

Bridging the Generational Divide: Mentoring in the Hybrid Work Environment

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*This paper was originally presented at the 2023
IIBEC International Convention and Trade Show.*

ON MARCH 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic after more than 4,000 deaths worldwide. Two days later, on March 13, 2020, President Donald Trump's administration declared a nationwide emergency due to the pandemic. The next two years were plagued with shutdowns, mask mandates, and product shortages. While the construction industry was deemed essential, the negative impact remained significant. Many employers required employees to work remotely to prevent further spread of the virus, while others struggled to retain employees at all. The shift to remote work resulted in what we now understand as the hybrid work environment. The new hybrid environment further highlighted the differences between workforce generations, while also revealing the common thread of values between those same generations. These highlights and revelations created a critical opportunity to reflect on mentoring through a positive feedback loop, to reconsider the approach to building a healthy mentor/mentee relationship, and to leverage technology in support of mentorship.

THE HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT AND THE GENERATIONS WITHIN

The hybrid work environment is generally understood as a combination of being able to work unconstrained hours in unconstrained places with the level of constraint being determined by individual employers. The understanding of this environment is well-described and depicted as a "2x2 matrix that's organized along [a vertical and a horizontal axis: place and time]"¹ (Fig. 1). The shift to remote work, with the additional freedom of when and where to complete that work, limited in-person

contact and created challenges for collaboration and mentorship.

Further complicating the challenges are the unprecedented five generations currently within the workplace and the individual work characteristics of those generations. A generation is defined as a group of individuals with shared experiences at similar ages. For example, those born between 1965 and 1980, Generation X, experienced and were influenced by events and trends such as the impeachment of President Nixon, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, corporate downsizing, increasing divorce rates, and the introduction of computers. As a result of such experiences, Generation Xers are generally more likely to be cynical, to be self-reliant, and to think globally. Such traits often expand into the workplace and influence their preferred environment, along with their interpretation of various situations. These preferences exist for each generation in the workplace and contribute to the challenges in collaboration and communication.

In general, work characteristics are understood to define an ideal work environment. The oldest and least currently represented generation is the Traditionals, also known as the Silent Generation. Born between 1925 and 1945, the group is stereotypically defined as being practical, patient, hardworking rule

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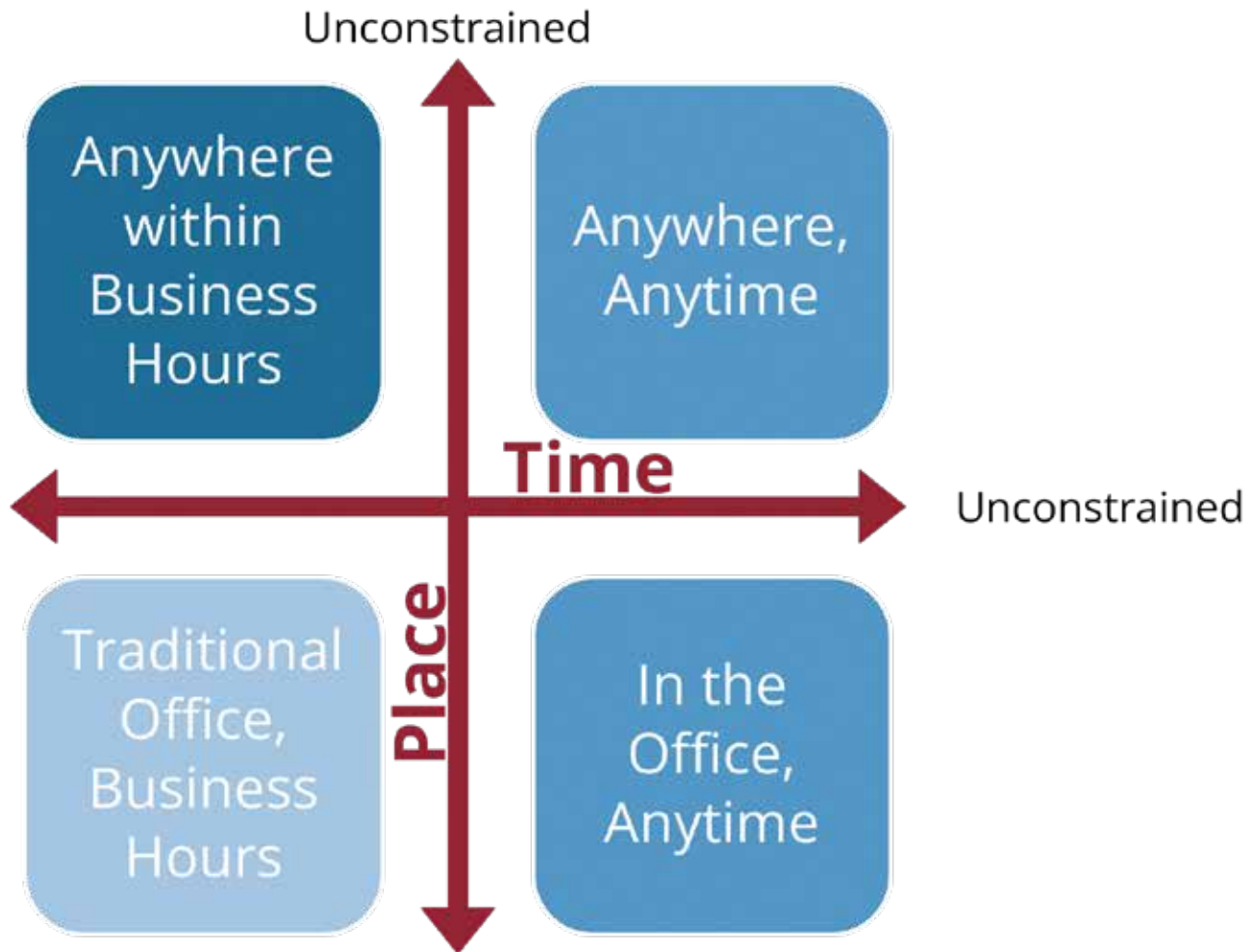


Figure 1. A matrix illustrating the hybrid work environment. Figure courtesy of Seal Building Enclosure LLC.

followers, with their work characteristics defined as preferring to work fewer hours in a consultant or advisor role. Following the Traditionals are the Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964 and stereotyped as being optimistic, cooperative, ambitious, and hardworking to the point of being labeled workaholics. Their work characteristics include a preference for face-to-face interaction and for a culture that emphasizes recognition and added value. Generation X has been typecast as being skeptical, self-reliant risk takers. Generation X's work characteristics include preferring a clear separation between their work and personal lives and a culture of autonomy. The fourth and currently most represented group within the workplace is Millennials, born between 1981 and 2000 and stereotyped for being conscious of health, social, and environmental issues, as well as technology savvy, with their work characteristics defined as a preference for collaboration and a culture of actionable feedback. Lastly, Generation Z, born between 2001 and 2020 and associated with being inclusive, diverse, optimistic "digital

natives," is currently emerging in the workforce. Generation Z's work characteristics are described as a preference for a diverse and inclusive workforce that embraces a culture of flexibility.

While workplace challenges remain present between the various generations, research indicates that the focus should be shifted from these stereotypical differences to the common values and attitudes that exist among them. Costanza et al.² indicate that there are very few differences in work-related attitude among different generations. Basically, each generation is willing to commit to their organization and work when company values align. Additionally, Dimock³ emphasizes that there is more of a continuum across generations, not a threshold: "The youngest and oldest within a [generation] may feel more in common with bordering generations than the one to which they are assigned" and "generations themselves are inherently diverse, complex groups, not simple caricatures." Overall, an individual's preferences are based on a variety of internal and external influences; therefore, deviations and

distributions within and across generations are expected.

MENTORING AND THE POSITIVE FEEDBACK LOOP

The purpose of mentoring is personal and professional growth. Growth is facilitated by feedback, and feedback is provided through a positive loop (Fig. 2). The positive feedback loop creates outputs that accelerate a cycle of growth. Like a map directing a reader and the compass orienting the user, growth will be limited or not occur without a positive feedback loop. As an example, a mentor may assign a challenge that a mentee accepts. The mentee works to complete the challenge, potentially asking questions along the way, and submits the work product to the mentor for evaluation. Once the work product is evaluated, the feedback is presented to the mentee and any revisions are completed. The final work product for this challenge and the lessons learned along the way are then utilized to inform the completion of the next challenge accepted by the mentee. This approach provides



Figure 2. *The positive feedback loop. Figure courtesy of Seal Building Enclosure LLC.*

an opportunity for a mentee to test their abilities with minimal risk to the company and provides an opportunity to evaluate where the mentee is in their development. If this approach excels, reciprocal mentoring occurs throughout, and the mentee also has the opportunity to be the mentor.

HEALTHY MENTORSHIP

Before successful mentoring can be achieved, a healthy relationship between a mentor and mentee must be built upon a foundation of trust, respect, commitment, accountability, and evaluation of results.

Trust is the foundation of successful mentorship, as it allows for a significant level of vulnerability, which opens the lines of communication. Brené Brown, in her 2010 TEDxHouston Talk, "The Power of Vulnerability,"⁴ describes vulnerability as "the birthplace of innovation, creativity, [and] change," all of which are driven by open communication. When an individual feels safe to be vulnerable, asking for help and sharing thoughts, ideas, and interests create opportunities to deeply connect. Additionally, admitting to a mistake and failing at a task no longer produce fear, but rather an opportunity to grow. As a result, trust increases and there is a willingness to communicate truthfully and openly. This open communication builds the foundation of trust and establishes the basis for the mentorship positive feedback loop.

Now that the foundation of trust has been cast, the relationship extends to building mutual respect. Respect at a base level should be given

to each other. Listening, understanding, and acknowledging individual strengths reinforce that respect. To further build upon respect requires commitment and accountability. The mentor's day-to-day actions must reflect the requested actions of a mentee and exceed the expectation regularly. No comparisons between the mentor and mentee should be drawn, but rather respect for the individual value added should be given.

With a strong foundation of mutual trust and respect continuing to build, the door opens to further personal and professional growth through commitment, accountability, and evaluation of results. The growth initiates with acknowledgement and commitment to the mentoring relationship. For the mentee, the primary commitment is to overall company goals and excelling at the completion of assignments with quality as the focus. For the mentor, the primary commitment is to guide in the personal and professional growth of the mentee by consistently being available as a sounding board and safety net. Once these commitments are agreed upon, both parties share the responsibility of holding each other accountable. The ability to do so requires open and clear communication to consistently evaluate the approach, progress, and work product from completing commitments. Without this dialogue, the positive feedback loop may be broken, resulting in stagnation of growth and negative impact on both internal and external business relationships.

TECHNOLOGY'S ROLE

The emergence of the hybrid work environment coupled with the five generations currently working creates a healthy mentorship challenge as, traditionally, the relationship between mentor and mentee has predominantly been developed, grown, and sustained in person. Now, teams of mentors and mentees must discover alternative solutions to overcome this challenge. Assistance with overcoming this challenge has become technology's role. In general, since the older generations have not grown with (as have Millennials) or been native to (as has Generation Z) the digital environment, the Millennial and Generation Z workforce has a unique opportunity to help teams more seamlessly transition to workstyle flexibility. Further opportunity exists for the older-generation mentors to embrace this paradigm shift and grow by allowing for reciprocal mentorship from their mentees, which accelerates overall commitment and accountability and therefore contribution of service to a mentor and team.

Modern technology allows us to be in constant communication with our colleagues through technologies such as chat rooms, virtual meeting spaces, mobile video calling, active document tagging, and digital task management. Each of these remote-communication approaches allows for real-time interaction in support of mentorship, similarly to in-person mentoring, with the possibility of a condensed time commitment.

While technology is improving daily, some tasks are best completed in person. Gratton¹ suggests that there are four productivity drivers: energy, focus, coordination, and cooperation. Each driver will be affected by changes in working arrangements. For example, there would be a challenge in a mentee completing in-depth field work with a remote mentor over digital platforms as the time, coordination, and cooperation would be extensive and essential to complete the assignment. Overall, the challenge of this type of in-depth field work would be best completed together face-to-face. Conversely, completing an office-associated task, such as a report, would be most efficient within a quiet, comfortable, and more isolated environment, such as a remote office. These examples illustrate the importance of evaluating each task or goal and deciding the method of knowledge transfer, mentorship needs, and the most favorable and efficient work environment. The positive feedback loop occurs virtually through the assignment of tasks with remote review and discussion to evaluate results.

Background

Russ, Kevin, and I met in September 2016. After interviewing with them for an entry-level building enclosure consultant position, I was successful in

MENTORING CASE STUDY

Approach:	Personal Narrative by Nichole Thomas, reviewed by Kevin Palma
Mentee:	Nichole Thomas, Born 1990, Millennial, Ideal Work Environment: Remote
Primary Mentor:	Kevin Palma, Born 1983, Millennial (Xennial), Ideal Work Environment: Hybrid
Secondary Mentor:	Russell Raymond, Born 1972, Generation X, Ideal Work Environment: In-person
Mentorship Relationship Duration:	6 years
Industry Profession:	Building Enclosure Consulting

joining their team in Texas. Shortly after I joined, both Kevin and Russ became my mentors. While Kevin was assigned as my primary mentor, Russ was consistently available in a secondary role. Based on our birth years, I am a Millennial and align more traditionally within the understanding of that generation. Kevin, based on his birth year, is a Millennial; however, he aligns with a microgeneration born between 1977 and 1985 called Xennials. Xennials have hybrid work characteristics between Generation X and Millennials. Overall, Russ predominantly aligns with Generation X.

The Positive Feedback Loop

The overall approach to achieving the positive feedback loop evolved throughout my mentorship. At entry level, Kevin and Russ typically worked through the various consulting deliverables with me, creating a basis for the "What, Why, and How" approach to providing comprehensive project solutions. As my knowledge and experience progressed, they would more simply request my assistance with a task, and once I provided the draft deliverable, they would complete an internal review. Depending on the assignment and how to maintain efficiencies, the internal review was either completed in person, through digital markup, or in real time, utilizing digital meeting platforms.

Trust

Mentorship with Kevin began on a day trip to Dallas my first week of work for a client meeting. He was so authentic that he broke the rigid formalities of boss/employee, mentor/mentee relationships and created a collegial dynamic. He seemed to discard any stereotypes that he may have had of me, including ones regarding race, gender, and age, by simply taking interest in who I was. From there, we saw how our values

related to work aligned, which is consistent with the findings of articles referenced earlier. Kevin's genuine interest in my identity, individuality, and values allowed me to feel comfortable enough to share some of my other interests and passions with him that were unrelated to the profession, such as music. Kevin utilized this knowledge of my interests to inform the mentoring approach for concepts related to architecture, construction, and consulting. He would make references to jazz improvisation, which takes cues from an understanding of music theory and the existing context to create a one-of-a-kind piece. He drew parallels to this improvisation and consulting by highlighting how consulting needs to consider cues from an understanding of architecture and construction within an existing context to create a solution that is unique and responsive to the project's goals.

Respect

In building our mentoring relationship, Kevin learned that I value time management for efficiency and organization, while my knowledge of the building enclosure was limited. He acknowledged my strengths and identified ways in which I could contribute to the team, which made me feel confident and respected despite my lack of experience. His willingness to acknowledge my talents, accept who I was, and collaborate with my differences established a mutual respect and reinforced our mentor/mentee relationship.

Both Kevin and Russ regularly followed through on their commitments and did not ask of me anything they would not do themselves. My respect for them grew when I watched them perform the same level of task I was expected to, despite being the overall leaders of our team. The two of them were not just on time for meetings and site visits, but early. They worked just as hard and stayed just as late as the rest of the team. They both lived by the principle

that "leaders eat last." Watching them conduct themselves in that manner increased my trust and respect for them, including their position and responsibility as mentors.

Besides watching Russ and Kevin excel at the types of assignments I was expected to do, what contributed to my immense respect for them was that they both demonstrated their respect for me by challenging me. Immediately after I joined the team, they challenged me to use my talents to develop the Bluebeam standards that were intended for use throughout the large organization. It was a daunting challenge, but the two of them believed I could do it. I trusted their judgment because I respected them, even if I had doubts about my own capabilities. I also trusted that I would have support from both of them at any point if I needed it. The assignment took over a year to complete and gave me a more in-depth understanding of large corporate dynamics. As a result of frequent and consistent feedback, my skills in Bluebeam became well developed and I gained additional influence with my internal and external clients.

Commitment, Accountability, and Evaluation of Results

Throughout my mentoring relationship with Russ and Kevin, the primary focus for me has always been a quality work product. Kevin and Russ, though they never verbally made the commitment, would always make themselves available immediately or soon after I contacted them. As a result, I would leverage technology to contact them in high-stakes situations, which allowed us confidence in that approach moving forward. This allowed me to confidently provide clients with solutions and learn in a real-time problem-solving situation. After any correspondence with clients, we had an internal discussion to confirm my understanding of the approach moving forward (Commitment/Accountability). I would take those lessons and recall them in new but similar challenges. After a while, my mentors would allow me to take the lead with client meetings and site visits. They would provide real-time corrections or additional support (Accountability/Evaluation of Results). Eventually, after demonstrating that I had a proficient understanding of building enclosure concepts (Accountability/Evaluation of Results), there was confidence in my conducting these meetings and site visits alone moving forward (Growth).

In the process of mentoring, I held Kevin and Russ accountable for their commitments as well. With a less formal approach to the mentoring relationship, I was comfortable articulating my expectations to them, such as senior review

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approach and deadlines, along with discussion of the various options of building enclosure concepts for similar conditions. While growth was necessary, these challenges have been met through capitalization of technology efficiencies.

CONCLUSION

Bridging the generational gap to achieve a successful mentorship is no easy feat, but it is possible because each generation has a common thread of values. Instead of generalizing based on characteristics and stereotypes, best practice is to approach mentorship on an individual level and establish a foundation of trust and respect. Trust and respect open the door to growth when combined with commitment, accountability, and evaluation of results. Together, they produce a positive feedback loop in which growth is accelerated from the lessons learned. In the safety of engaging within a positive feedback loop, mentors and mentees can confidently rise to challenges and grow personally and professionally. The mentor/mentee relationship is even more complicated in the hybrid work environment, where there is less overlap of time and place between individuals. Technology is an essential tool to overcome the challenges presented by the hybrid work environment. It allows us to be in constant contact with our colleagues and offers an opportunity for younger, emerging professionals to provide reciprocal mentoring. Despite technology bridging the physical space between individuals, there are still situations when in-person collaboration is more productive than remote work. It is important to evaluate each task or goal when deciding the method of knowledge transfer, mentorship needs, and the most efficient work environment.

The positive feedback loop is an effective approach to mentoring and contributes to growth. The success can be attributed to commitment toward the approach, personal values, and philosophies. Remember, as Kevin would say to me, "Don't only try to positively influence the world around you. Be open to the world around you—the people, places, and cultures positively influencing you." 

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