



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Deborah J. Acker, Esq.

The Value to Your Career of Taking On the Role of Mentor

As we approach the fall many law firms are preparing for the arrival of this year's class of first-year associates. The importance of a strong mentoring relationship in supporting the development of a new associate has been widely discussed and acknowledged. The flip side of the equation, or how becoming a mentor (and doing it well) can add tremendous value to the career development of an experienced attorney, has been underplayed in my opinion. This article will consider how the role of the mentor can serve to promote professional growth for all attorneys involved.

How do you define the role of mentor and how does it differ from supervision or instruction in relation to junior associates? The legal profession has defined mentoring in a variety of ways, with a focus on "passing on knowledge, skill, and wisdom." In a broader sense the role also includes advocacy and support for a junior attorney. Some of the common tasks inherent to mentoring a junior associate include basic orientation to the daily expectations, procedures, and unwritten rules in a law firm. Most mentors help their mentees set goals for career development and obtain the experiences to further those goals. Mentors are usually framed as "safe harbors" where no question from a mentee will be considered silly or inappropriate. Mentors are often encouraged to get to know the young attorney as a person as well as an employee, provide open door access, and have regular meetings or lunches to stay in touch. Obviously, a mentoring relationship is a much different dynamic than receiving feedback on a brief from a supervising attorney or gaining additional legal knowledge from a colleague who may be an expert in a practice area.

As the mentoring relationship develops and as the junior attorney gains experience, the mentor's role may include helping the young attorney to deal with sudden stresses or life crises and providing insight to deal with quirks in the firm culture or supervising attorney personalities. Some proactive mentors make a point of introducing their mentees to clients or taking them to professional networking events in the broader legal community. Some mentors will work as co-authors with their mentees if publishing is a specific goal. A mentor can help problem solve if there are problems with chemistry and fit between a junior attorney and a practice group or supervising attorney. Some firms proactively match attorneys of the same gender with their mentors to add support on issues of developing in the profession when faced with the challenges of maternity, parenting, and evolving roles. As an associate looks towards partnership, a strong mentor can help that individual form a marketing and client development plan. Mentoring relationships may be long-term or they may be sequential depending on the location and level of the more junior associate. Some firms provide multiple mentors. And in every firm, simple workplace relationships between like minds and personalities provide much of this support in an informal capacity.

So why should you, the experienced attorney, get excited about mentoring? Some individuals take on the role because it is part of their "job description." In other words, they do it for the same reasons they meet their billing requirement: because it is expected and they want to perform according to expectations. Some

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attorneys become mentors because there is a long pattern of mentoring in the firm culture and that is part of the role and identity of attorneys once they have reached a certain level. Some mentors can be effective when their mentoring is done according to cookbook procedures or protocol, but my belief is that the benefits really begin to accrue for all involved when the commitment comes from a deeper motivation.

Probably the best mentors approach the relationship as an opportunity to give back. They may be extremely successful in their practice and want to “share the wealth” of their experience and contacts. Others may have received wonderful mentoring themselves, and would like to return the favor. And some attorneys are simply natural advocates and teachers and tend to be supportive and encouraging in all their relationships, both in and out of the office. The role is satisfying and an additional source of pride and accomplishment.

What is to be gained from mentoring? Becoming a mentor is a firm-sanctioned opportunity to improve your relationship skills with a colleague and, in the process, increase your own insight and personal growth. Much of being a lawyer is about writing at your desk, not engaging in direct human communication. Here is a chance to expand your comfort zone. Good mentors will see the relationship as “two-way.” In other words, they will be asking questions and taking in another junior attorney’s point of view as well as providing their own wisdom. Gaining practice seeing “reality” through another person’s lens is a fundamental skill in both litigation and transactional/negotiation practices. Being open to a new perspective on law firm life without a traditional defensive, “knee-jerk” response can be extremely insightful in terms of a fresh view of areas where management may benefit from some tweaking. Staying in touch with the views and life experiences of a younger generation of highly educated young people can only be a positive in adding to a sophisticated outlook and maintaining currency in your practice.

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Creating and promoting a relationship based on good communication and trust is like sowing seeds of good morale in the workplace. Just as a “screamer” can contaminate an entire office environment, so can a mutually supportive, respectful relationship take root and spread to others. Being an insightful person with sophisticated communication and interpersonal skills who is often a favorite person in the workplace can only help your career.

As you watch a junior attorney gain confidence and “bloom” it can be tremendously satisfying if your support played a role in his or her success. Seeing yourself as capable of nurturing a career in this way will increase confidence in your knowledge, perspective, and ability to give advice. This increased confidence will hopefully extend to your relationships with clients and perhaps to your personal life. And just as you may strive to increase the junior attorney’s professional network with clients and colleagues, so will you gain from the junior attorney’s network of fellow alumnae and professional colleagues he or she may have accumulated in non-legal career settings. It is simply win-win on a variety of levels.

Advice on the specific steps involved in mentoring is beyond the scope of this article but does include issues of confidentiality, boundaries, and integration with the law firm procedures. These topics need to be spelled out in advance.

How does strong mentoring experience play out on a resume when promoting your career through a lateral move? Experience as a mentor can’t replace hard-core, excellent legal experience in your practice area. The best mentors are excellent lawyers first and foremost. At the most fundamental level, a resume must reflect the depth, breadth, and excellence of your practice. But, given two excellent resumes with nearly identical legal experience, a resume that also reflects an experienced attorney’s desire to and track record of promoting other attorneys’ success will almost always catch the eye of the hiring partner. A resume with strong mentoring experience speaks volumes about an individual’s maturity, confidence, generosity, and teamwork values. A good recruiter can help you communicate this aspect of your background on a resume. It is up to you to have the openness and willingness to take on the role of mentor for the right reasons, learn from the experience, and do it well.