message to the junior mentees that their views are truly welcome [4,15].

A Practical HR Framework for Indian Organizations

Based on the above discussion, this paper suggests a six-phase approach for organizing reverse mentoring schemes, shown in Figure 4, along with relevant organizational cases and brief descriptions provided in Table 1.

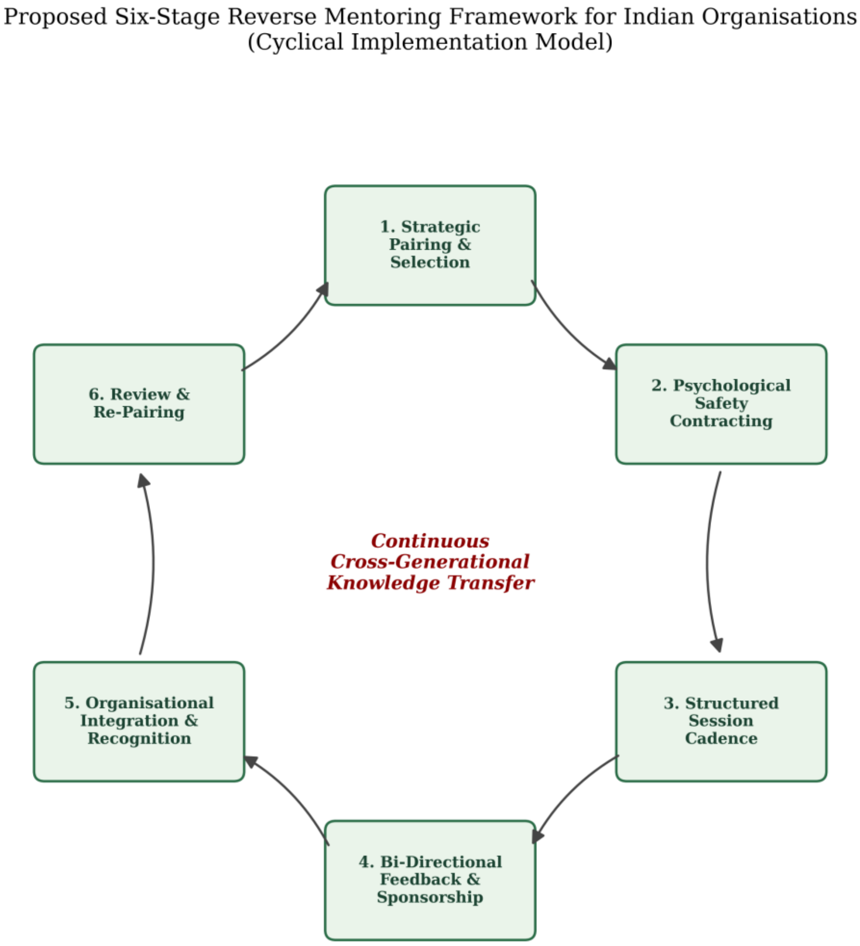

Figure 4: Proposed six-stage reverse mentoring framework for Indian organisations, structured as a continuous, cyclical implementation model [1,2,4,10].

Source: Author's own conceptualization, adapted from Chaudhuri & Ghosh (2012); Chaudhuri, Park & Johnson (2022); Chaudhuri, Ghosh & Park (2022); and Edmondson (1999) [1,2,4,10].

- **Stage Descriptions**

Junior mentoring should include strategic matching and selection not only on age grounds but on proven fluency in the relevant knowledge field, such as generative artificial intelligence, social media strategy, or inclusive communication, which the respective senior executive lacks the most [2,15]. Psychological safety contracting refers to the second component of reverse mentoring and involves application of the Edmondson's fundamental concept of team psychological safety, defined as a shared perception of the team or pair being safe for interpersonal risk-taking, which in its turn implies holding a facilitated conversation at the very beginning of each reverse mentoring relationship regarding confidentiality, respect, and freedom for junior mentors to challenge their senior mentees [10]. Structured session cadence instead of informal interactions guarantees the predictable element, without which, according to research, it is impossible to distinguish a thriving reverse mentoring program from one that simply fades away [2,4]. Two-way feedback and sponsorship make sure that senior executives not only receive information but also sponsor visibility and career advancement of junior mentors, thus adhering to the social-exchange principle of mentoring [1,9]. Organisational integration and recognition ensure that the process is embedded into HR procedures, such as recognition being included in performance and development of leadership processes, rather than leaving the process outside as an optional one [2,15]. Finally, the process of review and re-pairing allows feedback to be gathered from both the mentor and mentee and used to improve future matching criteria and structure of the meeting, in line with non-linear nature of mature reverse mentoring [4,9].

Organisation	Reported Focus Area	Illustrative Outcome
General Electric (1999 origin)	Internet and early digital literacy	Established the reverse mentoring model later adapted across industries [11]
Merck India	Social media strategy and digital presence	Senior HR leadership reported increased social media engagement and improved talent attraction [13]
P&G (global, incl. India operations)	Generative AI, IoT, cybersecurity trends	Senior executives gained hands-on exposure to emerging technologies shaping customer understanding [13]
NatWest Group	DE&I council multi-generational stream	Six-month structured pairings between senior executives and Gen Y/Z employees
KPMG, Fidelity	Retention, diversity representation, innovation	Formal programs linked to improved employee retention and inclusion metrics [11]

Source: Author's own compilation, drawing on Trivedi & Juyal (2025) and Induqin.com (2023) [11,13].

Discussion: Overcoming Age-Based Barriers in Practice

Implications for Indian HR professionals arise as a result of the synthesis. Firstly, psychological safety should not be presumed to occur spontaneously in a setting where deference on the basis of seniority is socially ingrained through childhood and early career years; rather, it needs to be actively facilitated through facilitation, guidelines, and often an outside facilitator for at least the first few meetings of the dyad until sufficient trust has been built up so that the dyad can conduct itself without such facilitation [8,10]. Secondly, the framing issue becomes critical in the Indian context, as knowledge exchange programs which are explicitly framed as strategic and CEO or CHRO-backed initiatives rather than just as well-meaning social activities seem much better positioned to surmount the status anxiety barrier that might otherwise lead senior executives to silently drop out [13,15]. In both cases, the common thread that runs through this paper's proposed framework is clear: in contexts of high power distance, structure is not an extraneous element to reverse mentoring, but a requirement for its psychological success.

The more subtle implication of reverse mentoring relates to the need for middle management, a function not prevalent among many case studies on reverse mentoring, wherein the practice mostly involves pairing the newest recruits and the senior-most executives in the company. In the context of big companies in India with a deep hierarchical system of management, the success story of reverse mentoring at the executive level could subconsciously communicate to middle management that giving open and honest feedback is something that only applies to the executives and not the lower layers of management. For HR professionals looking for long-term cultural change, they could consider taking the practice of reverse mentoring to the next layer of management and not confine it to only the executive level, where most of the time the members of Generation Z find themselves working closely with managers [2,9].

- **Measuring Success: Suggested Indicators**

Due to the subjective nature of reverse mentoring results, any Indian HR operations using the model that is suggested in this paper must monitor a select group of leading and lagging metrics instead of depending purely on anecdotal evidence of executive participants. Leading indicators can be measured quarterly and could be comprised of ratios such as completion rates relative to the structured session frequency, facilitator-rated levels of psychological safety gathered by brief, anonymous pulse surveys at the end of each session, and the percentage of senior mentors capable of pointing to a particular and tangible behavioral change resulting from the pairing [2,10]. Lagging indicators may be measured annually and could include the Gen Z and Millennial retention rate within participating groups versus those not participating, internal mobility and sponsorship results of junior mentors, and senior leader self-perceived levels of capability regarding engagement with emerging technology and inclusion issues before and after participation [4,9]. The tracking of both types of participation enables HR functions to differentiate between programs that are just popular and programs that are transforming the organizational knowledge flow, as the literature warns that the success of reverse mentoring programs depends on their design and not on the practice itself [2].

Limitations of a Conceptual Approach

This paper, being a conceptual one, builds on previous peer-reviewed literature and industry publications on the topic, and the proposed framework has not yet been empirically validated in any longitudinal and comparative research among Indian companies [7]. Most of the empirical literature on reverse mentoring to date was produced in the context of North American and European organizations; the cultural assumptions applied here, such as Indian power distance and face concerns, are drawn from the cross-cultural management literature rather than from peer-reviewed empirical evaluations of reverse mentoring programs within Indian firms [19,20]. Future research, based on case studies and comparative surveys conducted among Indian companies of various industries and sizes, would be required to validate the efficacy of the proposed framework compared to other frameworks.

Conclusion

The practice of reverse mentoring provides Indian organizations with a structurally elegant solution to an ongoing demographic and cultural challenge: the increasing number of Gen Z and Millennial employees in their workforces whose technical literacy and awareness of workplace requirements surpass that of the senior managers who guide them officially [12,13]. The scholarly literature examined in the present paper consistently identifies the same set of success conditions, including careful matching of the participants based on needs, deliberately created psychological safety, formally designed cadence of communication, truly bidirectional communication process, and organizational involvement instead of the personal one that makes reverse mentoring an effective knowledge transfer tool [1,2,4,10]. Within the Indian environment characterized by a high level of power distance and fear of losing face in the communication process, the suggested six-stage cyclical model can provide HR professionals with a cost-effective starting point. While structure might be perceived as the constraint to authentic mentoring in other settings, within the Indian one, it becomes the very means making it possible. With Indian organizations seeking to attract Gen Z workers and keep their executives relevant in the ever-changing business world, reverse mentoring is a concept that deserves attention, not because of its value as a diversity program but as a leadership development program.

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