

Talking to a Younger You Tips on Being a Mentor

By Joe Perry

Lawyers make a living giving advice, but what happens when someone asks you about *being* a lawyer rather than about some area of law?

Mentoring can be intimidating; there are no hornbooks, legal research engines, or groundbreaking decisions to fall back on. All you have is your own experience. What *would* you tell the younger you?

Although answers differ from lawyer to lawyer, there are at least three general ideas that you may wish to impart when a young law school graduate comes to you for advice.

1. Manage your expectations. After three years of law school, a grueling bar exam, and countless dollars, it may be natural for your mentee to want—or even expect—a dream job right out of the gate. When this does not happen and your mentee expresses dissatisfaction with a first legal job, a mentor might be tempted to say something like: “Welcome to the real world, kid.”

Both mentor and mentee are better served, however, by a more constructive form of dialogue. You probably know at least a few lawyers who were unable to obtain their ideal employment right after graduation from law school: maybe they tried again a few years later and were successful; or, maybe they found that the jobs they “were forced to take” turned into promising careers. Sharing such encouraging stories can help your mentee see that a first job is an opportunity and not a failure.

2. Hold onto your wallet. Suppose, instead, that your mentee *does* land that dream job. The next piece of sound advice you can offer is to guard your paycheck. There is a tendency to take comfort in the adage, “The world will always need lawyers.” Unfortunately, the truth is more nuanced. Sometimes it is corporate lawyers who are needed; sometimes it is bankruptcy lawyers. Especially in a fickle economy, your mentee may not always have an in-demand specialty. As there are no guarantees in life, it is better to celebrate that offer letter with a night on the town rather than a new house or sports car.

3. It’s not all big moments. Whether your mentee lands the perfect job or not, most lawyers at some point discover a painful truth about the law: in application, sometimes it is dull. As new lawyers may not have much experience inside a courtroom, they may be surprised, if not disheartened, to find that in actual practice there are few made-for-TV scenes where defense counsel gives a rousing closing argument that causes the gallery to burst into applause while the judge hammers away with her gavel. Not every day of a lawyer’s life is filled with careful consideration of cutting-edge legal issues and/or awe-inspiring oral arguments. Let your mentee know that the occasional drudgery of legal work serves to make the truly big moments all the more memorable.

Although taking a younger lawyer under your wing is a considerable responsibility, there are many benefits to being a mentor. Aside from the satisfaction that comes with giving sound guidance, mentoring also may help you improve your own practice. By giving substantive commentary on the law to a mentee, you may identify areas where you need to re-educate yourself. By listening to a younger lawyer’s ethical quandary, you may realize that you haven’t been thinking deeply enough about professional issues that you are currently facing. And perhaps *most* important: by counseling a “younger you” on all the ups and downs within the practice of law, you may rediscover the things you admire about your profession.

NEXT STEPS

- **Become an ABA YLD Ambassador through the “Touch 10,000 Program”** (www.abanet.org/yld/touch10k/), a member-to-member outreach program that connects current ABA young lawyer members (Ambassadors) with new bar admittees (NBAs).

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