

# Reverse Mentoring: Transforming Learning at Individual, Team, and Organizational Levels to Build Belonging in the Workplace

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## Abstract

*As the modern workplace undergoes rapid transformation, traditional learning approaches are increasingly insufficient in addressing the complexities of a multigenerational workforce. With as many as six generations now coexisting within organisations — from the Silent Generation (1928–1945), Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Gen X (1965–1980), Millennials (1981–1996), and Gen Z (1997–2012), to the emerging influence of Gen-AI, there is a critical need for innovative learning strategies. Reverse mentoring has emerged as a structured approach to fostering cross-generational and experiential learning, promoting inclusivity, innovation, and adaptability. This paper provides a historical overview of reverse mentoring, examines the predominantly qualitative research conducted in this domain, and presents a comprehensive framework for the effective design and implementation of reverse mentoring programmes within organizational contexts.*

## Keywords

*Reverse Mentoring • Leadership • Diversity • Inclusion*

## Introduction

The contemporary business landscape is undergoing rapid transformation, driven by shifting workforce dynamics and an increasingly vocal employee base advocating for meaningful change. Traditional learning paradigms have been fundamentally disrupted, rendering previous approaches insufficient in addressing current organizational challenges. To maintain a competitive advantage, organizations must recognise younger generations not only as workforce participants but also as key contributors to shaping the future of work. Within this context, reverse mentoring has evolved from a supplementary practice to a strategic necessity, providing a structured framework for enhancing cross-generational understanding, fostering inclusivity, and ensuring that organizations remain agile, relevant, and responsive to the complexities of an ever-changing global environment.

## What is Really Changing?

In an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) Bennis and Nanus (1985) world, established knowledge is continuously challenged by rapid environmental

and organizational changes. According to Price Waterhouse Cooper (PwC, 2017), these changes can be categorized into five key areas:

- 1. Technological advances** – The continuous evolution of technology is reshaping work processes and communication, necessitating adaptability and lifelong learning.
- 2. Demographic shifts** – The modern workplace now accommodates up to five generations, or six if artificial intelligence (AI) is included, resulting in a diverse range of experiences and perspectives that require effective integration.
- 3. Urbanization trends** – The expansion of urban centres into economic powerhouses is influencing both the cultural landscape and strategic decision-making within organizations.
- 4. Power dynamics** – Smaller nations with significant natural resources are exerting disproportionate influence on global power structures and political affairs.
- 5. Environmental and resource challenges** – The increasing emphasis on sustainability is compelling businesses to adopt innovative practices and strategies to mitigate environmental impact.

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## Internal Organizational Challenges

Organizations are also facing significant internal transformations, particularly in response to evolving workforce expectations and workplace models. Remote and hybrid work arrangements have stabilized at historically high levels, excluding the temporary surge observed during the COVID-19 pandemic (McKinsey Global Institute, 2023). Additionally, employees have become more empowered and vocal, actively advocating for meaningful workplace change. This shift has increased employee influence over organizational decisions, underscoring the need for businesses to prioritize genuine employee engagement mechanisms. Organizations must not only establish formal channels for employee feedback but also demonstrate a commitment to listening and implementing meaningful change, fostering a sense of belonging and sustained engagement (Harter 2024).

The analysis of these challenges, along with insights from various organizational programmes, indicates that communication remains a fundamental issue within workplaces. This challenge manifests at both the input and output levels. On the input side, there is a disconnect in expectations regarding effective communication among different generational and hierarchical groups. On the output side, leaders often perceive themselves as communicating frequently and effectively, whereas employees frequently report experiencing a lack of clarity, transparency, or engagement in organizational communication. This misalignment highlights the need for more structured, intentional, and inclusive communication strategies to bridge the gap between leadership and the broader workforce.

## What is Reverse Mentoring?

Reverse mentoring can be defined as a structured developmental relationship in which a senior leader receives mentorship from an individual belonging to an underrepresented demographic group, such as those differentiated by gender, age, ethnicity, social mobility, or disability (Gordon, 2022). This process reverses traditional hierarchical learning dynamics, positioning the senior leader as the novice and encouraging them to adopt a growth mindset. Through this engagement, leaders are challenged to critically reflect on their biases, broaden their perspectives, and take meaningful action toward fostering equity and inclusion within the organization.

## Why I Am So Interested in It?

In 2018, I was invited to serve as the first reverse mentor to Craig Kreeger, then CEO of Virgin Atlantic. At the time, I was

unfamiliar with the concept of reverse mentoring but accepted the opportunity nonetheless. This engagement was not merely symbolic, as I had long been an advocate for and active participant in organizational inclusion initiatives. However, what distinguished this experience was the intentional shift in dialogue — for the first time, I was encouraged to share my personal lived experiences rather than solely my professional expertise. This process provided a profound sense of visibility and recognition, reinforcing the transformative potential of reverse mentoring.

Following this experience, we launched a pilot reverse mentoring programme, in which I assumed the role of lead mentor, guiding participants through the elements of a successful mentoring relationship. The reflective discussions that emerged from these sessions highlighted two key insights:

**1. Leaders must cultivate curiosity about perspectives different from their own.** While individuals tend to gravitate toward those with similar backgrounds and experiences, it is imperative — both as professionals and as members of a diverse society — that leaders actively seek out and engage with differing viewpoints. This exposure fosters broader understanding and contributes to the creation of inclusive organizational cultures.

**2. Intentional inclusivity is essential.** Simply avoiding exclusionary practices is insufficient; leaders must engage in deliberate efforts to foster inclusion. This requires stepping outside of familiar professional and social networks and embracing opportunities for continuous learning and self-reflection.

As I began sharing these insights more widely, interest in reverse mentoring grew significantly. Richard Branson himself recognized the impact of this initiative and publicly acknowledged its contribution to fostering a more inclusive workplace at Virgin Atlantic. This recognition, along with additional industry accolades, ultimately led to an invitation from TED to deliver a talk on the subject during the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, I began receiving increased inquiries from organizations seeking guidance on the design and implementation of effective reverse mentoring programmes. This marked the beginning of a broader professional focus on formalizing and expanding the application of reverse mentoring as a strategic tool for leadership development and workplace inclusivity.

## Mentoring as a Concept

Mentoring has long been recognized as a critical mechanism for professional and organizational advancement, as it enables individuals to leverage the experiences and insights of others to navigate career progression more effectively (Hung, 2003). Traditional mentoring remains valuable; however, for organizations to achieve greater agility and innovation,

a fundamental shift in mindset is required. Rather than solely relying on historical trends and established practices, organizations must balance foundational stability with the flexibility needed to adapt to future challenges. Recognizing and embracing diverse perspectives is essential in building workplaces that are not only sustainable but also capable of driving continuous innovation and maintaining a competitive edge (McKinsey, 2023)

Despite its benefits, traditional mentoring often reinforces existing behaviours and hierarchical structures, which can inadvertently perpetuate power imbalances and limit inclusivity. In contrast, reverse mentoring challenges these conventional dynamics by positioning junior employees as mentors to senior leaders, fostering bidirectional learning that promotes organizational change and inclusive leadership. This approach requires a significant shift in mindset for both the mentor and the mentee, as it demands openness to learning from non-traditional sources and re-evaluating leadership assumptions.

In 2020, I undertook research on reverse mentoring programmes, specifically investigating the key determinants of their success. While the concept of reverse mentoring has existed for some time, its mainstream application in corporate environments was largely popularized in the 1990s by Jack Welch at GE Capital. Welch introduced the practice to ensure that senior leaders remained informed about emerging technological advancements, preventing obsolescence in an era of rapid digital transformation. In the contemporary business landscape, organizations once again face disruptive shifts, making reverse mentoring a highly relevant strategy for fostering innovation, adaptability, and inclusive leadership.

## The Research Approach

This study employed a multi-method qualitative research approach to investigate the effectiveness of reverse mentoring programmes. The research was conducted through three primary methods.

### Desktop Research

A comprehensive review of existing literature, business case studies, industry reports, and published research articles was undertaken to establish a foundational understanding of reverse mentoring and its impact within organizational settings. Secondary research of this nature is widely recognized as a method for synthesizing existing knowledge, identifying trends, and informing future empirical inquiry (Saunders et al., 2019).

### Qualitative Research

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including mentors, mentees, and HR

professionals, to gain in-depth insights into their experiences and to identify the determinants of success and challenges within reverse mentoring programmes. Qualitative research, particularly interviews, is a well-established method for exploring subjective experiences, attitudes, and organizational dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inductive nature of this approach allowed for the emergence of themes and patterns relevant to reverse mentoring practices.

### Action research and live testing

The research incorporated practitioner-based learning through direct consultation, implementation, and observation of reverse mentoring programmes in organizational settings. Action research, as described by McNiff (2017), involves an iterative process of testing, learning, and refining interventions in real-world contexts. This experiential approach facilitated practical insights into the design, execution, and sustainability of effective reverse mentoring initiatives.

The findings from these research activities formed the basis of the book, *Reverse mentoring: Removing barriers and building belonging in the workplace* (Gordon, 2022). The primary objective of this work is to provide a structured and evidence-based toolkit for organizations seeking to implement successful reverse mentoring programmes. The research underscores the importance of intentional pre-programme planning, as the success of such initiatives is contingent upon strategic design, leadership commitment, and the cultivation of a psychologically safe learning environment.

## The Following Factors Should be Considered

There are several key considerations for effective reverse mentoring programmes at the organizational level.

### Establishing a Culture of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a fundamental prerequisite for organizational success, as it fosters an environment in which individuals feel secure in expressing themselves without fear of negative repercussions (Edmondson, 1999). Trust serves as the foundation of psychological safety, and research has demonstrated that it must be cultivated over time to create the conditions necessary for open dialogue and vulnerability (Browne, 2021).

To assess and enhance psychological safety within organizations, quantitative data analytics can be leveraged to identify areas for improvement. Methods such as employee engagement surveys, pulse surveys, and exit interview data provide empirical insights into workplace culture, enabling organizations to tailor reverse mentoring programmes to address specific concerns and foster inclusive leadership.

A particularly relevant framework in this context is Clark’s (2020) book *Four stages of psychological safety*, which outlines a progressive model in which individuals move from feeling included to demonstrating learning behavior, contributing openly, and engaging in constructive challenges within an organization. This staged approach provides a structured methodology for organizations to ensure that their mentoring initiatives operate within a psychologically safe environment, thereby maximizing engagement and long-term effectiveness, illustrated in Figure 1 below.

### Fostering a Leadership Growth Mindset

For reverse mentoring programmes to be effective, it is essential that leaders cultivate a growth mindset, both at the individual and collective levels (Gordon, 2022). While discussions of mindset transformation are often straightforward in domains such as sales or operations, the complexities of leadership mindset shifts — particularly in the context of mentoring and inclusion — require deeper engagement and intentional effort. Research by Browne (2021) highlights that mentees who demonstrate the highest levels of commitment are typically at a stage in their careers where “career enrichment” takes precedence over “career advancement”. These individuals perceive reverse mentoring as an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to their organizations by sharing knowledge and fostering inclusivity, rather than as a means for personal career progression.

Approaching mentee recruitment with a “pay-it-forward” philosophy — rather than positioning the programme solely

as a strategic business initiative — has proven to be a more effective driver of engagement and programme success. Raza (2020) emphasizes that when mentees participate primarily for external visibility or public relations benefits, underrepresented employees often recognize these inauthentic motives, which can undermine the programme’s credibility and impact. Therefore, ensuring that leaders and mentees engage with genuine intent is critical to fostering trust, achieving meaningful knowledge exchange, and sustaining long-term programme effectiveness.

### Defining Clear and Measurable Objectives

Before implementing a reverse mentoring programme, it is essential to establish explicit and well-defined objectives (Gothian & Lopata, 2024). These objectives may include reducing hierarchical barriers, enhancing cross-generational collaboration, or fostering inclusive leadership. Clearly articulating the intended outcomes ensures that the programme is strategically aligned with organizational goals and effectively structured to drive meaningful change.

Establishing clear objectives also facilitates the development of robust evaluation metrics, enabling organizations to assess programme effectiveness and hold leaders accountable for achieving tangible results. Furthermore, well-defined goals reinforce the value of the mentoring relationship, ensuring that mentees recognize and respect the time, expertise, and emotional labour contributed by their mentors. This accountability mechanism promotes engagement, reciprocity, and sustained commitment to the mentoring process.

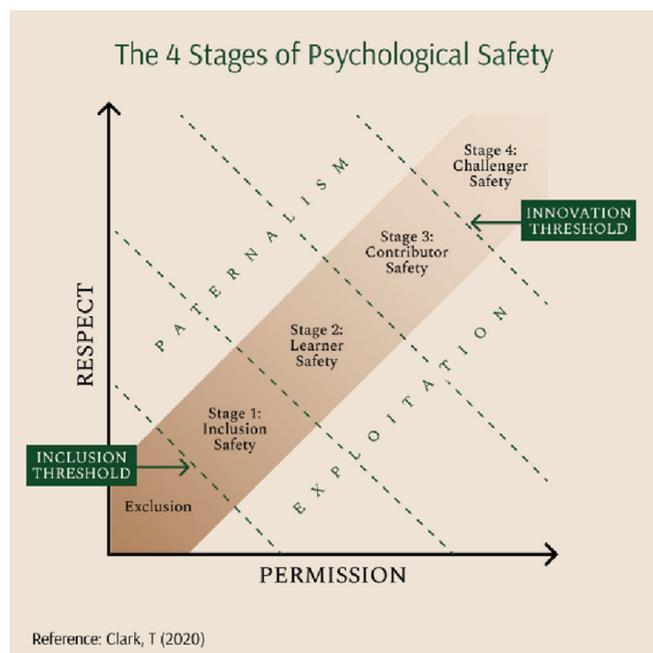


Figure 1. The Four Stages of Psychological Safety (Clark, 2020).

### Implementing a Systematic and Objective Matching Process

The effectiveness of a reverse mentoring programme is highly dependent on the mentor-mentee pairing process. Rather than relying on an informal or self-selection approach, organizations should implement a structured and evidence-based matching process that aligns with the programme’s objectives. One effective method is “blind” matching, where pairings are determined based on predefined criteria, such as departmental diversity, identified learning needs, and the mentor’s expertise and prior contributions to organizational culture and inclusion initiatives.

Allowing mentees to select their mentors may introduce unconscious bias, potentially reinforcing existing hierarchical structures and limiting the diversity of perspectives within the programme. A systematic matching process, grounded in objective selection criteria, ensures that pairings are strategic, equitable, and conducive to meaningful learning experiences. When mentor-mentee relationships are established based on clear programme objectives and complementary competencies, they are more likely to yield

positive developmental outcomes for both participants and the broader organization (Allen et al., 2009).

### **Implementing Structured Training Programs for Mentors and Mentees**

A well-designed reverse mentoring programme serves as a strategic mechanism for fostering organizational belonging and internal networking. To maximize its effectiveness, it is essential to implement structured training sessions tailored separately for mentors and mentees. This approach establishes “communities of best practice” (Raza, 2020), enabling participants to engage in peer learning, reflection, and feedback loops that contribute to the continuous improvement of the programme. Additionally, these training sessions provide a platform for identifying emerging themes and challenges, which can inform broader organizational strategies related to leadership development and inclusivity.

For a reverse mentoring programme to be sustainable and impactful, a formalized support infrastructure must be in place (Browne, 2021). This includes structured guidance, ongoing facilitation, and mechanisms for addressing challenges as they arise. A cohort-based approach fosters collective learning and psychological safety, providing participants with a trusted peer group for navigating their mentoring journey. Furthermore, integrating regular check-ins, collaboration tools, and structured reflection opportunities ensures that participants remain engaged and that knowledge transfer leads to meaningful organizational change.

### **Integrating Individual Narratives with Broader Organizational Insights**

While personal narratives can serve as powerful catalysts for change, they should not be the sole foundation for organizational transformation. To ensure that interventions are strategically informed and scalable, individual experiences must be triangulated with empirical data and broader research findings before being incorporated into organizational strategy (Gordon, 2022). This approach enables organizations to contextualize insights within a wider systemic framework, ensuring that solutions are both data-driven and representative of the broader workforce.

Validating individual mentoring experiences against quantitative and qualitative data helps organizations implement interventions that align with the scale and specificity of the challenges faced. For instance, certain issues may be department- or location-specific, requiring targeted rather than organization-wide responses. Additionally, conducting wider testing and analysis allows for the refinement of reverse mentoring programmes based on diverse feedback sources, ultimately strengthening their potential to drive meaningful and sustainable organizational change.

## **How Reverse Mentoring Is Making a Great Impact**

### **Organizational Level**

#### ***Enhancing Organizational Decision-Making Through Diverse Perspectives***

Reverse mentoring provides leaders with direct access to the lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges of employees from diverse demographic and professional backgrounds. This process functions as a structured mechanism for gaining insights that might otherwise remain inaccessible through traditional leadership channels. In essence, it serves as an internal, dynamic focus group, enabling leaders to engage with a broad spectrum of perspectives that inform more inclusive and equitable decision-making.

By actively engaging with underrepresented groups, leaders develop greater emotional intelligence and cultural competence, allowing them to tailor policies and strategies that resonate with a wider workforce. This, in turn, enhances inclusivity, strengthens employees’ sense of belonging, and fosters a more engaged and productive organizational culture. Empirical evidence from reverse mentoring programmes has demonstrated that such initiatives contribute to higher morale, increased innovation, and improved team cohesion. For example, observations from a reverse mentoring programme implemented at Toyota indicated that structured mentor-mentee engagements facilitated leadership awareness of employee experiences, leading to more targeted and effective inclusivity initiatives.

From my own perspective, the project has had a ripple effect. It’s opened communication channels with junior staff members that never would have been open otherwise. That effect has spread throughout the business and opened communication channels with staff members that haven’t even been part of the programme. I also think I’m more approachable than before. The programme has given me an insight into the core values of our younger employees, how they want to communicate and how they can be incentivized more effectively. It’s shown the mentors that I and my management team are approachable and open to challenge. In turn, they are spreading that message throughout the business and improving communication at all levels. **(Dealer Principle)**

#### ***Enhancing Leadership Agility and Organizational Relevance***

In an era of rapid technological advancement and evolving societal expectations, maintaining organizational and leadership relevance is essential for sustaining competitive advantage. Reverse mentoring serves as a strategic mechanism for

ensuring that senior leaders remain informed about emerging trends, technological innovations, and shifts in workplace culture. Younger mentors, who are often more attuned to contemporary developments, provide critical insights into evolving market dynamics and organizational challenges. Through this knowledge exchange, leaders enhance their adaptive capacity, allowing them to refine their strategic decision-making processes and cultivate more agile, forward-thinking leadership approaches. By integrating reverse mentoring into leadership development frameworks, organizations strengthen their ability to navigate complex business environments, ensuring long-term resilience, innovation, and market competitiveness.

### **Leveraging Reverse Mentoring to Drive Organizational Change**

A fundamental responsibility of leadership is to facilitate meaningful and sustainable organizational change. Reverse mentoring serves as a strategic tool for equipping mentees — typically senior leaders — with critical insights into the concerns, expectations, and aspirations of a diverse workforce. By engaging in bidirectional learning, mentees develop a deeper understanding of the structural and cultural factors that influence employee engagement, workplace inclusivity, and organizational effectiveness.

Through this process, leaders can design and implement evidence-based strategies that address workforce needs, resulting in policy reforms, operational improvements, and cultural transformations. Such initiatives not only align organizations with contemporary societal and business trends but also contribute to the creation of an inclusive and adaptive work environment. Ultimately, embedding reverse mentoring within leadership frameworks enhances talent retention, organizational agility, and long-term sustainability.

I feel more connected to leadership, and I feel like I can empathize with our leadership team. I understand that a lot goes into the decision-making process, and I appreciate our leaders working to improve the level of transparency. **(Anonymous Mentor)**

### **Organizational/Individual Level**

#### **Addressing Biases to Foster Inclusive Leadership**

Bias, whether conscious or unconscious, can significantly impede effective decision-making and act as a barrier to organizational inclusivity. Reverse mentoring offers a structured framework through which leaders can engage in critical self-reflection and actively confront their implicit biases. By participating in open, candid dialogues and being exposed to diverse lived experiences, leaders develop greater self-awareness and enhance their ability to recognize and challenge preconceived notions that may influence workplace interactions and decision-making processes.

This process of continuous reflection and learning contributes to the development of a more inclusive workplace culture, wherein employees are valued for their individual contributions and perspectives, irrespective of demographic or socio-cultural background. By embedding reverse mentoring into leadership development strategies, organizations can promote equity, reduce bias-driven decision-making, and cultivate a more diverse and engaged workforce.

I learned a lot. A couple things include: sometimes my good intentions are not translated in the way I present things to my team. Communication, organization/availability are things for me to work on. **(Anonymous Mentee)**

### **Individual Level**

#### **Enhancing Employee Retention, Productivity, and Engagement**

Participation in mentoring programmes, whether as a mentor or mentee, has been shown to have a positive impact on employee retention, productivity, and engagement. Empirical data indicate that employees involved in mentoring programmes experience a 10% lower turnover rate (9%) compared to those who do not participate (19%) (Ward, 2024). Furthermore, 88% of participants report increased productivity as a result of their engagement in mentoring initiatives (Francis, 2021). This suggests that mentoring fosters a greater sense of professional commitment, leading to higher discretionary effort and alignment with organizational objectives.

The findings of Thornton (2018) further support this relationship, demonstrating that enhanced employee engagement can be attributed to the concept of Perceived Organizational Support (POS). POS reflects an organization's commitment to investing in its employees' development, wellbeing, and career progression, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty. Given that employee engagement is a critical metric in evaluating organizational effectiveness, reverse mentoring programmes serve as a strategic tool for strengthening employee commitment, enhancing productivity, and reducing turnover.

### **Effectiveness of Reverse Mentoring**

Traditional learning methodologies, such as classroom-based instruction, remain valuable in certain contexts; however, research suggests that experiential learning is more effective in facilitating long-term knowledge retention and behavioural change. Reverse mentoring represents a holistic learning experience, providing both mentors and mentees with the opportunity to engage in situational learning, knowledge exchange, and reflective practice. This approach aligns with Bandura's *Social learning theory* (1977), which posits

that individuals learn most effectively through observing the behaviours of others and understanding the consequences of those behaviours. The storytelling and lived-experience sharing inherent in reverse mentoring relationships enhance cognitive, emotional, and motivational engagement, reinforcing deep learning that is difficult to disassociate from once internalized. At an organizational level, reverse mentoring acts as a catalyst for leadership development and cultural transformation. It enables leaders to challenge conventional thinking, embrace diversity and inclusion, and navigate complex workplace dynamics with greater adaptability. By leveraging the insights gained through reverse mentoring, organizations can enhance leadership effectiveness, sustain competitive advantage, and foster an inclusive work environment.

### Future Directions

Despite its demonstrated benefits, reverse mentoring requires structured implementation and support mechanisms to ensure its effectiveness. Research and historical literature indicate that not all participants readily embrace the concept, as traditional hierarchical norms often present initial barriers to role reversal. Therefore, organizations must provide formal guidance, structured training, and ongoing support to facilitate an impactful and sustainable mentoring experience for both mentors and mentees.

For practitioners seeking to develop reverse mentoring programmes, resources such as *Reverse mentoring: Removing barriers and building belonging in the workplace* (Gordon, 2022), the LinkedIn Learning course: *Reverse mentoring essentials*, and recent TED Talks on the subject offer valuable frameworks and best practices.

Given the ever-evolving nature of the workplace, organizations must remain proactive in adapting to change. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is by fostering deeper, more meaningful connections between employees and leadership through strategic and empathetic engagement. Reverse mentoring is not merely an innovative learning tool but a critical strategy for ensuring long-term organizational success in an increasingly dynamic business environment.

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## About the Author



### **Patrice Gordon**

Patrice Gordon is the CEO of Eminere, a bespoke leadership consultancy on a mission to build better humans—so they can build better businesses. Her career spans senior Finance and Commercial Strategy roles at top UK brands, including British Airways, Royal Mail and Virgin Atlantic, where she became the company's first-ever reverse mentor. That bold move earned praise from Sir Richard Branson, led to a viral TED Talk, and inspired her book *Reverse Mentoring: Removing Barriers and Building Belonging in the Workplace*. A qualified Executive Coach, Patrice specialises in inclusive leadership, women's advancement, and sustainable reverse mentoring. Her work has been recognised globally by TED, Adam Grant, Brené Brown, and others shaping the future of work.