

The Right Mentor Matters Law Firm Associates Speak Up

By Hope Viner Samborn

An open, relaxed exchange might not seem like the norm for a partner-associate encounter, but if the two have a great mentor-mentee relationship, that's exactly what's happening. And many female law firm associates seem to crave these relationships, especially if they involve a female partner who will talk to them about balancing a career and a family and how to develop clients.

Monica Ryden, a first-year commercial litigation and employment associate at Fennemore Craig in Phoenix, has had six mentors, two each year, since she first came to the firm as a summer writing associate. She is excited because next year she will help decide who her mentor will be. "It would be nice to have someone who has young kids," she explains. "I know who I want to model my practice after and who has a good work-life balance."

"There are a few women who have breastfed and have young kids at home," Ryden adds. "Talking to them is different from talking to my male mentor."

At Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, LLP, in New York, female associates are paired with multiple mentors. Female associates are linked with female partners as part of the firm's women's initiative.

Career Development Focus

Shuba Satyaprasad, a fifth-year attorney in the financial restructuring group, is being mentored by a female partner in that group. "We speak regularly about goals for the year and the next steps I need to achieve for the year," Satyaprasad says.

The focus of this initiative is career development rather than client-specific issues. These partners help ensure that the associates receive the type of experiences that will help them advance at the firm. Satyaprasad's mentor suggested that she complete a plan and disclosure statement on her own, and the mentor ensured she got that opportunity. "Getting that experience put me one step ahead of the game," she explains.

Satyaprasad's mentor also takes her to events at different community organizations to introduce her to

clients and ensures that she has client contact.

Having a woman mentor is very beneficial. "There are issues that women face in the workplace that are unique," Satyaprasad says. She adds that women partners often have dealt with these issues and can discuss them with mentees.

"The most important discussions have been about career goals and managing the whole motherhood and practicing law," Satyaprasad says of her mentor talks. "I have a son at home, and I'm pregnant. Speaking with my mentor about my career goals while I am mixing in maternity leave and talking about part-time policy—those are things I've been able to speak about openly," she explains.

Having access to a woman's perspective may make the difference in retaining associates. "The importance of having a women's mentoring process is making sure that women have support at higher levels, making sure they can bounce more personal issues off [someone like them], and making sure firms maintain the best and the brightest," Satyaprasad says.

Michelle R. Heikka, a third-year commercial litigation associate at Dickinson Wright PLLC in Detroit, agrees. Heikka and her mentor were on maternity leave at the same time, but under very different circumstances. Heikka adopted a baby with only about two weeks' notice and had to tell her mentor she wanted to take a leave.

“That was a stressful situation,” Heikka recalls. “I knew I was going to leave a lot of people in the lurch, and I didn’t know how to handle it. It was great to have people chaperone me through the process.”

“I went to my mentor just before the baby arrived when I had too much work,” she adds. Heikka’s mentor and an unofficial mentor helped redistribute her work.

A Trusted Advocate

Women also may have a different rapport with the associates. One of Ryden’s formal mentors was a young woman who continues to help her at the firm. “She always makes a point of talking to me about something that is entirely not work related—whether it is my son, my jewelry, or something fun that she is doing this weekend or I’m doing. It doesn’t always need to be about business. She wants to know about me. That makes people warm up to her.”

Mentees appreciate mentors who have an open-door policy. “I go to lunch quite often with my senior mentor,” Heikka says. “If I have an issue, I walk right into her office and say, ‘I need some mentoring.’”

Open communication and trust are essential. Mentees must be able to tell mentors when they are in trouble or buried with work.

“They will sit down with me, and maybe it is just a matter of organization or maybe it is something that I need not worry about at all,” Ryden says.

The best mentors ensure that mentees work with enough people to facilitate their careers, and they troubleshoot if an associate is having a problem or needs to be redirected to a different practice group or partner. Mentees also appreciate when mentors ensure that they have work even during slow holiday times.

“The biggest benefit to me is that you instantly feel like you have someone,” says Andrea Halverson, a fourth-year associate at Vinson and

Elkins in Washington, D.C. “You have a champion. You have someone who cares about your transition and your success at the firm.”

A mentor is someone to help you navigate the firm and “to ask the big silly questions to,” Halverson adds.

Another good thing mentors can do is introduce mentees to different people at the firm. They also can be a great resource if they explain office politics and lawyers’ personal quirks, Halverson notes.

Good mentors allow the relationships to evolve. In the beginning, mentors help new associates

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learn the ins and outs of a law firm such as how to write a billing entry or how to maximize office efficiency. As the associates become more senior, the discussions might turn to marketing and career development.

For Soñá Garcia, a second-year litigation associate at Vinson and Elkins in Dallas, her mentor helped her revise her web biography.

Formal vs. Informal Relationships

Informal mentoring relationships develop from formal relationships. “The ones that really work are these informal mentoring relationships that grow out of mutual admiration,” Garcia says. “A partner sees something in a young associate that they recognize and they take them under their wings.”

But she admits the formal mentoring process serves a good purpose. “It is kind of like working with your parents,” Garcia points out.

“You know they have to like you, and then you realize that they do like you and you can ask for advice from them and ask them who else you should talk to.”

Heikka and other mentees are not afraid of asking any questions—even if they seem silly. “If you just sit and turn your wheels by yourself, you are missing out on building that relationship and missing out on that knowledge,” Heikka says.

But if popping into a mentor’s office isn’t an option, a monthly lunch date is usually required at most firms, and it is important especially if a mentor is busy or out of the office a lot. To ensure a productive meeting, mentees should prepare a list of questions and an agenda.

If an associate has an often-absent partner mentor, it is great to be paired with a senior associate mentor who is more available. Associate mentors provide mentees with practical advice such as partner preferences regarding motions, legal documents, and court appearances. They also can offer sample motions or correspondence and will help mentees avoid trouble.

And sometimes they can relate to mentees better than partner mentors.

“My associate mentor has been practicing for four or five years. She is in the swing of things, but she is not so far removed that she has forgotten how difficult first projects are,” Ryden says.

Mid-level associate mentors, however, seem to be in short supply at some firms. “Incoming classes tend to be large, but as you go up the mid-level and senior-level associate classes, they are small,” Garcia says.

Mentors should direct mentees to opportunities both within a law firm and outside a firm.

For Ryden, one of her mentors knew she had an interest in publish-

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alums, and they first meet one another at a fall kick-off cocktail party sponsored by a local law firm.

“Because it’s off-campus, the atmosphere is very relaxed and people are very approachable,” Fairley says. Three more events are scheduled—one per quarter—to provide the mentee and mentor additional opportunities to get together. In the past year, the group sponsored an informal breakfast at a law firm, an evening at the theater, and small group luncheons around town—some featuring career panels.

“For the vast majority of people, the relationship goes on well past the first year,” says Fairley, who was in business for 19 years before entering law school. “I support this program because my professional experience helped me realize how very important mentoring is to a woman’s succeeding.”

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, has a program that pairs female students with women from the local women’s bar association. About 50 lawyers and 50 first-year students are participating in the two-year-old program. “We hold a fall kick-off event,” says Amanda Schlager, a third-year student and vice president for mentorship of the Women Law Students’ Association. “After that, it’s up to them to get together.”

While the program is not meant “to be a job-fishing tool,” lawyers invariably help students on their job searches by suggesting options they might otherwise have overlooked.

“The primary benefit is talking to women in practice, many of whom have moved here from major cities to enjoy a better quality of life,” Schlager says. “These are really fascinating women. The career advice is just icing on the cake.”

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ing. She asked Ryden to coauthor an article for a local bar association—an employment law update. Ryden was able to do that at her own pace, which was important because she has a small child. “It is easier to write an article on my own time,” Ryden says. “They are helping me to do things in small ways without making me feel overwhelmed.”

Female
networking is
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Another mentor introduced Ryden, a Mexican-American, to the Arizona Women Lawyers Association and Los Abogados, the county’s Hispanic bar association.

Vinson and Elkins hires outside consultants as part of its women’s initiative. Consultants provide additional mentoring opportunities for young associates such as Garcia. “The goal is to get women attorneys to recognize what their contribution is to the firm,” Garcia says. “It has changed how I talk about myself at work. The impression you make counts every day.”

Garcia says she is surrounded by successful and bright people. “Being competent isn’t enough. We need to talk about ourselves in terms of our expertise,” she explains. “That has really resonated with me. You don’t have to wait to be a 10- to 15-year trial lawyer to be an expert. You may not have won cases, but you have been on teams that have won cases.”

Garcia learned to tout her role

on that team and put the best spin on it. “If you can publicize that, it will come back to you and you will get the kind of recognition you want,” she points out. “You won’t be toiling away in your office unnoticed.”

Extracurricular Activities

Detroit’s Dickinson Wright hosts special events to promote the mentor-mentee pairings and promote client relationships. One night the mentor pairs went to an adult game spot—Dave and Buster’s. “It’s kind of like a carnival,” Heikka says. Lawyers were placed on teams, and mentors and mentees were paired together to play crazy games. “It was a great way to see each other in a very different light. It was a very relaxed atmosphere.”

Dickinson also established the DW Women’s Network to give associates other opportunities to network with partners. It is based on the idea that female networking is different from male networking.

One such gathering focused on allowing women associates to network with female clients and partners. Last year, the theme of the evening was life coaching. Activities included yoga, massage, hair and makeup tips, organizational strategies, and other pointers for managing life. This year, the activity will be a Creative Connections Network—an evening of shopping with various vendors.

“Mentoring activities have allowed my practice to flourish because there is a whole network of female partners I can go to with anything,” Heikka says. “With that comfort zone, I can be relaxed and focused on my work.”

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