

Successful Mentorship Is a Two-Way Street

Written by: Nancy Novak, Chief Innovation Officer, Compass Datacenters

When I say the word “mentorship,” what image comes to mind? You probably immediately envision a gray-haired senior executive taking a 20-something junior employee under their wing to bestow decades of wisdom and secrets of success.

While this is undoubtedly common, mentorship is not a one-way street where only one party gains value.

The most powerful form of mentorship is bidirectional, where senior and junior colleagues come together to provide valuable counsel to one another through their differing perspectives, complementary skills, and collective insights. In this scenario, the young professional benefits from hard-earned insights and advice, while the experienced professional benefits from new perspectives that help strengthen problem-solving, strategizing, communication, and leadership.

The construction industry is a prime example of a field where bidirectional mentoring can have a powerful impact for both junior and senior team members. There is a long history of formal and informal apprenticeship in the construction industry, where knowledge is passed to junior workers from experienced pros. That form of mentoring is important, but two-way mentoring is better.

In fact, I would argue that the future of our industry depends on the kind of communication and collaboration that is fostered by bidirectional mentoring. It’s not simply a nice-to-have. It’s a must-have at a time when our industry is changing in dramatic ways.



These changes are being driven by the relentless pace of technological change, workforce shortages that worsen each year, and sustainability mandates that are driving the need for innovation.

IMPLEMENTING NEXT-GEN TECHNOLOGIES

When most people think about what older professionals can learn from junior employees, the first things that come to mind might be tutorials about how to use tablets and social media.

Those are not the technologies I have in mind when I talk about the enormous importance of bidirectional mentoring. I am thinking about the long list of transformative technologies that are changing nearly every aspect of how construction is done: prefabrication techniques, virtual and augmented reality

tools, and artificial intelligence-driven applications.

So many of these next-gen construction technologies will be more intuitive for younger professionals who grew up with far more technology than older workers in the construction industry. Those younger professionals will also be the primary users of those technologies on the jobsite and in pre-fab construction factories.

Their feedback and guidance about how best to use these technologies will be invaluable to senior decision-makers who are responsible for moving the needle forward in their organization.

One common thread among so many of these technological advances is the importance of collaboration, which demands open, candid, clear lines of communication between senior and junior staff. The rapid acceleration in the use of prefabrication is a great example of where this collaboration is critical.

Prefabrication environments maximize efficiency and quality through a fine-tuned set of manufacturing processes for components that will be delivered to and assembled onsite. Mentoring can play a powerful role in driving the kind of effective communication and collaborative problem-solving that drives efficiency gains by blending seasoned industry wisdom with modern savvy for the greater good of the project.

MANAGING A CHANGING WORKFORCE

Two-way mentoring is also critical to our industry because of the unprecedented workforce challenges we are facing. It's no secret that the construction industry is struggling with a growing workforce shortage.

Construction companies have traditionally drawn most of their employees from a blue-collar demographic, but that segment of the population has declined steadily over the past few decades.

Young adults today are far more likely to pursue college degrees rather than look at skilled trades and construction careers. This has been compounded by the perception problem our industry has as a work environment that is not welcoming to people outside of its traditional male, blue-collar demographic.

The solution to that demographic challenge is to recruit a

more diverse workforce. While the industry has come a very long way on diversity in the last couple of decades, women still only comprise 11% of the industry's workforce, and 88% of workers are white, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

There are green shoots, though. Between the years of 2016 and 2021, there was a 32% increase in the number of females in the industry, according to software company Bluebeam. And every week, I see examples of recruitment initiatives leading to greater diversity in our industry.

Where does bidirectional mentoring come into play for these workforce challenges?


Recruitment will bring more and more diversity into our industry, including women and minorities who have tremendous skill sets that are perfect for the changing nature of work in construction. For senior managers, this changing workforce will require new styles of leadership and communication that may be very different than in the past. These young professionals will be eager to learn from their more experienced colleagues, but the learning needs to be in both directions.

Construction leaders who are committed to refine their management style to suit their changing workforce are the ones who will excel. Bidirectional mentoring is critical to lessening the learning curve for leaders who want to understand their teams and set them up for success.

A WIN/WIN/WIN

Not only does bidirectional mentorship enable the sharing of new ideas across historic organizational barriers, but the practice itself within an organization creates a culture of inclusion.

When leaders make it clear that they're interested in feedback about how to solve challenges, improve efficiency, and make processes faster, employees feel valued. This model for mentoring also has the added benefit of helping retain retirement age workers by reinvigorating them and giving a sense of purpose.

Doing away with the old top-down mentality of mentorship and adopting a transformational two-way model is one of the ways that companies can foster this kind of collaborative environment. The future of our industry depends on it. 



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