



## *Taking Charge of Your Mentoring Experience*

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Mentoring relationships are as old as the legal profession itself. In the earliest days of legal practice, mentoring and apprenticeship were the only way lawyers could learn their craft. Although legal training is more formalized today, mentoring remains a key component of attorney professional development. This is because mentoring was, and continues to be, one of the most effective ways to pass on skills, knowledge, and cultivate critical professional relationships.

Attorneys at all levels can reap benefits from the guidance and instruction of a good mentor. In addition to providing necessary instruction and development of legal skills, a mentor can help associates navigate the often tricky internal politics of a law firm, become a much needed ally and advocate, and help expand the associate's professional network both inside and outside the firm. Associates over the years have reported mixed experiences with law firms' efforts to provide formal, structured mentoring programs. For some, the mentoring relationship is a vital piece in the associate's development. In these instances, the mentor's guidance and shared expertise becomes an important part of the associate's skill and relationship building and fosters a sense of loyalty to both the mentor and the firm. For others, the relationship feels like a perfunctory, "box checked" experience offered by the firm to satisfy internal and external demands and perceptions, but ends up being a program which has little if any meaning or effectiveness.

It has been my experience that structured mentoring programs often struggle (or fail) because associates are matched with partners either randomly or based on practice area. There is usually little effort to ensure compatibility in terms of a shared background or common interests. As many partners and associates will attest, a meaningful connection is really at the heart of the most effective mentor-mentee relationships. And although it may seem counterintuitive, it is not necessary for a mentor to share the same practice area as the mentee. In fact, this arrangement is sometimes preferable to both parties because the associate has the option of being more open and honest about matters pertaining to skill development, firm structure and politics, and the associate's true career aspirations.

Mentoring relationships can also falter if associates sit back passively and wait for the partner to take the lead. As with most things in life, if you want a successful mentoring relationship, you have to take control of the situation and assume responsibility for keeping it going. Much of what you get out of your mentoring experience depends on your willingness to be proactive and to ask for what you need. This begins with [finding the right mentor](#). If your assigned mentor is clearly not a good fit, ask to be reassigned to someone with whom you think you might be more compatible. If that is not possible, an informal (i.e. unassigned) relationship with a superior in the firm with whom you feel a connection or would like to get to know better can serve the same purpose.

Once the relationship has been established, assume that it is up to you to keep the relationship moving forward. You may wish to create a list of objectives to be clear about what you would like to achieve from your interactions with your mentor. Clearly outlined objectives can provide structure to your meetings and serve as a useful guide with which to measure your progress. You may wish to consider the following when creating your goals:

- What exactly do I want from this relationship? Skill building? Networking opportunities? Career guidance?
- What specific opportunities can this particular relationship provide me?
- What do I hope will be different for me as a result of this experience?
- How will I measure success as the relationship progresses?

Keep in mind as you move forward in the mentoring relationship that the focus of your meetings should be on the successful achievement of your goals. It is important that you continue to play an active role in the relationship by assuming responsibility, staying organized, and keeping the momentum going. It is also critical that you demonstrate respect for your mentor's time. Keep the following pointers in mind when meeting with your mentor:

- Take responsibility for initiating meetings.
- Know in advance what you wish to discuss at each meeting. Prepare an agenda, either mentally or literally.
- Balance your comments with positive experiences and challenges you are experiencing. Come to meetings ready to share experiences that moved you closer to achieving your goals as well as experiences that set you back.
- Solicit feedback from your mentor on what he or she is observing in you.
- With your mentor's guidance, assess your progress, identify setbacks, and determine next steps.

Remember that in addition to a meaningful connection, the success of any mentoring program depends on the mentees' willingness to be actively involved in their own success. If the relationship is not helping you to meet your objectives, it is important to speak up so the appropriate adjustments can be made.