

The Importance of Law Firm Mentoring Programs

There is no doubt mentoring is extremely important to the careers of associates. It is extremely important that law firms and their associates realize that mentoring programs are crucial for retention and the career development of associates.

See the following articles for more information:

[The Importance of and How to Find a Mentor](#)

[Mentors, Attachment Disorders and Your Career](#)

[10 Biggest Career Mistakes Big Firm Attorneys Make](#)

Regardless, views on mentoring are changing from what they once were:

Associates once thought of mentoring as guidance and a watchful eye, assistance in maneuvering their way to partnership or into that cushy [in-house job](#), or the best way to get the best assignments.

Partners viewed mentoring through a filter formed by the kind of relationships and experience they themselves had as associates - good or bad.

Law firms, in general, viewed mentoring as important, but didn't feel comfortable promising much in the way of mentoring because they couldn't force partners to mentor.

Today we find associates not really knowing what to ask for, and partners and firms not really sure of what they can reasonably offer in the way of mentoring. The good news is that the evolution of the "mentoring movement" has provided clues that point to a more successful future for mentoring.

The History of Law Firm Mentoring Programs

A brief history may be useful here. What we call mentoring today is a way of describing the apprentice/protégé relationship that historically supported the development of private practice attorneys as long as firms have been around. A senior lawyer would pass on his or (much more rarely, in those days) her knowledge and experience and make sure the new attorney became a true "member" of the firm. Back then, every law student hired was considered a potential partner, and this type of individualized support was seen as critical to individual development and inculcation into the firm's unique culture.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, everything changed. With rising associate salaries (thanks to the New York firms), everyone started working harder, and the path to partnership became a bit less of a sure thing. By the time the stock market crashed in 1987, most associates felt there was very little mentoring going on, but it wasn't until the demand for legal services rebounded that they felt empowered enough to ask for it.

From the mid-1990s on, large-firm [associates](#) began to demand that firms provide some form of mentoring beyond what they could find on their own. A combination of high attrition rates and a shortage of senior associates caused by classes decimated by the downturn forced firms to take a hard look at how they might improve the overall [associate experience](#).

With retention at the forefront of their agenda, firms across the country - and even a few across the pond - embraced the idea of creating programs that would provide associates with the mentoring they wanted and probably needed. Firms focused on creating programs that gave associates ultimate control over the nature of the mentoring relationship and the frequency of contacts.

The relationships were to be confidential, mentors were often drawn from outside the pool of an associate's direct supervisors (or even outside the practice group), and a committee or administrator was assigned oversight responsibility to make sure it all worked as planned. People were duly paired up and introduced to all that could be made of their relationships. In the best programs, partners were given training in communication skills and provided with clear ideas of how to support associates.

Associates often received direction, as well, on how to use the program effectively. They were told to share their thoughts, concerns, and questions with their mentor with the knowledge that these communications were confidential and this relationship was separate and distinct from their everyday working relationships.

What Law Firms Know and Understand from Law Firm Mentoring Programs

Most programs got off to a great start. Many firms held festive kickoff parties to launch the program, hoping the bonding would begin immediately. Mentoring couples met for lunch or dinner and talked, promising to stay in touch and keep open doors to one another. Best intentions abounded - but not much happened after that. If the partner and associate were not in the same practice group, shared little common ground, or were both busy, the meetings probably ended after the first lunch. The mentoring relationship fell victim to the rigors of [law firm life](#). Mentoring programs entered that never-never land of tried-it-but-it-didn't-work developmental assistance programs. Even firms that considered their program effective admitted that it worked for only a small group of participants - arguably those who would have found or would have been mentors even without a formal program.

Yet it wasn't all for naught. Some great things happened along the way, and much was learned from the experience. Some associates did find great mentors through these programs - or at the very least, gained a greater understanding of how to find one on their own. Some partners learned they could indeed be mentors after all and found they looked forward to participating in the program each year. And some firms saw the benefits to business that mentoring relationships could provide and realized they could play an important role in a comprehensive approach to attorney training and development.

And there were lots and lots of breadcrumbs to follow on the path to "what went wrong?"

In the past 15 years, because the law firm environment was changing radically, the approach that seemed to make the most sense for effective mentoring failed to evolve.

The Current Approach of Law Firms to Mentoring Programs

The core goals for mentoring programs made all the sense in the world then and still do:
Provide every attorney the opportunity to develop the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to produce the highest quality legal work;
Make sure that developing attorneys are integrated and oriented to the [firm culture](#) and work environment;
and

Create an atmosphere that attracts and retains the best, most-talented lawyers.

During the period of creative approaches to associate mentoring, firms thought they understood what it would take to meet those goals. But that was before the salary wars, the dot.com revolution, the new-lawyer shortage, the business boom, and, finally, the bust. Mentoring programs designed and put in place before 1998 were suddenly quaint - and frankly, obsolete.

Yet these three goals are relevant regardless of the market, and associates still have mentoring on their Top 10 list. So the approach has to be freshened to allow for consideration of some new realities, such as 1,950- to 2,200-hour norms for both partners and associates, higher billing rates for associates, and greater pressures to amortize those higher salaries; megafirms with hundreds of attorneys and offices spread all over the world; cost-conscious clients; and associates trying to build career protection by making sure they acquire the right skill set.

Most firms are taking a new look at professional development, as a total package that includes mentoring in some fashion - reviewing what they currently do, how well it works, and where the holes are. In many cases,

firms have come to see that a comprehensive approach to development has three component parts:
 Normal training programs, inside and outside the firm;
 Training that takes place in the assignment process or "hands on" learning; and
 Individualized support and guidance.

Each aspect of this developmental triumvirate supports the others, and none are as strong alone. While most firms have or are carefully building their formal training programs and are able to keep challenging work flowing to their associates, the majority still struggle with individualized support, otherwise known as mentoring. Some of the obstacles seem insurmountable, but many firms are overcoming them with a different approach. Mentoring is back - albeit in a form that looks very different from its previous incarnation.

The new approach to mentoring (and one that actually seems to be working) is very structured and focused on professional development and shared accountability for that development. It recognizes the new realities of private practice, but manages to re-create a bit of the past.

The programs that are working today are a combination of the apprentice model of the past and the best practices that came from the formal mentoring programs of more recent history. Successful programs have the following things in common:

- They have a clearly defined purpose, structure, and set of expectations for participants;
- They focus on assisting the development of appropriate associate skills, knowledge, and experience;
- They are practice-centered and foster relationships within the practice area;
- They are flexible in shape, depending on the numbers of senior and junior attorneys;
- They offer multiple layers of individualized support, recognizing that no one person can address the needs of each developing attorney;
- They are tied in to the firm's other attorney management systems, such as performance appraisal, promotion, and merit-based compensation and bonuses;
- They provide training and ongoing support for all participants; and
- They measure the effectiveness of the program and continually adjust its structure to meet the evolving needs of each incoming class.

These are the hallmarks of effective law firm mentoring today. Every firm's program is slightly different, depending on the unique needs of their associate body. Some have some form of individual pairings, while others choose to employ a cluster-type approach that creates a small team of junior and senior attorneys.

The names of these programs have changed as well. In an effort to avoid the expectations and sometimes stigma (based on failed past efforts) of mentoring programs, the newest programs are called professional development initiatives or advisory programs. This reflects the fact that the primary focus is on professional development, not the delivery of warm fuzzies.

I have great hopes for the future of mentoring in its truest form in the law firms of the future, because firms today are creating more adaptable programs. Adaptability is what will support developmental objectives over the long term. The key is being able to admit what isn't working and make the changes necessary to move ahead.

They say that history repeats itself, but in this case it appears that history is only improving upon what was always a really good thing.