

Reverse Mentoring: A Key to HR Innovation?

HR Executive | Jen Colletta | April 5, 2023

When Tawanna Myers goes grocery shopping, it's inevitable: She says she always gets talking to employees or fellow shoppers and ends up learning their stories and sharing her own—creating informal mentorship opportunities.

"I recently found at least three phone numbers of young people I met who said something like, 'I was having a bad day and didn't know what to do but you inspired me,'" says Myers, chief people and culture officer at Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, an organization whose mentorship mission she says "has inspired me to take that extra moment to say hello, to talk to someone and let them open up. I want to be that model of a mentor."

While Big Brothers Big Sisters motivates her to spread mentorship throughout her community, the power of mentorship has been a refrain throughout her career, including through her more than 18 years at Boys & Girls Clubs of America, where she held positions in talent acquisition, talent management, HR operations, employee relations and more. Before leaving for Big Brothers Big Sisters last year, she served as Boys & Girls Clubs' vice president of talent management and DE&I in its national office.

Myers recently spoke with HRE about the role mentoring—including reverse mentoring, which puts young people in the driver's seat—is playing in shaping the organization's people strategy.

HRE: You've joined Big Brothers Big Sisters from Boys & Girls Clubs. Though they have similar missions, what was the adjustment like from an HR standpoint?

Myers: From an HR standpoint, I wouldn't say there was much of an adjustment. The way I approach HR is about people; I try to take the same journey and same approach, but certainly tailor it to what I'm seeing happen in that workplace and that culture. The one difference was the size in the national staff; we had several hundred more people at the national office at Boys & Girls Clubs than we did at the time I joined Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. So, it was about thinking how to adapt and ensure that I'm supporting that size staff and the individual needs we have here, versus how I managed there—which includes everything from technology to people practices, policies, how we engage employees.

HRE: Where is the focus of Big Brothers Big Sisters' people strategy at the moment?

Myers: It's really taken a bit of evolution. It's been a journey, and I can honestly say it's been a journey that's been really inclusive. I've taken some time and put a lot of thought into engaging with all of our team members—listening and learning where we've been as an organization, where they want to see themselves going, how our workplace culture is viewed. Where I am now is ensuring our talent management strategy speaks to the full employee lifecycle—not just for the short-term but for the long-term as well. We developed and formalized a lot of our people practices, we enhanced communication—like in the form of a weekly HR newsletter—and took a new look at benefits. We're also embedding JEDI [justice, equity, diversity and inclusive

work] throughout everything we do. It's been there since the beginning of our organization, but we want to ensure our people live and feel JEDI.

We're balancing opportunities between virtual and in-person—we have two all-staffing meetings a year in person in Tampa—and we ensure teams and leaders feel comfortable to host in-person meetings as well. We have virtual monthly staff meetings, and we have a lot of casual connects with our CEO. But we want our employees to know we trust them to work hard every day to further our mission by providing as much flexibility as possible.

HRE: How have you adapted the organization's focus on mentorship among its bigs and littles to your own employee population?

Myers: We know that mentorship happens, and it happens at all levels. But what's important and what we're focusing on a lot is reverse mentorship—creating that culture of continuous learning and thinking about how young people have the opportunity to impact our more experienced employees and leaders. Last year, we embarked on a partnership with AmeriCorps VISTA, whose members are mostly Gen Z; their perspectives became very important for us to listen to and we're working to bring their voices and their stories to the forefront. They're doing everything from conference planning to marketing campaigns to working on JEDI. They've also been very critical to how I think about our HR orientation. We just imagine that everyone knows what their benefits look like, but [an AmeriCorps VISTA partner] encouraged me to pause and go more granular; some people don't know how to enroll because they just haven't had that experience yet.

HRE: As an HR leader at an organization so focused on community, how do you keep yourself connected to the communities you serve?

Myers: Long before I was connected to Boys & Girls Clubs and now Big Brothers Big Sisters, I had a personal commitment to voluntary service through my own group associations at national and local levels, particularly those that support diverse communities. At Big Brother Big Sisters, we encourage volunteers to be mentors, and I strive to live by that experience. If I'm asking others to volunteer and serve, I need to be able to say I've done that as well.

That has truly shaped how I operate as a leader. I pause more. I ask myself, Am I asking you to do something that's reasonable? Is it within a feasible timeline? Is the outcome that will come from this a success? Am I putting on that hat of empathy and understanding who I'm connecting with? That helps me grow as a leader. I firmly believe that serving builds empathy.

HRE: And how is Big Brothers Big Sisters working to meet the evolving expectations of Gen Z?

Myers: That reverse mentorship has been a way to engage those Gen Zers and say, "Hey, we want your opinion." They want to talk, and they want to listen, too.

And the benefits that Gen Z want look different versus other generations, so we've implemented new benefits that are more supportive of different generations, we're rethinking how we reward talent, we're being more intentional about connecting and how we integrate our social impact so people feel aligned to our mission. At our national staff meetings, we have a "mission moment," so people can see themselves in our mission, which is one thing Gen Z is very passionate about.

HRE: How do you work to keep challenging yourself as an HR professional?

Myers: Anyone who enters the HR profession has to remain committed to challenging themselves. There are so many trends and shifts—we used to be HR and now we're more considered focused on people and culture—and also changing laws and best practices. I stay on top of this through email subscriptions and attending webinars, and I'm fortunate to have some great mentors in my network. I also ask questions of myself: What am I doing well? What do I need to stop or start or continue? And I ask this of my staff so they can help show me any blind spots. As HR professionals, we need to be asking these questions because it's easy to get bogged down into the bookend practices of HR, but that can prevent you from seeing the human side of things.

HRE: What have you personally learned from the mission of Big Brothers Big Sisters that has shaped how you approach life outside of work?

Myers: Our mission and the power of those 1-on-1 mentorship relationships between adults and youth have really impacted me. I have kids of my own so I've done some of that naturally, but I've stopped to ask myself, Am I reaching out to someone from a different community, a different background to help them? I've been inspired by that. Within my own friends, I'm always saying, "Have you considered being a big?" I'm that person now!