2026 AGAC Field Note #38
Good Practices in Korea through the WHO Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) Framework

From Leading to Learning

Reverse Mentoring

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Reverse mentoring is an arrangement in which a junior employee formally supports and mentors a senior colleague, typically on technology, generational perspective, or workplace culture, reversing the direction mentoring conventionally runs. The practice traces to 1999, when Jack Welch, then chief executive of General Electric, paired senior executives with junior staff to close one specific gap: the executives did not understand the internet, and the company needed them to (Gendreau et al., 2026). The problem Welch solved was narrow, but the assumption he inverted, that competence with new tools and ideas flows only downward from senior to junior, is also one of the most consistent findings in the WHO's own accounting of workplace ageism.

Its 2021 Global Report on Ageism documents older workers stereotyped across institutions as "harder to train and unable to learn," "resistant to change," and "not technologically competent," while the same institutions code the opposite traits, adaptability and technological fluency, as markers of youth (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 4). That stereotype is not just an abstract prejudice: the belief that older workers cannot learn something new tends to exclude them from new technology rollouts, or lead organizations to underestimate what they can actually do. A small but growing number of Korean public offices and companies have recently begun building reverse mentoring into their own organizations, assigning a newly hired employee to mentor a senior executive or department head, striking a balance between rapid change and an aging society.

> Yoo Sung-hoon, Mayor of Geumcheon-gu: "The era when being older automatically meant knowing everything is long over [...] administration can only innovate once senior officials build a culture of communicating with MZ-generation staff and learning from those junior to them." (Kim, 2024)

Beyond Respect, Toward Mutual Learning

The WHO's Checklist of Essential Features of Age-Friendly Cities, under its Respect and Social Inclusion domain, calls for older people to appear in the media without stereotyping and in a positive light, for community activities that bring generations together, and for recognition of older people's past and present contributions (World Health Organization, 2007). Its 2021 report names policy and legislation, education, and intergenerational contact as its evidence-based strategies for reducing ageism (World Health Organization, 2021).

Under what conditions, then, does intergenerational contact actually reduce ageism? A meta-analysis of programs spanning 45 years and 11 countries found that education about aging and positive intergenerational contact had a measurable effect, softening ageist attitudes and raising knowledge about aging. The effect was strongest when contact was (1) one-on-one, (2) between parties of equal status, and (3) in person (Apriceno & Levy, 2023). Reverse mentoring is one way of putting those conditions into practice, though not automatically: run as a group activity, or left alongside rank-based power that still operates as usual, it does not satisfy those three conditions on its own.

One program that illustrates the potential had young adults teaching digital skills to older adults. In Breck, Dennis, and Leedahl's (2018) study, older participants reported gaining confidence in using digital technology, along with reduced stereotyping of the other generation and a stronger sense of intergenerational connection. What matters, in other words, is not simply bringing different generations into the same room, but the kind of relationships and activities that contact is built around. The WHO's own 2023 guidance, Connecting Generations, makes the same point: intergenerational contact only becomes real exchange when its goals, roles, activities, and evaluation are deliberately designed, not left to chance (World Health Organization, 2023).

Korea became a super-aged society in 2025, when the share of its population aged 65 and older reached 20.3 percent (National Data Agency, 2025). As more generations work side by side, the way organizations transfer knowledge and communicate has had to be redesigned. One Korean company's reverse mentoring program manager explained that a thick layer of senior staff, combined with a growing number of new hires, had opened a real gap between generations, and that understanding MZ-generation customers meant leaders also needed to keep up with current trends (Kim, Lee, & Chung, 2021). The public institutions covered in this piece tend to lead with a specific, practical problem, adapting to digital tools or reforming administrative practice, while private companies tend to lead with the broader problem of generational understanding and organizational culture.

The Public Sector's Version:
A Conversation Worth Having on Purpose



Figure 1. Reverse mentoring in Geumcheon-gu (top and bottom left), KOTRA (top right), and Jeonju (bottom right)
Source: Kim (2024, top left), Lee (2024, bottom left), Park (2026, top right), Jeonju City Hall (2026, bottom right)

Seoul's Geumcheon-gu district office introduced tablet-PC training for its senior officials in 2024, as part of a "paperless meeting" policy aimed at cutting carbon emissions. According to follow-up reporting, resistance among senior officials to the new equipment was considerable, so the office assembled seven newly hired officials, at the ninth rank and below, who were already comfortable with tablets, as mentors. They taught department heads at the fourth and fifth rank the user interface, apps, stylus use, and file-sharing methods, and the district's mayor and deputy mayor were each coached in their own offices as well (Kim, 2024; Lee, 2024).

One mentor recalled how strange and new it felt to be the one answering a bureau-level official's questions, after months of being the one asking senior colleagues for help. Another participant said the experience taught them that "regardless of age or rank, every member of an organization should be able to learn from, and share with, anyone else" (Lee, 2024). What makes this case notable is that it folded tablet training, acceptance of a new meeting format, and cross-rank conversation into a single program.

On September 22, 2026, Seocho-gu brought together senior officials and junior officials at the eighth and ninth rank for an event run as a professionally moderated interview and talk show, structured around three segments: "Now How," where junior staff taught short-form video production; "Know How," where senior officials shared their

work experience; and "Culture Talk," a discussion of the organizational culture both sides wanted to build. Mayor Jeon Seong-su said "an organization's growth needs both a senior colleague's experience and a junior colleague's fresh perspective" (Park, 2026; Seocho-gu, 2026).

On October 1, 2026, Jeonju held the launch ceremony for its "Generational Empathy Reverse Mentoring" program, with roughly 50 participants, including Mayor Cho Ji-hoon, junior mentors, and senior-official mentees. The program is one of the mayor's own signature pledges for this term, designed around team-chosen topics aimed at improving organizational culture and surfacing ideas for administrative reform. Mayor Cho said he hoped it would be an opportunity for generations to understand and respect each other's experience and thinking (Jeonju City, 2026; Lim, 2026).

From August through the end of 2026, KOTRA organized 22 junior staff, averaging 28 years old, into seven teams, meeting monthly with seven executives including President Kang Kyung-sung, each team rotating to a different executive each month. The main subjects are generative-AI tools and AI-assisted video production, alongside slang and youth culture. President Kang said junior staff's "fresh sense and AI literacy" would be a core driver of improving the organization's service quality (Jung, 2026; Park, 2026). Where GE once addressed an internet literacy gap, this case addresses today's AI literacy gap.

Yeongdeungpo-gu tried the same reversal of roles on ordinary citizens rather than inside its own organization. The "Digital Generation Empathy Challenge," reported in May 2024, ran monthly at the Seoul Digital Companion Plaza: young people helped seniors with kiosk ordering, train reservations, and taxi-hailing apps, while seniors, in turn, taught young people baduk (Go) and screen park golf. District mayor Choi Ho-gwon called it an activity that shows "intergenerational solidarity, the fact that seniors and young people can easily become friends" (Kang, 2024).

The Private Sector's Version: Culture, Not Just a Tool

Reverse Mentoring in the Private Sector



Figure 2. Reverse mentoring at LG Uplus (left), POSCO (center), and Woori Financial Group (right)
Source: LG Uplus Newsroom (2020), Kim (2023), Lee (2020)

LG Uplus began its reverse mentoring program in 2019, and from 2020 expanded it from once a year to twice, in spring and fall. By its sixth cohort in 2022, 21 newly hired employees, averaging 25 years old, mentored 10 executives across 10 teams over four sessions in three months. Chief HR Officer Yang Hyo-seok explained the rationale this way: as MZ-generation employees become a larger share of the workforce, "cross-generational and cross-rank communication inside the organization will become an increasingly important issue" (Kim, 2022). By that point, 92 new hires and 52 executives, including CEO Hwang Hyun-sik, had taken part in total (LG Uplus, 2022). Mentors choose their own topics, from MBTI typing to secondhand-marketplace apps and personal values around work. In 2020, one new-hire mentor said that, contrary to expecting a stiff relationship with an executive, they instead felt "a warmth like an uncle, or a father" (LG Uplus, 2020).

POSCO International introduced a roughly three-month program in July 2020, organizing teams of one executive and three to four employees. Nine executives and 32 employees took part at the time, and mentors chose topics such as MBTI, social media culture, and current slang. Participants said that getting a glimpse of the more human side of executives they rarely had a chance to talk with broadened their understanding across generation and rank (Kim, 2020).

Public institutions, in other words, tend to start from an immediate challenge like a digital tool or an administrative practice, while private companies tend to start from generational understanding and organizational culture.

What Reverse Mentoring Still Gets Wrong

A common limitation runs through the Korean cases surveyed here: published outcome data is scarce. Participant impressions are plentiful, but there is little reporting on how things like actual digital-tool use, ideas adopted, internal mobility, retention, promotion, or job performance changed before and after a program. Press releases can confirm that a program ran; they cannot show whether it worked.

Kim, Lee, and Chung (2021), drawing directly on a Boston College Sloan Center on Aging & Work report on an anonymized US Fortune 500 financial and insurance firm,

found that 11 of the 12 mentors in that firm's first cohort were promoted within a year, and that two patents were filed as a direct result of the cross-generational conversations the program sparked.

Tellingly, when the two companies were compared on three criteria, reciprocity, equal contribution, and sustainability, the US firm scored well on all three, while an anonymized Korean company, four cohorts and 69 mentors into its own program since 2019, had room to improve specifically on sustainability: whether the practice outlasts its initial novelty. One program manager put the problem plainly:

> "This person does it once, and it's over. What you need isn't a one-off program, but a leader who genuinely commits to saying, here's what I took from this, and I'm going to apply it, and that's not easy." (Kim, Lee, & Chung, 2021)

A second limitation is more structural. A separate commentary aimed at senior mentees in these programs identifies a real risk: if ego keeps a senior participant from candidly admitting what they don't know, or if they can't resist slipping back into a teaching role when their younger mentor isn't looking for one, the whole point of reversing roles is undercut. Its advice to senior participants is blunt: remember that you are, first and foremost, the mentee (Lee, 2023). And scale remains genuinely small. Even generously counted, the organizations named here amount to a handful of public agencies and large private companies, concentrated in resource-rich institutions, central- and metropolitan-government bodies, and large corporations, rather than the small and medium-sized enterprises where most of Korea's working-age population, older workers very much included, are actually employed.

Conclusion

Age discrimination often hides inside unspoken assumptions about who understands technology, who communicates well, and who has something valuable to contribute (Gendreau et al., 2026). Respect for older people, in other words, which is to say resisting ageism in practice, is not simply a matter of younger people being polite to them. It also means treating what an older colleague does not yet know as unremarkable, and what a younger colleague does know as worth learning from directly, by name, in front of others.

Korea's experiments with reverse mentoring are still closer to a symbolic attempt:

short-term programs followed up, at most, with participant impressions and satisfaction surveys. Three changes would move it further. First, give reverse mentoring itself clear goals and real follow-up evaluation, the same kind of post-training assessment the OECD recommends as general best practice, rather than running it as an occasional event (OECD, 2020). Second, measure what actually changes, retention, internal mobility, ideas adopted, not just how participants said they felt afterward. Third, extend the model past public agencies and large private companies toward the small and medium-sized firms that employ most of Korea's older workforce.

A labor market aging this quickly can no longer assume that knowledge flows only one way, from age to rank. Reverse mentoring's real value lies not in briefly swapping roles for an event, but in the learning and knowledge exchange that role-reversed collaboration makes possible, one that, it is hoped, can extend further still to shape how organizations work and make decisions.

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