

Some Specific Tips on What You Should Do as a Mentor

Most senior lawyers had mentors when they were starting practice. Few of us at the time called the senior lawyer a mentor. He or she just simply answered our questions, let us watch them, watched us, offered advice and was our champion or sponsor within the firm. The best mentoring we received generally occurred on the spur of the moment. It was totally unplanned.

Things have changed so that fewer associates are fortunate to find informal mentors for whom they work. Over time those mentors provide help on a variety of different topics. If every associate had a trusted informal mentor, firms would not find it necessary to have a formal mentor program. This article is written for the mentor who has been asked to help an associate in a formal mentoring program.

Suppose you have been asked to be a mentor for a third year associate in your practice group. What do you do now? What does the firm expect of you? What does your mentee expect of you? Well, the firm has guidelines for its mentoring program that will help answer some of the questions. The firm will also provide mentoring training and that should help answer other questions. In the end, mentoring is all about trust, building relationships and caring about the future of the mentee. In many ways it mirrors the relationship a lawyer has with his or her client.

Whether you like it or not, you will be a role model for your mentee. She will quickly understand whether you have a passion for your work and your clients. She will see how you treat the staff generally and specifically your administrative assistant. She will see whether you are credible and conduct your practice with integrity. Over time she will discern your core values and principles.

If you haven't previously done so, first you need to get to know your mentee. Take her to lunch. Let her know that you want to get to know more about her and her family. Don't spend much time on career or work related matters during this lunch. Focus on getting to know her as a person and letting her get to know you. What is her husband's name? What does he do for a living? How many children does she have? What are their names and how old are they? Where do they go to school or what are they doing for fun this summer? Let her get to know you. In my case, I would let her know that my wife is Nancy. We have been married 33 years. We got married after my first year in law school and because I went to law school year-round we spent our second married night in a motel off the Ohio Turnpike on our way back to Richmond where I went to law school. Nancy is a great golfer. I haven't beat her since she first started playing. We have a daughter, Jill, who teaches middle school history.

Why have this conversation? Well, there are many reasons. I want to know my mentee as a person, not just as a lawyer. I want to understand her unique background and unique definition of personal success. I want to demonstrate my interest in her and all the things that makes her unique. I want to start to build trust because the only way I can effectively offer advice is to have earned her trust beforehand. I want her to feel comfortable about talking to me. By the way, when I get back to the office from lunch I will write down all the information I have learned, especially the names of her husband and children. I want her to know me and know I

am more than just the lawyer she sees working on client matters in the office. This is just the first step in a journey. Throughout the journey it is important to express interest and continue to get to know more your mentee.

At some point shortly after the lunch I want to focus on learning more about my mentee as a lawyer. Ask when she decided she wanted to become a lawyer and what caused her to choose law as a career. Find out what her career dreams are. As a third year associate she has had many assignments. Find out which ones were most interesting and enjoyable and why. Ask what she believes her greatest asset is as a lawyer and the area she needs to work on most. David Maister suggests that a mentor find out what the mentee wants to be famous for and what she thinks she can do this year that will have the greatest positive impact on her career. Share with her your own career path and how you made certain choices that led you to this point in your career. By now you and the mentee have gotten to know each other fairly well, so it is appropriate to get to the task at hand.

What does a mentor do? Historically a mentor had many roles and functions including teaching and training, giving career guidance, being available to answer the really stupid questions, explaining unwritten firm politics, helping get quality work assignments, providing opportunities to observe the mentor or others, observing and providing feedback, sponsoring the mentee for raises, bonuses and promotion.

Today an associate may have many mentors, both formally and informally. So no one mentor may provide all of the support previously provided. A formal mentor should focus on short and long-term career guidance and on making sure the associate is becoming the best lawyer she can be. He should provide real-time feedback and make sure the mentee is on the right path.

In this new role the mentor should spend time working with the associate on her Development and Performance Plan for the year. Focus on helping her discover and develop skills in work areas for which she has a passion and talent and for which there is a client or firm need. Ask her what niche she thinks she can be the best fill.. Have the associate identify four or five specific goals she wishes to accomplish for the year. Help her determine how much investment time (non-billable) she will spend for the year and how she can best spend it for her own career development and to meet the firm needs. Once you have done this you have what David Maister refers to as “nagging rights.” Then ask her how you can help her obtain her goals.

Meet with the mentee regularly. Take time to actually prepare for these meetings. Think about the things you are going to say and how you are going to say them. This is especially important if you feel the need to offer criticism. It is important to actively listen during these sessions. Do not take phone calls or look at messages on your Blackberry or your computer. Give the mentee your undivided attention. If she is doing well, let her know and then ask if she thinks she can do even better. Refer back to her Personal Performance and Development Plan and see if she is accomplishing the goals she thought important and investing time as she envisioned. Find out what project she has worked on since the last meeting that she enjoyed the most and why. During these meetings provide real-time feedback. Develop action items for the mentee to implement that will help her become a better lawyer.

Meet with the mentee informally also. Informal meetings give you the opportunity to share more about the firm, its history, the thinking of its leaders and its strategy. It also provides additional opportunities for the associate to get to know you better and for you to know her better. Over time, the greater the opportunity to create an informal mentoring atmosphere the better.

Look for opportunities to do something fun together that has little to do with work itself. These opportunities may include client entertainment or even include families. Over many years the summer associates at our firm have expressed they gain more from the in-home dinners than any of the other social activities. I suspect it is because they get to know our lawyers and their spouses.

Give your mentee as many opportunities as possible to attend client meetings, sit in on client calls, attend hearings or closings or other activities that will enable the mentee to see your techniques. Look for opportunities for the mentee to observe other lawyers. After each observation experience, have a debriefing. Let her ask questions and help her understand not only what happened but also why it happened.

There will come a time when the mentoring relationship concludes. We have suggested that a successful mentoring relationship last two years. Before it concludes, sit down with the mentee and see what, if anything, is left to be accomplished. Get a sense from the mentee what she feels she gained from the relationship and what you might do better in the next relationship. Share with the mentee what you got out of the relationship.

Mentoring is the best opportunity we have to create an environment where our young lawyers know that they are greatly valued and their careers are important to us. Taking time and interest in the mentee and her career will send the message that the firm cares. In the end, our lawyers will have greater career satisfaction, they will be better trained and our clients will be better served.