

The Legal Intelligencer

THE OLDEST LAW JOURNAL IN THE UNITED STATES 1843-2016

PHILADELPHIA, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2016

An **ALM** Publication

Mentoring Is a Win-Win-Win for Aspiring Attorneys, Mentors and Firms

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Special to the Legal

In her book, “My Beloved World,” U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor said, “There are very few people in the world whom you can’t learn something from, but even rarer are those souls who can reveal whole worlds to you if you observe them carefully.” Sotomayor’s words are an apt philosophy when examining how mentoring in the legal profession, especially among female attorneys, breeds professionalism and excellence in the law.

VALUE FOR ALL

Mentoring is the passing on of legal skills that promotes professional development and ensures that our clients will have the most effective counsel, and, importantly, it offers multi-faceted value to those involved—from providing the crucial technical knowledge and skills young attorneys learn from mentors, to offering a combination of professional and personal enrichment, and the socialization and support needed to facilitate success in the legal profession. Perhaps the mentor-mentee relationship’s greatest value is that it fosters the development of crucial skills to navigate difficult personali-



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ties in a world where civility is sometimes lost. In an era where work-life balance has become a priority, mentoring teaches lawyers the art of balancing the living of life with the practice of law and greatly enhances a new attorney’s chances for success.

Clearly, mentoring is much more than teaching legal concepts; it is coaching and counseling. It’s about the qualitative, subjective parts of the profession—dealing with frustration, receiving constructive criticism, handling difficult counsel, dealing with a male-dominated professional world, behaving with civility, and ultimately, being given the tools to be a future rainmaker and firm leader.

Effective mentoring is also the key to a law firm’s future well-being. The associates of today are the firm’s principals and partners of tomorrow. For a law firm, mentoring the younger generation helps ensure its vitality and strength through the decades ahead. A good mentoring program can teach young lawyers concrete skills that will lead to their success, including how to:

- become involved in professional and civic organizations,
- enhance their professional reputations through speaking and writing,
- consider the business impact of the choices they make,

- forge and maintain strong relationships with clients through excellent service and positive social interactions.

EFFECTIVE MENTORING

The most effective mentors are active listeners and sounding boards who know how to create an environment that encourages younger lawyers to share their doubts and fears, to seek help when they are unsure of themselves, and to feel confident that they will not be judged or ridiculed, but supported and helped to analyze and work through their challenging moments. Mentors are particularly important in helping young women to navigate in a historically male-dominated profession that, despite its many advances, still seems at times to operate through an opaque set of unwritten rules that are not as obvious or transparent to women as to their male colleagues.

Incorporating an effective mentoring program in a firm is not without obstacles, but setting realistic goals and expectations can generate a successful program. The first obstacle is time, and it's essential to make a concrete time commitment to ensure that the process is effective. The firm also must be devoted to the adoption of a mentoring program and the balancing of its goals with firm profitability. The success of the program must be founded upon thoughtful matching of partners and associates who already have some common components, such as practice areas, clients or legal skillsets. The size of the firm will impact the matching process and may offer challenges to making good matches, particularly

in smaller firms where mentors and mentees are already working closely on a daily basis. For this reason, careful planning is essential to ensure that mentors and mentees meet on a regular basis. In an era where attorneys can work and be connected to the firm remotely, face-to-face contact must be planned and scheduled—and cannot be sacrificed in the face of other commitments.

LOOK BEYOND THE FIRM

Participation in a mentoring program does not have to be limited to partners and attorneys with many years of experience; it can begin at the early stage of an associate's career. While there is still much to learn, an associate's insight is incredibly valuable to those who will come after them. This mentor relationship can begin by advising women as early as high school and can be invaluable to both the mentor and mentee. At the earliest stages, mentoring can provide an opportunity for the mentees to get a firsthand look at the legal profession. Mentoring those with an interest in the law allows a platform for true, usable information to pursue a career in the legal profession not available in a guidance or career counselor's office. Young women in high school and college are driven and goal-focused; they appreciate and actively seek direction for avenues that will navigate them to a career in the legal field. Most have ideas of chosen practice areas, and while those aspirations and the mentor's area of practice may not match, it is inconsequential. Career goals are certainly fluid, changing over time,

but relationships forged through a mentoring program will have long-term benefits, even if the mentee does not ultimately pursue their original focus.

Mentoring, whether you give it that formal label or not, guarantees that a young or aspiring attorney knows there is someone who cares about their success and they are not alone in dealing with the challenges that come with our profession. Mentors help build people up, give them confidence, provide a feeling of inclusion in organizations, and collaborate on legal issues.

BETTERING THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Most of all, mentoring is a responsibility we have to the profession. Part of what we need to give back to the profession is the development of people who do excellent work, can be part of and carry on a culture of professionalism and civility. A successful mentoring experience includes revealing "whole worlds" to mentees by helping and supporting them to manage their own learning in order to maximize their professional potential, develop their skills, improve their performance, and become the attorney they want to be. In truth, if the tenants of mentoring were embraced more widely in the legal professions and more of us collectively took the time to build up others—it would have a significant and positive impact on the profession and how it is viewed externally.

For those of us who had the benefit of a great lawyer as our mentor when we were new to practice, it is an honor for us to mentor the next generation. •