

| ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

# LEARNING IS A TWO-WAY STREET

## A Case Study in Reverse Mentoring

By John Salustri

In the commercial real estate industry, much focus is given to the importance of continuing education. But besides the typical venues for CE credits, such as industry associations and colleges, there are sources much closer to home—your millennial employees.

We've all heard of reverse mentoring, but how do many organizations really practice it as a means to both curate new ideas and manage the development of younger employees?

"Certainly there's a lot of discussion of reverse mentoring as it pertains to technology, but it is so much more than that," says Jay Olshonsky, SIOR, president of NAI Global, New York City.

At Olshonsky's shop, reverse mentoring takes form in both formal and impromptu applications, and while there's no written policy that promotes the concept, "we certainly spend a whole lot of time listening to our younger employees" he explains.

And that's to the benefit of management. He notes that successful reverse mentoring involves taking on a different point of view for the organization's leadership. "I expect everyone—including myself—to think differently about how

we approach things," he says. "So a lot of our conversations start with, 'What would you do?' rather than, 'Here is what I want to do.'"

Obviously, there's a huge inclusionary aspect to that attitude. "We recently hired someone in marketing at an entry-level position," he explains. "This person doesn't come with a fundamental understanding of real estate, so instead of taking the attitude that she can't contribute because she doesn't know all there is to know about the industry, we're taking the attitude that we don't know all there is about marketing."

Tough as it can be to admit we don't know something (thank heaven there are no egos in real estate), Olshonsky's approach opens the door to new, previously untried ideas. "Our approach is that her thoughts on marketing that have nothing to do with real estate might have greater impact than some of the approaches we have tried over the past five or 10 years."

He says it's necessary to have her participate in pertinent meetings, as opposed to "the old days, when she might not even be invited to join. How do I know she doesn't have the next big idea? If I shut it down, we'll never know."

And while the meetings are the formal part, he notes that a lot of the practice of reverse mentoring takes place in a more day-to-day impromptu style, via chance encounters and casual conversations. As we've all seen, such happy coincidences are often the source of new ideas.

There are, of course, mentors for the process of mentoring. For Olshonsky, two of them are his grown children. "Over the years," he says, "it became clear to me that the organizations they were working for were embracing the millennial generation and recognizing the importance of listening to them."

From the public forum, he cites people like Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and (ironically, of an older generation) Bill Gates. Of the Microsoft founder, Olshonsky says, "he reversed-mentored the entire world."

For NAI Global, the importance of reverse mentoring and curation of the up-and-coming generation isn't a concept confined to the office. It was, literally and figuratively, front and center at the firm's recent leadership meeting in Dallas.



Typically one might expect the company president to kick off the festivities, and in fact, Olshonsky has filled that role in years past. Frankly, he says, “you tend to say the same things over and over.”

This year, it was given to a young woman: senior vice president Lindsay Fierro, an MBA and five-year veteran of the firm. “When she is front and center, such as in Dallas, it sends a clear message to everyone that we embrace the concept both formally and informally,” he says.

Behind the scenes, much of the strategy that went into the meeting was also developed by NAI’s younger cohort. While Olshonsky would have traditionally overseen the all-important opening presentation, “this year we put together

a team of people who are significantly younger than me to prepare the slides with a focus on what they thought people want to hear, rather than what I wanted to say.”

And, not surprisingly, the presentation took on a new voice as a result. Much of the emphasis was on “new initiatives that essentially were more forward-thinking than repetitive real estate practices.”

All of this sounds terrific, but none of it rules out the inevitable pushback from some of the more senior members, and indeed, there was some of that at NAI in the early stages of the initiative. Interestingly, says Olshonsky, the resistance was less about age and more about roles.

The resentment was more a reaction to “allowing less experienced real estate people to fill positions traditionally held by 15- or 20-year veterans,” he states. But he believes that such resistance might be more of a factor in larger firms. “We didn’t get as much resistance as other, larger firms might. We have about 50 employees, it’s not like we have to deal with people in the thousands.”

Of course, mentoring is a two-way street, and Olshonsky says that millennials can push for autonomy beyond their depth of understanding. That of course is a good thing, if those expectations are managed. It’s ambition, after all.

But it’s also necessary “to take the time to answer the questions new employees have so younger professionals, everyone in fact, can better understand the commercial real estate industry as a whole, as well as why certain procedures were historically done in a certain way.”

This, of course, provides context for a greater understanding, and understanding, after all, is what it’s all about. ▽

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