

Step-by-Step Guide to Building Effective Mentoring Relationships

By Lisa Hall Johnson

Mentoring is a critical part of a lawyer's growth and development. Yet many lawyers make the mistake of delegating the responsibility of finding an effective mentor to their employers. Employer-imposed mentoring programs can have good intentions and yield positive results; but often the best mentor is the one that you seek out yourself, sometimes in unlikely places. Follow this step-by-step guide to achieve the beneficial mentoring relationship you deserve.

Step 1: Do not limit your potential mentor pool to successful partners and senior attorneys.

There is nothing wrong with these types of mentors, but there are not enough of them to mentor everyone. Therefore, you should consider every professional relationship as a potential mentoring relationship. Lawyers and staff members at all levels can be mentors. For example, there may be a staff person who can provide valuable insight into your organization, a peer who has a broader base of knowledge on a specific issue than you, or a junior lawyer who has access to resources and people that you do not. Keep an open mind and allow yourself to benefit from information that is available to you no matter who provides it.

Step 2: Develop a variety of mentoring relationships.

Think of this as mentoring by committee. You will benefit from having mentors in different practice areas, firms, and departments. Having access to this breadth of knowledge and experience provides you with a wide perspective. However, to gain access to a wide variety of mentors you must make an effort to meet people outside your normal circles. You can meet potential mentors at community, alumni, and political events. Remember, mentors are people too and have interests outside of work.

Step 3: Build relationships with people before you need anything from them.

People are better mentors to people they know and respect. Therefore, you should develop relationships with your mentors while things are going well for you, not only during a crisis. If your mentor is writing an article or brief, offer to do research. If your mentor is active in the bar, volunteer for his or her committee. Make yourself useful, and create opportunities to show your ambition and work ethic. You will be rewarded with a mentor who sees you in the best possible light and is willing to return the favor.

Step 4: Do not be an absent mentee.

Maintain regular contact with your mentors and update them on your professional development. Also follow their careers and congratulate them on successes. You cannot expect someone to show an interest in your career if you do not reciprocate.

Step 5: Be genuine.

Seek and maintain mentoring relationships with people you genuinely like and respect. Mentoring relationships are more likely to succeed and last when the mentor and mentee enjoy each other's company.

All relationships require time and attention from both parties to stay healthy and dynamic. Mentoring relationships are no different. If you invest time and effort into finding effective mentors and maintaining your mentoring relationships, your mentors can be valuable assets to you and your career.

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