

PUBLICATION

Mentoring: Lessons Learned and New Ideas

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Baker Women has offered mentoring to the Firm's women attorneys and public policy advisors since 2006. Over the years, though, we have had to continually revise, revamp, and retool our mentoring program to meet the evolving and diverse needs of Baker Donelson's women. What we have learned through this process only reinforces what we always knew – that there is immense value in mentoring for career and leadership advancement and professional satisfaction, and that it is important to continue to offer new and innovative programs for mentoring women.

As a starting point, we have long been aware that there is a strong correlation between mentoring programs and women's advancement in law firms. For example, more than twenty years ago, the Journal of Vocational Behavior reported the results of a study entitled, "The Benefits of Mentoring for Female Lawyers," which concluded that "having a mentor appears instrumental for the career success of female protégés in terms of earnings, promotional opportunities, procedural justice, and social integration. In addition, in terms of the emotional outcomes, protégés report greater career satisfaction than non-protégés and indicate that their expectations are met to a greater degree. "We have benefited from not only having strong mentors, but also in mentoring our colleagues, and we have seen first-hand the value of mentoring relationships to the retention and promotion of women.

At Baker Donelson, we have long strived to ensure that our women lawyers and public policy advisors have multiple opportunities and options for mentoring. We periodically conduct focus groups and surveys to find out what our women need from our mentoring program, seek feedback on what is working and not working, and are always open to trying new ways of encouraging mentoring. Each year our Mentoring Committee sets goals for the year and works on new initiatives and strategies for increased engagement. Since our Mentoring Program began in 2006 with traditional one-on-one mentoring pairs, we have experimented with offering mentoring meetings within offices, mentoring programming with circles across offices, topic mentoring provided by mentors with particular expertise in certain areas, and periodic lunch groupings. We have hosted programming on how to be a better mentor and mentee. We have shared examples of and best practices from successful mentoring relationships. We have regularly shared topics for mentors and mentees to discuss. We have worked with and involved our male colleagues in many of these initiatives as well.

Our most recent innovation is to experiment with a pod or small group format for mentoring. We will be rolling out this concept over the course of 2024. Each pod will have about five or six members, and one of the members will be responsible for scheduling meetings. The membership of each pod will be diverse, with a range of more senior and junior members. We will offer the pod concept to existing pairs and give those pairs the option of continuing as a pair or joining a mentoring pod. Once we begin the roll-out of mentoring pods, we will host a short video conference to review the new format and share best practices on how each person can engage with their pod. We will invite all women attorneys and advisers to attend this introductory program, so that those who have not opted into the pods can have an opportunity to join a pod and Mentoring Program. Our Baker Women's Manager will help each pod get started and make sure they have their recurring calls scheduled. On a going-forward basis, we will send out topics of conversation each month to facilitate productive meetings and discussions.

We are excited to launch this new mentoring concept. Based on our research, we are optimistic that it will provide new opportunities for multifaceted mentoring and learning from colleagues at different levels of experience. Too often mentoring relationships can be hit-or-miss if one or both of the members of a mentoring pair lose interest, are too busy, or simply fail to schedule mentoring sessions. With a pod, there are more avenues of accountability, sources of feedback, and opportunities for connection. Our goal is to create new, more dynamic, and supportive mentoring relationships. Ideally, our pods will offer informal networks to help with the retention and advancement of women. Each pod will explore its members' specific challenges and goals, and each session should generate actionable feedback and concrete ideas.

How will we measure success and determine if the mentoring pods are working? Our Mentoring Committee will monitor the pods' progress and make changes as needed. Since we already conduct periodic surveys of our women mentors and mentees, we can incorporate questions regarding mentoring pods into that process. Additionally, we can reach out directly to our pods and individual members. We want to hear about challenges, what is working well, and what is not working well. And if it does not work well, we are committed to trying something else. As we have found, only by being open to change and responsive to feedback – both positive and constructive – can we build a truly successful mentoring program.