



A Study on the Dual Mechanism of Reverse Mentoring in Promoting Organizational Innovation and Employee Well-being from a Humanistic Entrepreneurship Perspective

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Abstract. In the digital era, generational differences have become increasingly prominent within organizations. Both the national anti-involution strategy and the corporate philosophy of humanistic entrepreneurship strongly advocate people-oriented management approaches. Taking Tencent Holdings Limited as the research object, this study adopts a single-case research method. Based on the dual-cycle model of humanistic entrepreneurship, it explores the internal operation mechanism of reverse mentoring through in-depth interviews and comprehensive document analysis. The findings demonstrate that reverse mentoring significantly enhances employee well-being by activating the four core elements of the human cycle: empowerment, ethics, equality, and empathy. Meanwhile, it effectively drives organizational innovation by mobilizing the five key elements of the enterprise cycle: vision, enthusiasm, inspiration, experimentation, and execution. Through perfect institutional design, positive cultural guidance, and sufficient resource support, this study provides a replicable and practical people-oriented management paradigm for enterprises and further enriches the theoretical research in related fields.

Keywords: Dual-Cycle Model of Human-Centered Entrepreneurship, Reverse Mentoring, Organizational Innovation, Employee Well-being, Tencent Holdings Limited.

1 Introduction

In the era of the digital economy, generational differences have become an indispensable and critical issue in corporate management. People at different age stages have different shortcomings in their knowledge structures and work experience. Failure to properly address the cognitive differences and competency gaps across generations will inevitably lead to communication barriers and reduced work efficiency within organizations.

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Against such changes in the macro environment, the novel management concept of "human-oriented entrepreneurship" has emerged and evolved. At its core, this concept emphasizes the deep integration of the employee life cycle and the enterprise life cycle. Accordingly, it not only enhances employee well-being but also facilitates the sustained improvement of an enterprise's innovative capability. Nevertheless, how to implement this concept remains a practical challenge confronted by numerous enterprises.

Therefore, this study contributes to enriching the empirical research on humanistic entrepreneurship theory. Second, this study can broaden the research scope of reverse mentoring theory. For enterprises, the practical significance of this study is mainly reflected in three aspects: First, it provides a reference for enterprises to design and implement reverse mentoring programs. Second, it offers feasible approaches for enterprises to reconcile intergenerational differences and facilitate employee development. Third, it provides a practical paradigm for enterprises to pursue "anti-involution" and implement people-oriented management.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Definition of Core Concepts

Reverse Mentoring. Reverse mentoring was first proposed by Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, in 1999^[1].

Reverse mentoring refers to a practice in which junior employees mentor senior employees in specific knowledge domains, often covering areas that constitute knowledge blind spots for senior staff, while senior employees in turn impart their experience to junior employees^[2]. Research has demonstrated that when mentors perceive subordinates as a source of knowledge, they will invest more actively in the mentoring relationship, thereby improving mentees' skill levels and employment competitiveness^[3].

Traditionally, experience and organizational position have been regarded as closely correlated. However, in the context of digitalization and intergenerational integration, the emergence of new technologies may disrupt such relationships. Faced with disruptive new technologies, it has been observed that most practitioners tend to safeguard their status by concealing their difficulties and learning processes to maintain their positional advantages^[4].

Therefore, mutual mentoring must involve interactive processes characterized by psychological safety^[3], so as to prevent senior employees from developing a sense of psychological imbalance when learning from junior staff, as well as the psychological pressure that junior employees may experience when providing guidance to seniors. Accordingly, digital platforms can also mitigate hierarchical constraints in the workplace, transforming the relationship from superior-subordinate guidance to one of equal collaborative partners, and enabling reverse mentoring to place greater emphasis on mutual growth through complementary competencies.

Organizational Innovation. Due to technological iteration, generational differences, outdated management models, and certain knowledge blind spots among senior employees, organizational innovation requires organizations to adopt and assimilate new technologies, new products, new services, and new business models through multi-stage processes^[5].

Employee Well-being. Employee well-being refers to employees' overall evaluation of the quality of their positions and work experiences^[6]. It refers to employees' comprehensive positive perceptions and value satisfaction regarding their need fulfillment, work environment fit, and sense of professional value identity in the workplace. It consists of three dimensions: career development, work experience, and emotional belonging.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations

Human & Enterprise Cycle. In the 1940s, sociologist Pan Guangdan put forward the sociological thought of people-oriented development. He argued that individual development should be pursued while also taking into account the future of society, the nation, and even humanity as a whole^[7].

Human Cycle. In line with employee well-being, this framework encompasses Empowerment, Ethics, Equity, and Empathy.

Enterprise Cycle. With regard to organizational innovation, the framework includes Envisioning, Enthusiasm, Enlightenment, Experimentation, and Execution.

At present, the applicability of the dual-cycle model of human-centered entrepreneurship remains unclear, calling for in-depth and comprehensive research in the future.

Social Exchange Theory. Social Exchange Theory holds that interpersonal exchanges and interactions are effectively conducted with the goal of obtaining rewards and practical benefits^[8]. This exchange can involve economic resources or social resources such as information, support, and influence^[9].

3 Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory research design with a single case. Based on the theoretical framework of the Humanistic Entrepreneurship Dual-Cycle Model, this study regards reverse mentoring as a critical bridge connecting the human life cycle and the corporate life cycle. It focuses on how Tencent, through internal institutional design and cultural guidance, enables Generation Z employees to empower managers upward, thereby realizing dual value creation for both individuals and the organization in the process.

To ensure the depth and reliability of the research, this study adopts multi-source qualitative data for triangulation. The data are mainly obtained from the Secondary Data and Public Data.

This study adopts thematic analysis, and the analytical process strictly follows the six-step procedure below:

Familiarization with data. → *Initial coding* → *Theme development* → *Theme review.*
→ *Theme definition and naming.* → *Writing the analytical report.*

4 Case Description and Analysis: A "Dual-Cycle" Interpretation of Tencent's Reverse Mentoring Practice

4.1 Background of the Case Company and Overview of the Reverse Mentoring Project

Tencent, established in 1998, is a benchmark company in China's internet industry. Its employee structure exhibits distinct generational characteristics. This generational diversity has not hindered Tencent's development; instead, it has injected innovative vitality into the company and fostered a demand for knowledge transfer and cognitive integration.

To address the dual challenges of technological iteration and generational cognitive differences, Tencent has internally developed a system of mechanisms embodying the spirit of reverse mentoring.

4.2 Analysis Based on the "Human Cycle": How Does Reverse Mentoring Enhance Employee Well-being?

Empowerment and Support: Intrinsic Motivation for Two-Way Growth. For young employees, reverse mentoring serves as a key to "intrinsic empowerment." During the update process for WeChat Video Accounts, many employees born after 1995, leveraging their precise understanding of Generation Z's social preferences, articulated the design logic of "using bullet-screen interactions and virtual gifts to build a social space" during product review meetings. The adoption of these insights not only enhanced their influence within the team but also translated bold, innovative thinking into product competitiveness. This cycle of "knowledge transfer – value recognition" allows young employees to perceive their own worth, achieving intrinsic empowerment.

Managers, in turn, gain "extrinsic empowerment" through reverse mentoring. For example, a senior producer in Tencent's gaming division, after receiving input from young employees on the conceptual design of "metaverse game social scenarios," saw a 30% increase in user interaction rates for the game product he managed^[10]. The addition of new technological insights enables him to maintain sustained innovative vitality within the gaming industry. This expansion of professional capabilities is a clear manifestation of extrinsic empowerment.

Equality and Respect: A Communication Revolution Breaking Hierarchies. Traditional management systems at Tencent inherently involve hierarchical differences; however, reverse mentoring establishes a more egalitarian platform for dialogue. During a cross-generational workshop at Qingteng University, a young engineer engaged in a debate with a senior business director on the "ethical boundaries of AI in social recommendations." Their roles shifted from "superior-subordinate" to "knowledge transmitter and learner." This egalitarian dialogue broke down positional barriers, allowing employees from different generations to establish purer professional connections through intellectual exchange.

Building Empathy: The Emotional Bond for Generational Integration. Reverse mentoring facilitates deep communication between generations, thereby cultivating empathy. In a "Generational Awareness Workshop" organized by Tencent's Human Resources department, employees born in the 1990s explained to managers born in the 1970s concepts such as "the rationale behind workplace professionals' willingness to pay for 'emotional value'" and "how short-video platform algorithms shape user behavior." Through this process, managers gradually understood the behavioral motivations of young employees, such as "seeking meaning in work and relying on data-driven thinking." Concurrently, young employees gained insight into the decision-making logic of managers, characterized by "focusing on risk control and valuing experiential accumulation." Thus, cross-generational empathy was established.

4.3 Analysis Based on the "Corporate Cycle": How Does Reverse Mentoring Drive Organizational Innovation?

Vision and Enthusiasm: Empowering Corporate Development. The enthusiasm of young employees for new technologies injects goal-oriented innovative momentum into Tencent. Since implementing the "Living Water Program" in 2012, this initiative aims to keep the organization vibrant through internal talent mobility. By reforming talent flow mechanisms, the "Living Water Program" drives organizational innovation, breaks down silos, and activates the organization's innovative potential. This provides an organizational mechanism to support reverse mentoring, creating an egalitarian platform for dialogue between senior and junior employees. The "Living Water Program," through its mechanism allowing "employees to independently apply for job rotations without obstruction from superiors," dismantles traditional departmental barriers and hierarchical constraints, enabling employees from different business units and generations to collaborate and move more freely. With the implementation of this flexible internal talent mobility mechanism, employees gain greater work motivation and innovation drive.

Inspiration and Experimentation: Enhancing Employee Innovation Motivation. Tencent project teams launched the innovative mechanism "Linkshow." This platform utilizes live on-site presentations broadcast company-wide, allowing product heads to take the stage, pitch their products like entrepreneurs, share product development

philosophies and plans, team atmosphere, and the support provided for employee growth, thereby attracting interested employees to join ^[11]. Product heads are responsible for presenting and explaining, while leaders listen from the audience. This sharing format naturally serves as a platform for reverse mentoring. When faced with questions, leaders can raise their hands, and the product heads are responsible for providing answers. Such a public platform offers employees a venue for reverse mentoring and supplies ample motivation for innovation.

Execution: Accelerated Implementation of Innovation through Resource Support.

Reverse mentoring enables innovative ideas to be rapidly implemented leveraging managerial resources. For instance, a young product manager in WeChat Pay proposed a concept for a "small-scale mutual aid financial tool based on social relationship chains" during a reverse mentoring interaction. After the idea was approved, technical and operational resources were swiftly allocated, and the project progressed from concept to launch within just three months^[12]. This model of pairing "innovative ideas" with "resource allocation" significantly shortens the innovation implementation cycle, helping Tencent maintain its competitive advantage in the fintech sector.

4.4 Initial Coding Analysis

By initial encoding all the data, we get a lot of scattered code.

Through the comparative classification and integration of the initial codes, we can conclude that Tencent enterprises build a large number of platforms for equal communication between senior employees and junior employees, so that junior employees can reversely guide senior employees. And through the system design to break the organizational level barriers, to achieve organizational innovation and improve employee well-being. This reciprocity realizes the two-cycle model of people-oriented entrepreneurship.

4.5 Summary of Collaborative Mechanisms

Tencent's reverse guidance practice forms a closed-loop path of 'reverse guidance → activation of two-cycle elements → organizational innovation and employee well-being'. In the dimension of 'human cycle', reverse guidance activates individual growth factors of employees through empowerment, equality and empathy, and enhances happiness; in the 'enterprise cycle' dimension, through vision and enthusiasm, inspiration and experiment, execution activate organizational innovation elements to promote business development. The joint action of the two makes Tencent continue to rejuvenate in the dual cycle of intergenerational integration and innovative development, realize the unity of employee value and organizational goals, and provide a template for the intergenerational learning practice of science and technology enterprises. The specific analysis framework is shown in Figure 1.

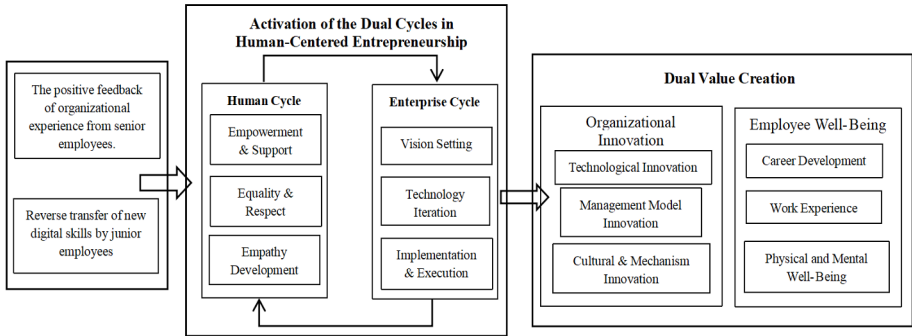


Fig. 1. Analytical Framework

5 Research Conclusion and Contributions

5.1 Research Conclusion

Research shows that after the implementation of reverse guidance at Tencent, it effectively activated the two-way synergy between the “human cycle” and the “enterprise cycle”, significantly enhancing the organization’s innovation capacity and the happiness of its employees.

In the dimension of “Human cycle”. Reverse guidance has significantly enhanced employees’ sense of happiness. In the “Enterprise Cycle” dimension. Reverse guidance has strongly driven the innovation of the organization. Under the concept of human-oriented entrepreneurship, reverse guidance has constructed a closed-loop system of “input - transformation - output”. External user demands and internal youth wisdom serve as inputs and enter the organization through institutionalized reverse channels. Complete the transformation of knowledge in an environment of equal dialogue and psychological safety; Ultimately, output organizational innovation achievements and enhance employees’ sense of happiness. This mechanism not only responds to the demand for humanized management in the context of “anti-involution”, but also provides a feasible way for enterprises to maintain their continuous competitiveness in the digital age.

Tencent breaks down hierarchical and generational barriers through the two-way flow of knowledge, ideas and perspectives between young employees and senior managers. The dual promotion mechanism of the human cycle and the enterprise cycle enables employees to have a sense of value recognition and emotional belonging, ensuring their career growth and enhancing their sense of happiness. The product iteration of enterprises is accelerating, technological application is leading, market response is agile, and organizational innovation of enterprises is strengthening.

It enriches the human-oriented entrepreneurship model from the empirical research dimension, and provides relevant evidence for the reverse guidance theory of Chinese enterprises. In the context of the application of social exchange theory, the field of intergenerational knowledge exchange is expanded and verified.

This study is a single case study, and the data source focuses on public information and lacks vertical tracking. The universality of the conclusion needs more cases to test. Future research can use multi-case comparison or quantitative methods to further explore the mechanism and long-term impact of reverse guidance in different industries and enterprises of different sizes.

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