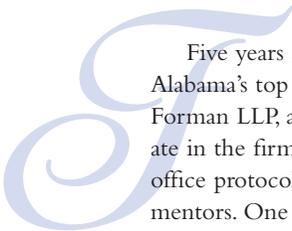




Bend an Ear, Straighten Your Path

THE PROACTIVE MENTEE

By Ann Farmer



Five years ago, Janine Smith joined one of Alabama's top corporate law offices, Burr & Forman LLP, as the second black female associate in the firm's history. In accordance with office protocol, she was soon matched with two mentors. One was with the firm's only other black female associate, which struck her as somewhat unnecessary. "We were going to have a natural bond anyway," says 30-year-old Smith, who was already plying her female associate on company etiquette, such as whether it was okay to wear open-toed shoes.

The second pairing was to her practice group leader. Because Smith was spending 10 hours a day under his tutelage, she didn't see the point of it. "I went in and said, 'I want to be reassigned,'" Smith recalls. "I said, 'I want a 60-year-old white male partner. Someone who, besides sitting down and talking to me as an associate, I would not otherwise associate with.'"

They willingly agreed, placing her under the wing of one of the firm's senior partners. "But I think my request forced them to look at their mentoring process and consider its purpose," Smith says. "If the purpose is to help a young lawyer shape and define her career, you should assign her to other lawyers who can do that."

Embracing Differences

Not all neophyte lawyers, or even highly experienced ones, have the guts to go after the mentor of their dreams. Nor do all law firms roll out the welcome mat with an official mentoring program. Some lawyers find the guidance and support they need by instinctively reaching out to a particular colleague they respect and feel comfortable with. But regardless of how anyone procures a mentor, the most important thing is to make good use of her or his insight and availability.

As the first in her family to pursue a law degree, Smith recognized that she lacked certain advantages of her peers and colleagues. “A lot of associates know each other because they grew up in the same blueblood background and went to the same country clubs,” says Smith, whose family never belonged to any country club establishments, which are where, she says, important business deals commonly take place in her community. “Sometimes, the disadvantage is that you don’t have the history to support your access to clients,” she adds.

She viewed the company’s mentoring policy as a golden opportunity to improve her situation, and she sought her experienced mentor’s advice on how to get clients and other important matters that a first-generation lawyer needs to learn. “He felt proud that I had sought him out,” says Smith, describing, for instance, how he recommended her for a position on the board of directors of a local girls’ organization.

Although the mentoring eventually ran its course, when the *Birmingham Business Journal* recently honored Smith as one of the city’s “Top 40 Under 40 Professionals,” her mentor, who is now the managing partner of the firm, attended the awards ceremony.

Benefits of Shared Similarities

But whereas Smith benefited from a mentor whose background differed radically from hers, Latino attorney Griselda Vega, 31, discovered that her first true mentor mirrored herself in many ways.

Vega underwent culture shock after arriving in Yakima, Washington, five years ago to assume her first post-graduate position as a litigation lawyer for Columbia Legal Services, a nonprofit legal assistance organization. For one thing, the rural community was a far cry from the diverse, bustling urban environment of Chicago, where she grew up. Being of Mexican descent, Vega was

relieved to encounter another Latino attorney, Kevin Diaz, in her office with whom she shared similar interests, goals, and work ethics.

“It was great to meet an experienced attorney and relate to issues of being an attorney of color. There are so few of us,” she says, describing, by contrast, the abundance of Anglo-Saxon, middle-aged male lawyers that worked in and out of the Yakima County Courthouse, who didn’t always readily acknowledge her as their peer. “A lot of times,” she recalls, “I was asked if I was the client or an interpreter. It’s

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emotionally and mentally tough [to face] that whole boy’s club thing of not being accepted or welcomed very easily.”

She says Diaz and her supervising attorney helped her cope with unpleasant or racially tense situations and other work-related issues, such as determining the best strategy for winning a case. But because her supervising attorney had more power and control over her position, and was ultimately responsible for evaluating her, Vega found herself confiding more readily to Diaz, with whom it was easier to discuss office politics, for one thing.

“You’re learning to be an attorney, but you’re also learning how to work with others and you’re learning about yourself,” she says, describing how Diaz would be very candid with his advice. “He could say, ‘Yea, he or she tends to be that way, so

this is how we’ve dealt with it before.’ Or he might say, ‘You’re taking it a little too personally.’ Or he might say, ‘Call her; she’s someone you can talk to about how you feel.’”

Although Vega eventually returned to Chicago, she says a result of her constructive relationship with Diaz is that she continues to seek out mentors. “After that, I realized that these people exist. They may not be knocking on my door, but I can go to them and ask for help,” says Diaz, explaining that because she’s currently the sole Spanish-speaking (and sole Latino) and youngest lawyer in her firm, she tends to network more outside it, with organizations like the ABA Young Lawyers Division and a local Latino bar association. “We’re like a giant mentoring group for each other,” she says.

Building Trust

Mentors come in all shapes and personalities, but everyone seems to agree that trust is necessary to fostering a positive mentor-mentee relationship. Even before she was hired last year by Hahn & Hahn LLP, one of the largest and oldest general practice firms in Southern California, Haegyung Cho, 25, hit it off with the firm’s hiring partner, Laura Farber, who later became her assigned mentor.

“There was no mincing of words,” says Cho, describing how Farber made it very clear during initial interviews what the firm’s policies were, how people related to each other in the company, and what degree of work stress she was looking at. “So I knew what I was getting into.”

Since joining the firm, Cho has been trying her hand at various practice areas, including estate planning, family law, civil litigation, and corporate work. “So I can figure out what I am interested in,” she says, explaining that Farber not only provides guidance, but she’s also regulating her workload for the time being.

Things to Consider When Seeking Mentors

- How accessible are they?
- Do they make good role models?
- Are they candid, honest, and trustworthy?
- How comfortable do you feel around them?
- Do they offer insightful advice?
- Are they happy in their job?
- How important is it that you share common background, goals, or experiences?
- How can they help you shape your career?

“If she thinks I have too much on my plate, she’ll say to the others that I have too much.”

Most importantly, Cho recognizes that she has an open-door policy with Farber. “The number one thing is knowing that I’m important to my mentor,” Cho says. “These mentors have full-time jobs and full-time families, but I know that Laura will drop everything and listen to me. Knowing that I’m a priority to her makes me go to her even more.”

The More, the Merrier

Some lawyers are lucky enough to find a small village of mentors. Just ask Carole Angel, 25, a staff attorney for the Immigrant Women Program at Legal Momentum in Washington, D.C. “There are three strong female attorneys in my program who are teaching me the ropes,” says Angel, describing, for instance, how she thrived under their recent guidance while working

on the Violence Against Women Act 2005 Reauthorization.

“They pushed me to work hard and come up with concrete results. They helped me prioritize my work,” says Angel, adding that another important way her mentors mentor is by demonstrating their trust and confidence in her ideas and abilities. “They invite me into conversations. We sit together and do strategy,” Angel says. “The fact that they’ll take my opinion in the same way as someone with 10 years’ more experience means I’m really being guided.”

Although she’s had male mentors, Angel identifies closer to female mentors and describes her mother as her first. When Angel was a young child, her mother, a social worker, would read *The Three Little Pigs* to her. When her mom reached the end of the story, Angel fondly recalls, “she would say the pigs were homeless and we have to help them

get social services.” When Angel was older, her mother took her to volunteer at soup kitchens and battered women’s shelters.

“I could really see myself in her role as a successful female that was also successful at being compassionate and giving back to the community,” says Angel, adding that she’s similarly inspired by her three mentors at Legal Momentum. “They fuel my passion for the issues.”

Role Model vs. Hand Holder

Likewise, Cara Fineman, 32, who works for the Washington, D.C.-based Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, naturally gravitated toward her female supervisor, whose mentoring style was a bit hands-off, but who was always there in a pinch. “She always had your back,” says Fineman, describing an early NAACP case in which her clients became unhappy with the settlement. “It turned into a huge mess and embarrassment for the organization,” says Fineman, who says her supervisor stuck by her and helped her work it out. “When you have that kind of support within an organization, it empowers you to do what needs to be done.”

Fineman looked up to her in other ways, too. “She was doing the kind of work I aspired to do. She was really good at what she did. She was also a single mom,” says Fineman, who appreciated how her supervisor made her son a big priority. “A lot of female lawyers have trouble finding that balance. I looked at her to show me how to bring balance in life.”

When her supervisor left and a male supervisor replaced her, Fineman was concerned that she would have less in common with him. In fact, it was a little awkward, initially. He’d want to talk sports and kept a football in his office. Ultimately, though, Fineman learned a lot from him because he took the time to walk her through things. “He was more of a hand holder,

Do Your Part

- Know what you’re looking for in a mentor.
- Be respectful of your mentor’s time.
- Come to meetings prepared.
- Keep an open mind.
- Express your gratitude.
- Stay in touch after the mentor period has ended.

whereas she was more of a role model,” says Fineman, acknowledging that both fit her criteria of a mentor: “Someone I can look at and see where I would want to be in 10 years.”

Mentoring for Solos

But what happens when there is no one in the office to turn to? Ellen Tanowitz, 35, worked in various Massachusetts civil litigation law firms until February 2002, when she gave birth to her youngest son and her small firm couldn’t accommodate her desire for a part-time schedule. Determined to find more time for her children, she recalls saying to herself, “I can do this,” and went out on her own.

Even though she had never nurtured a significant mentor relationship, “the first thing I did was get on the phone and call a whole bunch of people I know who are solos and ask them for advice,” says Tanowitz, describing how she even called two women who’d been opposing counsel on cases. They passed her some useful tips, like where to get malpractice insurance, and one gave her a contact to call. “I said, ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you,’” recalls Tanowitz, who was acutely aware that they could have been billing clients instead of taking time to help her. One of them told her, “You’ll do it for someone else someday,” she recalls.

With no one at home to bounce ideas off, Tanowitz found a few websites, including the ABA’s Solosez, where solo practitioners can share and obtain information on a wide range of legal questions and technology problems. They also have an area for online water cooler chat. “With the Internet, there are more resources than ever that allow us to connect to each other,” says Tanowitz, who remains mindful of their offerings. “I use them with a grain of salt because I don’t know who’s doing the posting.”

Over time, she’s also formed a

mutually respectful relationship with another freelance lawyer who suits her needs for a mentor-confidant. “I might call him if I have a private client who’s being a blanket-blank, and I don’t know what

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to do with him,” she says. “Or maybe I don’t know how much of a retainer to take on a job. I’ll say, ‘Can I bend your ear for five minutes?’ He calls me, too.”

Looking Outside Your Firm

The law profession being highly competitive, many lawyers are understandably afraid of sounding ignorant or appearing vulnerable around their mentor, especially if he or she is also their boss. Neha Sampat, 30, a former lawyer who became the director for student services at the Golden Gate University School of Law in San Francisco, where she established a mentor program, says, for instance, “I’ve worked with a lot of people who could give me insight, but I didn’t feel comfortable asking questions.”

When she was first thinking of leaving her law practice, she sought

mentors outside her firm who could provide her guidance without a conflict of interest. There was one in particular. “She really listened to my heart and showed enthusiasm for me,” says Sampat, explaining how advice from someone who is truly happy in their job can sometimes resonate more deeply.

Liz Lopez, a former Massachusetts prosecutor who wanted to segue into a more lucrative area of law, also sought help outside her law office; she cold-called a prominent Hispanic lawyer after seeing him on a television talk show and says he’s been providing support and advice ever since. “I can call him anytime and ask for five minutes,” Lopez says.

But whether a mentor is located in the office next door or works in another state, Sampat recommends preparing ahead of time. “If you go in with an idea about what you want, you get more out of it,” she says, explaining that it’s also important to ask questions in a relaxed fashion. “If you can have a conversation about what you did this weekend, it’s a great building block.”

She also suggests showing gratitude. “Good mentors put their heart into what they’re doing. They care about you,” she says, explaining that she’s a big proponent of sending thank-you notes. “Don’t take it for granted. Show your appreciation.”

Ann Farmer is a freelance journalist who lives in New York City. She works as a breaking news reporter for the New York Times, and writes about television, law, dance, women’s issues and other topics for EMMY Magazine, Court TV, Dance Magazine, Women’s eNews, and others.

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