

Firms Create Programs Mentors and Mentees Can Sink Their Teeth Into

By Hope Viner Samborn

When Atlanta lawyer Heather M. Howard needed to know whether she should double-space a document or how many hours she was expected to work, she had a firm-designated senior associate to ask. For other questions, she was paired with a partner.

King & Spalding created both matches as part of its one-year Link program—a type of mentoring designed specifically to acclimate new associates to the firm.

“It is comforting that you have someone to go to at both the associate and the partner level,” Howard says. “Otherwise, you may not know who to go to with those questions.”

Other firms have created similar mentoring programs that match senior associates with new associates.

At Foley & Lardner LLP, new associates are paired for three years with either a senior associate, called a senior counsel, or a partner.

“What we have discovered is that the senior counsel are some of the best mentors because they are closer in age and they are up for partner,” says Susan Schoenfeld, Foley’s professional development director, based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

A senior counsel “is kind of like a buddy,” explains Schoenfeld, noting that associates feel most comfortable asking other associates, even senior ones, mundane questions.

Lisa Keyes, King & Spalding’s professional development partner, agrees. New associates ask senior

associates questions such as “What do people really wear on casual Fridays or to holiday parties?” They also ask about deadlines, assignment conflicts, and who really goes to firm meetings. “These things you learn the hard way,” Keyes notes. “[But now new associates have] a resource to answer the silly questions.”

At Downey Brand LLP in Sacramento, California, new lawyers are paired with senior associates for one year and partners for the next year. Associates can ask senior associates the “first-year kinds of questions” and the seniors can “warn about the grumpy guy down the hall,” says Steven Saxton, Downey’s professional development partner.

A Triad Approach

King & Spalding has taken the senior associate mentor concept one step further. For its Link program, it forms between 100 and 125 triads each year. Each is composed of a senior associate, a partner, and a new associate. When a new associate is identified, the senior associate is selected. That individual chooses the partner for the triad.

Robert B. Friedman, a senior associate at King & Spalding in Atlanta, was asked to be a link for a first-year associate and selected the partner “link” to join the two. “The senior associate link knows the first-year lawyer better [than firm administrators] and will have a better sense of who the right partner is,” he says. “Letting the senior associate pick the partner leads to better matches.”

And the partner is flattered to be asked by the associate instead of the administrative staff, Keyes says.

In the past, matches were not as well done, Friedman says. “They just didn’t know as much about the team dynamics in each practice group.”

The triad has a benefit for the senior associate. “This creates more opportunities for us to interact on a social basis,” he says. “It builds on the good foundation we already had.”

About three years ago, King & Spalding revamped its Link program and increased the time that the triad exists from six months to one year. Firm officials hesitate to call it a mentoring program because that term implies the development of long-term relationships. Long-term relationships are not the goal of the Link program, but sometimes they result.

Oversight Is Key

Oversight is one of the keys to a successful mentoring program. At 120-lawyer Downey, Saxton meets regularly with mentors and mentees. He is credited 100 billable hours for his work coordinating the mentor program.

Saxton may meet with mentees in groups of two or three people. “All of the associates have varied experience and different perspectives on what works best,” he says. “I’ve received a lot of useful information.”

He also meets with the practice leaders of the six practice groups and sends reminders to mentors and mentees to get involved.

After the two years, natural relationships often will develop, Saxton says. But “the formal program is a safety net when a natural relationship doesn’t take place,” he explains.

Change or the opportunity for it is important for success. At Foley, mentors change after three years. Firm leaders hope that the first relationship will continue, but if it didn’t work, the mentee has a second opportunity to find a good mentor.

“We want to make sure that they experience someone else in the firm—another work style,” Schoenfeld explains.

Firms also must be willing to change mentor-mentee relationships early if the match doesn't work, and the change must be discreet.

At Foley, unhappy mentees notify Schoenfeld and she will make the change. At the end of the first year, Schoenfeld contacts each mentee to ask whether the relationship is working. Of the 66 people matched last year, only one requested a change.

Switching mentors after three years is a good thing, according to Carl R. Kugler, a partner at Foley's Madison, Wisconsin, office. "You don't get pigeon-holed with one partner," he explains. "It gives you richer feedback and better mentoring."

Added Benefits

Some firms offer mentor-of-the-year awards that often carry nice bonuses such as airline tickets.

At Downey, the mentor of the year receives \$2,500 in travel credits. "That makes for some nice vacations," Saxton says.

Kugler was one of the recipients of Foley's outstanding mentor award. But for Kugler, the main reason to be a mentor is to give back what he was given.

"I appreciated the mid-level associates putting themselves in my shoes," Kugler explains. "We deal with enough egos in this business. It is really nice as a new person to have a senior person not show off all the lingo they know."

It's just good business. "People who start who get good guidance and don't have as hard a time will be happier and do good work," Kugler says. "There are enough stresses. Everyone at the same firm should be on the same side."

Mentors also can be advocates for mentees. At Foley, a mentor is involved in a mentee's evaluation, Kugler explains. "The mentor is supposed to get to know you better than others," he says.

For instance, Kugler notes that if an associate had a project that didn't go well because his or her child was

sick, the mentor can inform the other evaluators about the situation and explain that he or she has addressed the issue. "It goes so much smoother when the left hand and the right hand are talking."

At Foley, each mentor and mentee receive a checklist for the mentoring relationship that helps the pair set goals for training and work review.

King & Spalding has found that clearly defined and limited goals as well as frequent communication are essential, Keyes says.

Achieving Effectiveness

"A lot of people think that a mentoring program is the answer to their prayers," notes Ida O. Abbott of Ida Abbott Consulting LLC in Oakland, California, who consults with firms about mentoring and other staffing issues. "A lot of mentors pull back from that. If you give them very well-defined and limited responsibilities and expectations in this particular mentoring relationship, they are more likely to achieve it. If it is too open ended, things get lost."

Goals might be to develop lawyering skills or to assist in understanding client relationships. Administrative and financial support also is essential, but very few firms tie mentoring to partner compensation or evaluations.

"That is some serious accountability," Abbott says. "You have to be taught how to be an effective mentor. It is not enough to cut your compensation. You have to have some teaching and help them to understand what they should be doing to be more effective."

King & Spalding does not "police the meetings or lack of meetings," Keyes says. "It would not fit the firm's culture," she explains. "It is not a firm that issues edicts. It is a firm that expects people to listen to what they should do as professionals and do it."

However, King & Spalding and others send reminders to mentors and mentees to attend programs together

and meet. They also suggest activities. In addition, each King & Spalding triad is given \$500 to go to lunch or do other activities during the year.

Fun in Relationship Building

Those who've worked with mentoring programs report that monthly lunches, social activities, and special seminars are the events that facilitate the mentor-mentee relationships.

At some firms, breakfast meetings replace lunches to accommodate West Coast offices. Often firmwide mentor-mentee programs are teleconferenced so that everyone can participate together.

One fun and popular event for mentors-mentees at Foley is the firmwide Jeopardy, played more like Trivial Pursuit. Winners play against mentors-mentees from the various Foley offices via video conference. Donning t-shirts and funny hats, lawyers show their competitive spirit as other firm lawyers act as spectators. Winners receive coveted airline tickets.

"We actually trained beforehand," according to Jennifer Devitt, a second-year associate in Foley's Milwaukee office. "We wrote down each other's favorite colors, favorite clients, and clients we do the most work for. Silly as it sounds, it is kind of good. You get to know people you are mentored by and other people in the firm."

Such activities also are morale boosters. "They had fun together," Schoenfeld says. "They let down their guard."

Foley also had a mentor mania month in August where various offices planned special events for the mentor-mentee couples. The events included a Euchre tournament, a murder mystery night, wine tasting, Legal Pictionary, a par-three golf game, jazz in the park, and a night at a local bar in New York.

But there has to be more. "Just talking about getting together for coffee and talking about the ballgame isn't what mentoring is about," says Abbott, noting that a learning component is essential. 🌀

Hope Viner Samborn is a lawyer and a Chicago area freelance writer.