

## ESPI Executive Brief

### Reverse Mentoring

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The time-honoured way of thinking about mentoring is that a very experienced person seeks to pass on experience and expertise to a less experienced person. There is much to be said in favour of this.

But there is also much to be said in favour of having the young and ‘inexperienced’ mentor senior managers. In fact, Jan Wörner, the chairman of DLR, proposed as much at a conference on space and youth unemployment in ESPI in November. Jan Wörner argued for ‘Space for Youth!’ not only in the sense that space should serve the needs of youth, but also in the sense that space should make room for the young, should give the young space to influence the thinking of the space community, should allow the young to mentor those with leadership roles in the space endeavour.

How can this be done? The first requirement is perhaps that there is a genuine readiness of senior managers to allow themselves to be mentored by junior staff. This is not an easy proposition. Senior managers spend decades building up an arsenal of knowledge, analysis and experience – and it seems counter-intuitive to try to let go of all that. But, of course, that is not the point. The point is to be ready to put aside all the baggage of the past for a while, whilst listening to the young. When you speak to world-class teachers you often hear how inspiring the dialogue with students is, not only for them to pass on expertise, but in terms of them getting new viewpoints, new inspiration from the students.

Still, it remains true that mentoring only works if there is a genuine willingness by both sides in the process. This is so, inter alia, because effective mentoring requires a degree of trust and informality. However, when these requirements are fulfilled, the twinning of junior and senior in what ultimately becomes a reciprocal mentoring situation can become very fruitful, as demonstrated by an article in the Financial Times on 21 November 2013, ‘Old hands steered by the young’. Corporate culture often starts at the top and hence when top managers take time to build a reciprocal mentoring relationship it might mean that also lower levels will try out the idea.

Is there a danger in reverse mentoring in the sense that senior managers will be misled by the young? Hardly, since senior managers, with all their professionalism, will ultimately filter the advice of the young. In hi-tech industries the riskier path is probably not resorting to reverse mentoring. Silicon Valley is full of amazingly young entrepreneurs and managers who allow themselves to be mentored by the mature, but who sees youth as the emblem of being ‘on the beat’. ESA is unlikely to engage a 25 year old as Director General, but ESA and all the other players in space are well advised to allow the voice of the young to be heard more clearly. Skybox Imaging and many other start-ups are showing where the road might take us – and we should listen carefully!

There are other permutations on the theme of mentoring and breaking down barriers! Senior managers might want to twin with academics doing cutting edge research; companies and agencies might want to set up dedicated innovation committees – or might even create youth committees that will provide advice to management much as a scientific or technical committee might! A youth committee might serve not only innovation, but also broader business sustainability goals by explaining the perspectives of the young across a range of topics; topics that might often serve tomorrow rather than today.

In the end it is all about the needs of tomorrow – and who can be better to address this than the young, who are interested in today but gazing at tomorrow!



#### Mission Statement of ESPI

The European Space Policy Institute (ESPI) provides decision-makers with an informed view on mid- to long-term issues relevant to Europe's space activities. In this context, ESPI acts as an independent platform for developing positions and strategies.

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