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Successful Mentoring and Accountability Tips for Young Lawyers

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July 22, 2021

Having a great mentor is, perhaps, the most powerful resource that a young lawyer has in his or her arsenal – much more so than fancy offices or laptops or even tailor-made suits (though none of those are bad to have either). Great mentor/mentee relationships not only provide invaluable educational and networking opportunities for a young lawyer, but they also make practicing law manageable and enjoyable. However, as with any other relationship, a professional accountability relationship requires effort on the part of both the mentor and the mentee to reach its full potential. Below are five tips to help foster a beneficial and purposeful mentoring relationship.

Top Five Tips for a Successful Mentoring/Accountability Relationship for Young Lawyers:

1. Be the initiator with calendar appointments.

Locke Waldrop (Associate): An organized calendar makes for a happy attorney. This may not be everyone's motto, but as a color-coded calendar operator myself, it sure makes finding time to meet with my mentor much easier. Keeping calendars updated, and actually blocking off time on your calendar for scheduled meetings with your mentor, helps to keep a young attorney accountable to mentor/mentee development. Setting aside time to meet with your mentor forces the mentee to be intentional about the relationship and professional development.

Katy Furr (Shareholder): An associate who is eager to get a mentoring meeting scheduled is never going to be looked down upon. By contrast, if you are in a mentoring relationship and the mentor is routinely having to reach out or schedule mentoring meetings, then it's quite possible that the mentor will eventually view that the relationship as unimportant to the mentee. Thus, regularly requesting (formal or informal) mentoring discussions (by the mentee) shows initiative and commitment to the process and will help foster the mentoring relationship for years to come.

2. Never be afraid to ask for guidance or for a meeting.

LW: One of the most important components of a mentoring relationship is the willingness on the part of the mentee to seek and receive guidance. When learning how to practice law, the ability to have a frank conversation about a particular topic is invaluable. Young lawyers are often faced with issues of first impression or questions on how to handle a specific situation. A willingness to approach your mentor as a sounding board—and actually listening to what they say—helps young attorneys learn how to confidently navigate the practice of law and "sticky" situations. And, it fosters a sense of camaraderie, knowing that you aren't in it alone and that someone has been where you are before.

KF: Navigating the practice of law as a new lawyer is daunting. Don't be shy when it comes to asking for advice. The reality is that your mentor likely had the same question at some point in time too!

3. Come prepared to each meeting with an agenda and/or set of questions.

LW: Nothing is worse than leaving a conversation thinking: "I wish I had asked [insert question here]!" Preparing for your mentor/mentee meeting by developing a list questions to discuss helps both the mentor and the mentee cover sufficient ground while keeping the meeting both targeted and purposeful. Personally, I find that preparing a general list of topics I would like to discuss (with specific questions if specific answers are needed) provides for an open, yet structured, discussion. Leaving a meeting feeling like you had all of your questions answered makes the meeting feel productive.

KF: Thoughtfully thinking through questions or scenarios before a mentoring meeting helps guide the discussion and (just like initiating the meeting) shows strong initiative by the mentee. However, don't be so wedded to your questions and/or your agenda that you don't let natural dialogue develop. Sometimes the best conversations and advice can arise through organic conversation.

4. Use the opportunity to leverage time to obtain introductions to new contacts, both internal and external.

LW: Networking is a powerful tool. For associates, shareholders are one of the most important gateways to client development—both internally and externally. Shareholders have significant contacts with many attorneys inside and outside your law firm or organization and often know who the best person is to handle the task at hand. Similarly, never shy away from asking your mentor for opportunities to observe or get involved, as a mentor can be your greatest advocate and cheerleader.

KF: If your mentor is regularly taking time out of his or her busy day to invest in your professional growth, then your mentor will almost always be eager to make introductions and provide new networking opportunities for you. Use each mentoring opportunity to ask about a new person (internally or externally) that you should approach for a networking meeting or introduction. Mentors are also great resources to ask about professional organizations that will provide you with a meaningful return on investment for your time commitment.

5. Follow up each meeting with routine updates and check-ins.

LW: Knowing that a follow-up or check-in with your mentor is on the horizon will prevent a young lawyer from putting tasks on the back burner. As attorneys, we are faced with multiple deadlines for multiple projects for multiple clients in multiple courtrooms, so it's too easy to say: "I'll do that when I have time." However, keeping in routine contact with a mentor forces a mentee to prioritize goals developed in the mentor/mentee relationship just as if it were a court-ordered deadline for a dispositive motion. Follow-through keeps a young attorney's feet to the fire and can help the mentor monitor progress and development.

KF: Specifying next steps and identifying a next meeting date will provide you the best chance at success. Most people work better under a firm deadline, and no one wants to let down a superior. Thus, specific action items with a defined end date will prepare you for success at each future mentoring meeting.

A strong mentor/mentee relationship is vital to the development and success of any young lawyer. Taking intentional and purposeful steps to invest in the accountability relationship will yield great returns. From great mentors, great attorneys grow.