

January/February 2011

The Bench

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN INNS OF COURT



Mentoring



AMERICAN
INNS of COURT

Mentoring Outside the Box:

Improving Law Firm Formal and
Informal Mentoring Programs

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This article, used with permission from the American Inns of Court and Nicole C.H. Massey, Esquire, was originally published in the January/February 2011 issue of *The Bench*, a bi-monthly publication of the American Inns of Court. Inquiries about this article should be directed to the American Inns of Court

Mentoring is a hot topic for law firms these days, particularly during recruiting season. Law firms often tout their formal mentoring programs when wooing potential new associates; they claim that the programs provide the key to integrating new lawyers into the firm and facilitating professional development. Firm recruiting websites encourage grand visions that, through such formal mentoring programs, new associates are swiftly introduced to grandfatherly (or, perhaps, grandmotherly) senior partners who then gently guide the associates' careers. Associate mentors, glossy recruiting brochures imply, help new associates learn the fundamentals of law practice, introduce them to countless colleagues, and share in their mentees' pain and triumphs.

The realities, at least from the perspective of young lawyers like myself and my friends, are often quite different. While formal mentoring programs help some associates develop a positive and lasting professional relationship with a senior attorney at their firms, the experiences of many others are far less ideal. For example, some friends of mine at other firms were brusquely introduced to their "mentor" on their first day of work, never to hear from that person again. Others went out to lunch with their mentor in the first week of the job, but quickly surmised that the two did not have much in common. Despite the best of intentions on both sides, within a year, most of these associates only speak with their "mentor" at occasional firm events, and even then only make small talk.

Such results aren't terribly surprising. Law firms attempting to jump start a mentoring relationship are in a difficult situation. Most formal mentoring programs are led by attorneys, like the members of the American Inns of Court, who appreciate and value mentoring relationships and genuinely desire a supportive firm culture for their firm's new associates. These attorneys and their firms are leading the proverbial horses to water through formal mentoring programs, but how can they make them drink?

I believe that many law firms make two fundamental mistakes with their formal mentoring programs. The first is that they assume that if they choose the right group of mentors, those mentors can be of service to most any associate. In my view, that assumption is wrong, and formal mentoring programs can be improved dramatically by simply paying more attention to the mentor-mentee pairing process. The second fundamental mistake that many law firms make is assuming that

mentoring programs are sufficient to meet the professional development needs of young associates. While formal mentoring programs can prove very effective in some circumstances, even the best formal mentoring program does not equate to effective firm-wide mentoring, much less universal success in professional development.

This article will discuss a few suggestions for how the members of the American Inns of Court might tweak their firms' formal mentoring programs to make them more successful. These suggestions are hardly scientific; they are gleaned from contrasting my own positive mentoring experiences at my law firm with some of my friends' less positive experiences at theirs, as well as my experiences participating in other not-for-profit mentoring programs for children. The article also encourages the group's members to recognize the limits of formal mentoring programs, and encourages attorneys to develop a "mentoring culture" at their firms that can pick up where a formal mentoring program often leaves off.

Maximizing formal mentoring programs

One of the easiest ways that a firm can cultivate more meaningful mentoring relationships is by improving the structure of its existing formal mentoring program. First and foremost, the mentoring relationship should be recognized for what it is: a beneficial partnership, but one that requires effort on both sides to be successful. Many firms make participation in the mentoring program obligatory not only for the new associates, but also for the associate and partner mentors assigned to them. A forced mentoring relationship—particularly one with no direction—is almost sure to fail. Indeed, one not-for-profit mentoring organization in which I participated required mentees to sign a commitment to spend the time necessary to develop a relationship with their mentor before they could be assigned one. This emphasized to both the mentor and the mentee that a successful relationship might be rewarding, but it would take effort to reap those rewards. While formal law firm mentoring programs might not go to that extreme, they could be signifi-

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cantly improved if both mentors and mentees were informed that the relationship would likely require work on their part, and permitted them to opt out of the program if they so desired.

Once the program is filled only with willing participants, the relationship is much more likely to progress well if both parties have an idea of what they want and expect from the other. A fundamental problem with many formal law firm mentoring programs is that neither the mentor nor the mentee is entirely sure what to expect (or even what they want) from the program. Simply asking each party to respond to a brief questionnaire stating their goals and expectations for the mentoring relationship could prompt both parties to solidify their goals and help them to work toward those goals more effectively.

The success of a formal mentoring program also rises and falls on the care taken to pair the mentors and mentees. Anecdotal evidence indicates to me that formal mentor pairings are somewhat akin to a blind date. Some lead to a long and fulfilling partnership, while others invoke little interest from either party involved. And, just like a matchmaker, law firms can maximize the chances of a successful mentoring relationship by carefully considering the personalities, goals, and interests of both the mentors and the mentees before pairing them together. Particularly when a firm carefully matches new associates with their mentor counterparts, formal mentoring programs can serve as a useful springboard into firm life for new associates.

Instead of viewing the mentoring program as a matchmaking process of sorts, law firms often view them as more of a lottery. They assume that if they just choose the right attorneys to be mentors, those attorneys will match well with most any new associate. That attitude is the surest way to create an ineffective program. It fails to take into account that mentoring is, at bottom, a form of friendship. It also fails to take into account that a mentoring relationship in which the parties have mismatched goals and expectations will not be satisfying for either party. Perhaps as important, it fails to consider that when the mentor gains substantially from the mentoring relationship (for example, by gaining a trusted confidante, a protégé who can reliably handle the mentor's excess workload, or an information source about associate morale), the mentor becomes much more willing to invest the time and effort that it takes to develop a true mentoring relationship.

Therefore, law firms can improve their formal mentoring programs by carefully playing "mentor matchmaker." Ideally, law firms would consider, among other things:

- **The personalities of the mentor and mentee.** Do they share similar interests outside of work? Do they have a similar sense of humor? Are they both social (or do they both tend to keep to themselves)? Two perfectly nice people do not always strike up a close friendship. If the mentor and mentee would not be interested in spending any time together outside of the office building, they likely won't want to invest the time and energy to keep in touch with one another inside of the building, either.
- **The professional goals of the mentor and mentee.** Given that a law firm mentoring program is designed primarily to assist new associates in achieving their professional goals, many law firms wrongfully assume that labeling any relationship a "mentorship" always helps individuals accomplish something. That could not be further from the truth if the two parties are mismatch. Before pairing a mentor and mentee, a law firm should carefully consider what each wants out of the mentoring relationship and consider whether those goals are consistent. For example, if both primarily want to use the program as a way to learn about other parts of the law firm, then matching up two people from different practice groups makes sense. But, if the new associate wants a conduit to plum work assignments and the mentor wants a unique opportunity to train a new protégé, an assignment within the same practice group seems necessary.
- **The time commitment each party is interested in making.** Just like any other relationship, the best mentoring relationships take some time and effort to develop. Oftentimes, matchups in formal mentoring programs fail because the parties have very different expectations about the time commitment of the relationship. An associate who only wants to ask a simple question every now and again, or obtain a solid letter of recommendation, might pair wonderfully with a particularly busy and well-respected senior partner. By contrast, an associate who anticipates more substantive feedback might prefer a younger partner who actively enjoys imparting the lessons he learned over the years.

Even with the greatest care in pairing, not every mentor/mentee relationship will blossom. One office in my firm came up with a creative way to help solve this problem. Although the goal of my firm's formal mentoring program is to give new associates a mentor "for life," both parties are approached after the first year of the relationship and asked if, due to intervening circumstances, they would prefer to continue the relationship

or be assigned to a different attorney. This gives both parties a second chance to use the formal mentoring program's "matchmaking" services to find a good mentoring match.

If two parties are well-paired (whether on the first or second try) formal mentoring programs are much more likely to result in a meaningful mentoring relationship. That, in turn, could greatly increase the effectiveness of the formal mentoring program for the mentors, the mentees, and the law firm.

The limits of formal mentoring programs and developing a mentoring culture

A carefully planned formal mentoring program is the start of a positive mentoring culture at the firm. But, even the best matchmaker can't make every blind date successful. It is therefore critical that firm attorneys view the mentoring program as the start, and not the finish, of a young associate's professional development.

With a few notable exceptions, my friends from law school have long since given up on a meaningful mentoring relationship with the assigned mentors they received through their law firms' formal mentoring programs. Some of those attorneys now feel a bit isolated and abandoned, because their firms have no other support systems for professional development. Yet, others have since established informal mentoring relationships with senior attorneys at their firms. These informal mentoring relationships are often deeper, more beneficial, and longer-lasting than those set up through formal mentoring process. And they are critical to establishing true mentoring culture at any law firm.

While the common view is that informal mentoring relationships develop organically, the reality is that in a busy law firm, both parties typically make some sacrifices if such relationships are to thrive. They are the product of a thousand small decisions by the firm's attorneys—decisions that are oftentimes inconvenient in the short term. For example, attorneys who excel at writing often find it easier to simply re-write a brief than to teach a younger associate how to improve his writing. An informal mentor might choose to take the time to explain the process he uses to edit and improve a brief, allow the younger attorney to apply that process and submit another draft, and so on until the associate himself has drafted quality work product. An informal mentor takes the time to talk through her mentee's problem, even when she would prefer to be finalizing that brief due tomorrow. She helps guide work

assignments to her mentee, and connects her mentee with the other attorneys at the firm who share the mentee's professional interests. These things take time. An informal mentee stays at work late because he is loath to disappoint the person who has been so helpful in navigating firm politics recently. He steps up when his mentor asks for help recruiting a promising new lateral candidate, even if it means attending a dinner when he'd rather be doing something else. The list goes on.

These decisions are sometimes painful in the short term, but over time, they pay enormous dividends for both parties. For example, investing in an associate's writing skills eventually allows the senior attorneys to spend less time editing and re-writing the associate's work. The associate, in turn, develops marketable skills (writing and editing) and generally becomes a more competent attorney. Moreover, many associates who receive such valuable feedback appreciate it and feel that they are gaining valuable experience at their law firms. Thus, associate morale and retention improves. It's a win-win situation for the attorneys and the firms, not to mention the clients.

Law firms on a broad institutional level cannot force a culture where its attorneys, as a general rule, follow through on a mentoring commitment. In essence, it requires individual attorneys to step up and voluntarily contribute their time to the betterment of their colleagues and their institution. Law firms can, at best, foster that culture. For example, management could make clear its view that mentoring is valuable, and explain why. The message might be particularly effective if mentoring is tied closely to a quality of the firm in which most of its attorneys take pride (for example, teamwork or excellence in client service). Similarly, senior attorneys and partners might be more willing to take the time to mentor if firms make clear that attention to younger attorneys' professional development—and its concomitant time commitments—are one of the firm's expectations to obtain and retain partnership. This message could be reinforced by valuing time spent mentoring similarly to time spent in other aspects of firm service, such as serving on a firm committee.

There is no "one size fits all" solution to foster informal mentoring at every law firm. However, simply recognizing that mentoring does not end at the firm's formal mentoring program is an important start. ♦

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