

Book Review

*Reverse Mentoring: How Young Leaders Can Transform
the Church and Why We Should Let Them*

Earl Creps,

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008. 210 pages.

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Assemblies of God

Knowledge is doubling every seven years, and the waves of cultural change continue breaking over the ministry landscape.¹ Oblivious to the changes around them, ministry leaders discover that “despite pure motives and hard work, their leadership models and skills simply clock out; not because they failed, but because they succeeded in a world that no longer cares as much” (35).

Who wants their ministry to “clock out” early? In truth, influence, personal and organizational growth, and spiritual transformation are tied to reading the times. Leaders chill at the prospect of losing relevance; it is a harbinger of other looming losses. But, the disconnect creeps in silently. It takes a special skill set to self-diagnose decline, to determine that cultural blindness has set in, and to confess, “I don’t get it” or “I’m not cool” anymore (as if we ever were).

Creps contends that the eroding effects of time and change cannot be reversed by book knowledge or updated programming; journeying into our Jerusalem’s new culture requires

updated maps and a recalibrated compass. *Reverse Mentoring* proposes that those living in modern culture are the best guides. They alone possess the accessories needed to understand the new topography and climate. The idea and practice of older leaders learning from younger peers is at the core of reverse mentoring (RM). Creps makes a solid case for including RM in any leader’s toolbox.

In the style of the author’s previous book, *Off-Road Disciplines*, the reader finds snippets of narratives from scores of casual conversations and formal interviews with young leaders across the country. Gathering around Earl’s favorite brew at franchise coffee spots, these establishments become the venue of choice as an interview studio. For the reader, these table conversations become a listening lab, an observation perch. Eavesdropping has never been so instructional. The sheer number of conversations the reader is invited into is impressive—a virtual window into a land and people to which most leaders who have been around awhile are rarely privy. This is a valuable part of the book’s design.

Earl is a humble cultural expert on the “y-generation,” having a keen ability to go below the surface and mine out values, emotions, opinions, and trends. The reader will get a real sense of the cultural mosaic outside the environs of the church. I was perplexed to see just how far removed my seat is from the bow wave of changing culture. However, there is hope, as Creps maintains that each of us can be taught and, thereby, close the gap in our understanding. How? Recognize our need to learn and then find a seat beside someone who can speak into our lives—a younger leader.

RM will challenge even seasoned leaders. For instance, consider the practice itself; reverse mentoring is counter to traditional instructional approaches. While we know cognitively that change is necessary for growth, having gotten used to being the teacher, moving back into the pupil’s chair is not our first instinct. However, the change in position is necessary, and making readers feel safe when launching away from familiar moorings is a forte of Creps. Few authors can make you feel okay about facing a potentially uncomfortable reality. With pastoral inflection, he pleads, “Realize that a position on the downside of the cool curve creates a fresh opportunity to humble oneself and depend on God” (3). Sounds like the urgings of a genuine friend.

Be prepared to have your worldview on ministry practice and assumptions challenged. Creps is disarming, not accusatory in his approach. The effect on me was a creeping, rising discomfort with myself and the facts as I progressed through the book. Frankly, I was

surprised to see myself as part of the problem, and in some cases, I was missing reams of information on matters I previously felt confident about.

The book’s four section format builds nicely by helping the reader face reality, offering hope by showing new skills and attitudes, laying out the benefits, and offering principles for customizing one’s approach to new relationships in both individual and organizational settings. Expect conventional wisdom to be challenged, like the notion one must be wise, not just informed (71). Sensible reminders are suggested, such as the practical value of being a good listener and learner at any age level (128,130). Creps also offers numerous anecdotes and insights into leadership decisions others have made, and blind spots in communication with others (100, 104, 111).

Though Creps disclaims that the book is a weighty research piece (xxii), the reader will discover sufficient case studies and references from existing formal research to legitimize RM’s practice. Biblical examples, easily overlooked without RM in mind, also lend support. For a Christian leader, this takes the practice out of the drawer and into plain sight, prodding the reader to ask, “Now what will I do with it?”

The author takes you on his personal journey with reverse mentoring and writes of his own struggle with the process and information. This journey approach in writing is distinctive when compared to other books I’ve read, which is so refreshing. RM is peppered with both self-discovery and confession. For instance, during a debrief on tips for improving his presentation, the author was broadsided by another revelation: “Their candid self-disclosure provoked

more than research conclusions, confronting me inadvertently with how my own leadership had failed youth pastors who worked for me” (139). Honesty can be brutal, but it can also be a catalyst to positive change. I felt the author’s pain.

RM is not prescriptive, but a practical guide for developing reverse mentoring relationships. One will see the benefits and necessity of older leaders learning from younger peers. “It’s not about being young; it’s about being tuned in” (170). For leaders who don’t want to clock out early, this is a timely and groundbreaking book.

¹J. Ebersole, “The Future of Graduate Education,” *University Business*, <http://www.universitybusiness.com/viewarticle.aspx?articleid=527> (accessed November 23, 2008). See also Brian Fitzgerald, “Lifelong Learning Is Goal of New Division of Extended Education,” *Boston University Bridge*, <http://www.bu.edu/bridge/archive/2001/08-31/exed.html> (accessed November 23, 2008).