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**The Art of Mentoring  
Cultivating Growth and Development**

*By Tina R. Karkera*

Knowing the law and being a lawyer are two separate things. Law school teaches just the legal basics. Before you know it, three years go by, you pass the bar exam and you are thrown into the real world to practice law. And that's when the real learning begins.

While the learning curve may be steep, the journey of a young lawyer can be made easier with the help of a good mentor. Many workplaces today have instituted some form of a mentoring program for their young attorneys, but it is not enough just to sign up to be a mentee or a mentor. There are certain things that both mentors and mentees can do to make sure the relationship truly helps the mentee grow and develop professionally.

**ADVICE FOR MENTORS...**

Lawyers have demanding schedules and, at times, personalities. It can be challenging to balance work demands with family and personal commitments. So consider the following before signing up to be a mentor:

**Do You Have the Time?**

Mentoring can take more time than you may think, especially if you are doing it correctly. While it's generous of you to want to mentor someone, it's not worth signing up to be a mentor if you can't actually be there for your mentee. This doesn't mean that you have to spend an hour with your mentee every week. At times, your mentee may need your attention and advice in resolving a situation and this may require you to set aside some time for him or her. At other times, just catching up with your mentee in the hallway or grabbing lunch together every

few weeks may be enough for him or her to know that you are available. But when you sign up to be a mentor, you should not expect to meet your mentee only every six months for a short conversation. If you feel you are constantly struggling to keep up with your work or if you often are inaccessible because you travel a lot and view having a mentee as one more thing on your already full plate, give serious thought to whether you should be a mentor.

### **Should You Be a Mentor?**

The truth is that not everyone should sign up to be a mentor. Having the time to mentor is great, but having a mentoring personality is what is important. The ideal mentor is a “people person” — someone who is personable, approachable and considerate; someone who has the mentee’s best interest in mind and helps him or her succeed; an active listener who can keep his or her mentee’s confidences. Personalities like Gordon Ramsey and Simon Cowell may help their apprentices learn, but chances are that young attorneys will find such an intense and abrasive personality in a mentor a turnoff, making it less likely that they will really utilize you as an advisor and sounding board. There is something to be learned from everyone, but just because someone can learn something from you does not mean you should be a mentor.

### **What’s the Goal?**

If you are serving as a mentor within your workplace’s mentoring program, find out what is expected of you by your employer. Know whether your mentee is expected to meet certain goals so you can track his or her work and help him or her achieve those goals. Additionally, find out what your mentee’s goals are and what he or she expects from your mentoring relationship. Undoubtedly, both your employer and your mentee want the mentee to succeed because, in turn, the firm or organization will also succeed. By knowing what everyone wants, you will be able to help the mentee in the best way possible.

### **Honesty Is Key**

As a formal mentor, you are, in many ways, the liaison between your employer and your mentee. Keep your mentee informed of your firm/organization's expectations. If you hear colleagues speaking highly of your mentee, pass along those words of praise. At the same time, if there are areas in which your mentee can improve, be honest. Certainly, there's a way to deliver criticism constructively. When sharing bad news, go one step further by helping your mentee develop a plan to improve himself or herself or the circumstances. If nothing else, you don't want your mentee to think he or she is doing well based on conversations with you, only to find out at year-end evaluations that he or she has much to improve on. In keeping your loyalty to your workplace, you may be unable to share everything you know or hear with your mentee. But if you are holding back information or advice simply because you are uncomfortable giving it, you are doing a disservice to your role and your mentee.

### **Know Your Mentee**

To make the most of your mentoring, you have to get to know your mentee. If at all possible, avoid having as a mentee someone with whom you will have to work closely or who will have to report directly to you. Otherwise, you run the risk that any problems in the working relationship will interfere with the mentoring relationship, leaving your mentee to rely on others for advice regarding work. Once you have a mentee, do not limit mentoring experiences to when your mentee comes to you with a concern. Get to know your mentee as a person and as a lawyer; learn about his or her interests and ambitions; take him or her out for lunch or a drink; invite him or her to a networking opportunity or a client meeting. By simply watching you at work, your mentee will learn from you and your experiences while undoubtedly appreciating the efforts you are making to improve his or her career.

### **ADVICE FOR MENTEES...**

As a young attorney, you will have many opportunities to have mentors. Take advantage of these but know that signing up to be a mentee in a formal mentor program is just the beginning.

### **Formal and Informal Mentors**

If your workplace has an official mentoring program, sign up to get a mentor. Hopefully, your mentor will be someone with whom you will develop a strong mentoring relationship and friendship, someone whom you might have sought out as a mentor even if a formal program did not exist. Either way, do not limit yourself to one mentor. Seek out others in your workplace with whom you can build a trusting relationship and take advantage of mentoring opportunities offered by your local bar association and your law school. Most important, recognize that someone does not need to have the title of “mentor” to actually be your mentor. A mentor is anyone who is willing to help you learn and develop your skills to become a better lawyer. If you depend solely on your formal mentors, you will be missing out on the advice and opportunities others can share with you.

### **It Is What You Make of It**

The mentoring relationship is for your benefit. While your mentor may reach out to you initially, he or she has his or her own workload and commitments to attend to, and you should not expect him or her to always check in on you. The purpose of the mentoring relationship is for you to progress as an attorney, so take the initiative and maintain contact with your mentor. (Plus, you will be known for taking initiative, always a positive in our field.) Certainly, you should talk to your mentor when you need help with something, but the best way to foster the relationship is to talk and meet with your mentor even when you are not struggling with workplace issues.

### **Learn about and from Your Mentor**

The mentoring relationship is set up to develop your skills, but it is also a great opportunity for you to learn from someone else, one on

one. Ask your mentor out for coffee or lunch (which you should pay for), and take this time to get to know him or her. Learn about your mentor's aspirations and struggles as a young lawyer and seek his or her advice on how to handle difficult situations and people. Find out about the legal organizations to which your mentor belongs and learning opportunities he or she has found worthwhile. And should you or your mentor leave your workplace for other opportunities, stay in touch. Your mentoring relationship can continue and grow as you advance in your career.

### **Talk Honestly and Listen**

To get the most of your experience at your workplace, it is important that you share your experiences and concerns with your mentor. Speak honestly with him or her about any concerns you have regarding your work product, adjusting to your workplace or managing your caseload. (That being said, assess for yourself whether you can trust your mentor to keep your conversations confidential.) While speaking honestly is important, listening is equally important. Your mentor's advice to you in resolving your concerns, whether relating to how you can improve your work or how you are perceived at your workplace, should be taken as constructive criticism. Be open to ways in which to improve yourself and your abilities.

### **Pay It Forward**

It does not take a long time to go from mentee to mentor. As a first-year lawyer, you can mentor law students; as a second-year, you can mentor interns and summer associates. So when your time comes, remember all that you have learned from those who have taken the time to help you and pay it forward.

PBA President Gretchen Mundorff recently emphasized the importance of new practitioners having "a safe place where they can be mentored by nonjudgmental, patient lawyers." As attorneys, we often focus more on how we treat our clients than on how we treat each

other, especially those just entering the profession. Mentoring is not a spectator sport; both the mentor and mentee have to actively participate, and, when done correctly, both can benefit greatly from the relationship.

*Tina R. Karkera worked as a litigation associate in Philadelphia and served as an Executive Committee member of the Philadelphia Bar Association's Young Lawyers' Division before becoming a litigation attorney with the New York law firm of Stern & Montana L.L.P.*

#### CALLOUTS

***For mentors: Do you have the time? It's not worth signing up if you can't actually be there for your mentee.***

***For mentors: Having a mentoring personality is important. The ideal mentor is a "people person."***

***For mentees: Take the initiative and maintain contact with your mentor.***

***For mentees: Share your experiences. Speak honestly about any concerns.***