

Mentoring: Lasting Principles and Evolutionary Changes

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Mentoring is a well-established method for transferring knowledge and values in societies and organizations from one generation to the next. It is accepted and valued as beneficial to younger lawyers because it promotes their career advancement and satisfaction. But mentoring is also a proven and cost-effective way to increase law firm proficiency, productivity and profitability. As lawyers demonstrate excellence, feel more confident about their abilities, and feel supported in their efforts to succeed, they become more engaged and efficient in their work to the advantage of the firm and its clients. In fact, one of the principal benefits of mentoring is that it unites the interests of individual lawyers with those of the firm.

Mentoring has always occurred in law firms, although it was not always identified or even recognized as a particular process. For generations, new lawyers learned practice skills and acquired wisdom and clients by observing, assisting and being sponsored by an experienced and influential practitioner. Under this “apprenticeship” model, mentoring was simply taken for granted, because those who succeeded in a firm had mentors. In recent years, the legal profession has become more aware that mentoring is critical to a lawyer’s career success but also that many talented young lawyers do not have mentors, and that this deficiency often curtails success. Greater emphasis is now being placed throughout the profession on increasing mentoring opportunities for all lawyers through mentoring initiatives in law firms and legal associations. Some firms and associations are establishing mentoring programs that find mentors for young lawyers; others are encouraging both junior and senior lawyers to be proactive in forming their own mentoring relationships.

Throughout this time, the fundamental principles at the heart of mentoring have remained the same. But the practical realities of law practice today, including increasing lawyer diversity, multi-office firms, cross-border practice, growing competition, lawyer mobility, and greater time and billing constraints, make the traditional intensive, localized one-on-one mentoring process impractical for many lawyers. As a consequence, mentoring has taken many new directions, some of which are presented in the Table below. In this paper, I will explore the fundamental principles of mentoring; some of the recent changes to mentoring and their implications for lawyers and firms; and one particular development, the rise of distance mentoring that facilitates mentoring among lawyers in different locations.

The nature and evolution of mentoring

The historical roots of mentoring are ancient, and the term can be traced to Homer's *Odyssey*. When Ulysses goes off to fight the Trojan Wars, he leaves his son in the care of Mentor (actually Athena in disguise). Thus, the term "mentor" has come to refer to a wise and trusted teacher, protector and advisor. Attention to the actual process of mentoring (and the verb form itself) is a more recent development. It became popular in the 1980's, when companies and firms began to make intentional and organized efforts to promote it in the workplace through formal mentoring programs. Today, law firms and other organizations promote mentoring in order to orient new hires, transfer knowledge, teach skills, and inculcate values of professionalism. Mentors promote the career orientation, engagement and retention of younger lawyers who want to work where they feel valued and see a future for themselves. However, mentoring is no longer just for junior professionals. It is also important for experienced lawyers moving into leadership roles or even transitioning out of practice. Mentors are beneficial any time someone can use assistance and guidance from another who has been in the same position before and is willing to be of help.

Before continuing, let me offer a definition of mentoring. Mentoring within a business or professional context refers to a process of learning and development, based on a personal relationship, in which the mentor helps the mentee develop as a professional and achieve professional goals. Let's look at each of these elements.

1. Mentoring is an ongoing process. It may be relatively brief or continue for many years, but the principal objective is professional growth through learning and development
2. The unique feature of mentoring is that it requires a personal relationship between mentor and mentee. As with other personal relationships, it must be based on mutual trust and respect. This does not mean mentors and mentees must be friends or socialize at all; the focus, after all, is on professional growth. But the mentor must feel personally invested in the other's success, and the mentee must be committed to his or her own professional development and actively receptive to the mentor's assistance.
3. Mentoring promotes mentees' professional development in many different ways. The benefits of mentoring are divided into two functional categories: psychosocial and career functions. The former refers to the mentee's professional identity, a feeling of belonging, self-confidence and self-regard as a lawyer. The latter refers to increased competence as a lawyer and successful career outcomes, including promotions and higher compensation. Mentors can be helpful in either or both areas.

These fundamental elements remain the keys to effective mentoring whether the mentoring relationship is formal or informal. *Formal* mentoring takes place in an organized mentoring program, where people are matched up specifically for the purpose of mentoring. Mentoring programs began in law firms when firms realized the importance of mentoring but also saw that while many individuals developed mentoring relationships informally, many others did not. Formal

mentoring is a means of ensuring that junior lawyers have at least one mentor under the particular guidelines set out by the program. *Informal* mentoring relationships develop when the relationship arises naturally. Most often this occurs when a lawyer with more experience takes a special interest in the career of a less experienced colleague. It usually happens as they work together on client matters, firm committees, or special projects. As they develop rapport and discover they share personal interests and work values, the more experienced person reaches out to offer assistance, advice and other kinds of help.

Whether or not they participate in a mentoring program, associates are wise to seek out informal mentors. Lawyers who think strategically about their careers do not wait for mentors to come to them. Instead, they consider their development or career goals and the kind of knowledgeable or influential people whose help they need. They then identify potential mentors and make a purposeful effort to initiate a mentoring relationship. They do not necessarily ask the person to be their mentor; they look for a chance to work together or get to know the person, ask for specific guidance or advice, and do what they can to make themselves worthy of being mentored.

This proactive stance is one of the many ways that mentoring is approached differently today than in the past. Other changes that have evolved reflect the increasing diversity in the workforce and greater complexity of careers in the legal profession. In the past, mentors were seen as experienced practitioners who “bestowed” their wisdom on a favored few junior lawyers. Mentors took these juniors under their wing and nurtured their careers. Invariably, mentor and mentee were men who shared a common background and socio-economic status; they often went to the same schools and socialized with the same people. This kind of mentor provided work experience, contacts, business and other forms of support and protection, offering reliable advice and fostering, if not assuring, a junior associate’s career success.

This idealized notion of mentoring still occurs today but rarely. Mentoring relationships now occur across race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and geographic borders. Mentors and mentees usually share the same values regarding legal work and professional obligations, but they do not look alike or come from similar communities or backgrounds. Some lawyers find this disconcerting; after all, it is comfortable and often validating to be in a relationship where both parties understand and accept each other easily because of their similarities. But in a culturally and gender diverse work environment, diversity can help both parties learn more by testing their existing views, increasing empathy and an appreciation of differences, and providing new perspectives. Having multiple mentors enhances the opportunity for diverse mentoring experiences.

That is one of the reasons lawyers are now encouraged to have a “constellation” of mentors, i.e., multiple mentors who can provide different kinds of assistance for different purposes at different times over the course of a career. Those mentors

need not be in the same firm, the same field, or even in law. From a mentee's standpoint, the best mentor is the person who can best help you get what you want or achieve your particular goal at this moment in time. Within a firm, that mentor may be a peer or even a subordinate, depending on what the mentee's needs are and who can best address them.

A related change is the movement away from the importance of a single, long-term mentor. It is well established that mentoring has many positive benefits. Mentors help mentees' move ahead by giving them interesting and challenging work assignments, teaching them professional skills, sharing "inside information" about the firm, increasing their visibility in the firm, sponsoring them for positions, opportunities and promotions, making introductions to clients and influential people, and protecting them from criticism or unfavorable treatment. But rarely can one mentor do all of these things. It is unusual to find one person who can provide all the help that someone needs at every stage of a career. Moreover, mentees cannot and should not rely on a single mentor in today's volatile economy and highly mobile workforce. While in the past, lawyers came to law firms with the intent to stay for the duration of their careers, partners and associates today are more mobile, moving from firm to firm and place to place as interesting opportunities arise. Their career paths are no longer fixed, linear or predictable.

Because of the desirability of multiple mentors and the limited number of mentors compared to the number of lawyers needing mentors, some firms are using group approaches to mentoring. In addition to (and sometimes in lieu of) conventional one-on-one mentoring relationships, these firms are using *group mentoring*, pairing one or two mentors with a small group of mentees, or *mentoring circles*, with a mixed mentor-mentee group that shares leadership responsibilities. Mentoring this way offers many advantages. Firms can leverage a small number of mentors, enabling them to mentor a wider group of mentees than each mentor could reach alone. Lawyers learn from and contribute to the learning of their peers and colleagues at all levels of seniority. And such groups provide fertile ground for informal one-on-one mentoring relationships to arise between some members of the group.

This approach is also in keeping with the shift in mentoring toward mutual learning. Although the emphasis remains on the mentee's learning and professional growth, the reciprocal nature of the relationship means that mentors also learn and that the process is based on dialogue rather than a mentor simply offering unquestioned instruction and advice. Mentors do not provide "all the answers"; by listening and sharing, asking probing questions and helping mentees reflect on and learn from their own experience, they facilitate the mentee's learning process.

Distance mentoring

One recent development in mentoring is the rise of "distance" mentoring, where mentor and mentee are not in proximity, so they rarely (if ever) meet face to face. Instead, they use various forms of electronic media, such as telephone, email,

texting, or Skype. There are advantages and disadvantages to distance mentoring. Advantages include flexibility, quality of interaction, and a larger pool of mentors. With this type of mentoring, firms and organizations can provide mentors for lawyers in any office, no matter how small or how far away, creating direct and personal links to the rest of the organization. Especially where options are limited and people are separated by great distances, it extends mentoring possibilities to professionals who might otherwise have none.

With email, mentor-mentee dialogues can be synchronous or asynchronous, meaning mentor and mentee do not have to interact at the same time. People whose schedules make face-to-face meetings difficult can participate when it is convenient for them. Time intervals between messages allow mentees to ask more thoughtful questions and allow mentors to reflect longer before answering. This often results in higher quality discourse. Distance mentoring also attracts mentors who might otherwise be unavailable or unwilling because the time commitment is better defined and mentoring sessions can be arranged around travel or other work constraints.

While distance mentoring can have the same benefits as in-person mentoring, online relationships are harder to start and maintain. The adage “out of sight, out of mind” accurately states the challenge. For some people, the lack of spontaneity makes the process too mannered and formal to be engaging, and their relationships fail to build momentum. Even for many people who are fully comfortable online, building the personal and trusting relationship required for high quality mentoring is especially difficult when there is no face-to-face interaction.

There are other difficulties as well. If the primary means of communication is email or texting, communications can be misleading because so much of communication occurs visually and aurally. Reliance on written text alone means missing nuances and non-verbal cues that suggest the need to ask a follow-up question or dig beneath the surface of the conversation. Without face-to-face interaction, it is often hard to tell if the reader has correctly interpreted a written thought or suggestion. Moreover, when mentor and mentee are in distant offices, the mentor may be unfamiliar with the mentee’s local office culture, protocol, and politics, which may limit the mentor’s ability to offer appropriate advice.

Distance mentoring programs should be designed to maximize advantages and overcome drawbacks. Some the features it should include are the following:

- Adequate structure and oversight.
- Clear guidelines and timetables.
- Training for participants (possibly web-based) in skills that will help them enhance and maintain online mentoring relationships, such as the degree of formality vs. informality in emails, and how to recognize the underlying meaning behind the words on a screen.

- Instructions, templates, frequently asked questions, chat rooms, articles, periodic reminders and suggestions for meetings, and other resources that will keep participants informed and on track.

To enhance the distance mentoring experience for participants, mentors and mentees should:

- Participate voluntarily, because it requires a high level of motivation to persevere in a virtual mentoring relationship.
- Be matched for specific reasons: the mentee’s particular goals and needs and the mentor’s ability to address them.
- Clarify their expectations and develop specific objectives for the relationship, spelling out the responsibilities of each party to keep the conversation and relationship going.
- Decide on ground rules for communicating (e.g., how often and at what time of day or night they will speak by phone, if and when they will use instant messaging, how quickly they will respond to emails, the level of confidentiality they can expect).
- Communicate on a regular and frequent basis, even if briefly.
- Be fully prepared whenever they meet, whether online, by phone or in person, with a specific agenda of items to cover in the meeting.
- Meet in person if and whenever possible.
- Schedule all meetings for a period of time (e.g., the same time each month for a year) or schedule the next meeting before the current meeting ends.

By taking these steps, mentoring can overcome differences in space and time and offer benefits to those working in law firms, wherever they are.

Table: Some changes in mentoring over the last three decades

Before	Now
Mentoring was a method of knowledge transfer	Mentoring is a process that promotes learning and development
Mentor speaks, mentee listens and asks	Mentor and mentee engage in dialogue
Mentor gives answers	Mentor asks good questions
Mentor is the actor, mentee “receives” wisdom	Mentor and mentee are both active participants, both learners
One long-lasting mentor beginning early in a career	Constellation of multiple mentors throughout a career

Uni-directional: senior mentor to junior mentee	Multi-directional: between peers, upward/reverse mentoring
One-on-one	Group mentoring
Mentor and mentee from similar backgrounds	Mentor and mentee of different genders, races, ethnicity, countries and backgrounds
Face to face	Distance mentoring