

Set for Success

How to set up a firm mentoring program
for young attorneys.

WRITTEN BY REAGAN ELIZABETH BOYCE

Who Should Be Involved in the Firm Mentorship Program?

When you hear the words “mentorship program,” you may automatically think the people involved are new, inexperienced professionals. But mentorship occurs at multiple levels. As a young attorney, I was literally thrown in the deep end and told to figure it out. And I did, but only with help from a mid-level associate who was willing to show a brand-new attorney how to do the day-to-day work. It was the simple things from how to prove up a declaration to authenticating documents to analyzing discovery responses for that key piece of information that would win the case. New attorneys come out of law school ready to take on the world, but they know absolutely nothing about how to be an attorney in the practical sense. This is where mentorship comes into play. Throughout my career, I have looked for individuals who have achieved success and made a point to interview them about how they got to the top, so I could follow in their steps and later go on to forge my own path to the top.

Set Realistic Expectations for New Attorneys

Today’s young attorneys come into a firm and expect to be handed their own files and be let loose on the legal community. The greatest secret to success you can share with new attorneys is that great attorneys are those who take the time to learn the process from the ground up. When you take on the role of mentor to a new attorney you have to have a frank and honest conversation with the new attorney and set realistic expectations for them. Make them understand that they have to prove they have mastered the basic skills before they will be given more responsibility. You as the mentor must convey to them the importance of having a solid foundation upon which to build their skill set. Winning at trial is the result of preparation, and the preparation that it takes to win at trial is not something you know, it is something you learn by doing over and over. As a mentor, it is your job to impress upon the young attorney the importance of each step of trial preparation, not just the glory of the successful verdict. Have this conversation early on with your new attorneys, make it clear that they will be expected to demonstrate their willingness to do the mundane and do the mundane well before they will be entrusted with more opportunities. Realistic expectations are a key component to effective mentorship.

Feedback, Feedback, Feedback

It is important for the new attorney to understand that the red pen is their friend. This is the only way someone can learn

effectively what they are doing well and where they still need improvement. From my early days interning with a federal court judge to my first jobs working in litigation firms, I took the red pen corrections to my work in the spirit in which they were intended—as an instruction on what I could do better. If you are asking a young attorney to write something for you, don’t waste this opportunity to provide constructive criticism. Print that document out and take your red pen to it, or if you prefer to work paperless, go through and reline the document and save a redlined copy to share with the associate. Use this opportunity to talk to them about what changes or corrections you made and why. Whether it is the organization of the argument, the word choice, the way in which they cite the law, or whether they provide sufficient or even the right type of evidence in support of their argument. This type of feedback will make your mentee a better writer and attorney.

Templates, Samples, Library of Resources

One of the most valuable tools you can provide to your mentees is the repertoire of resources that they can use every day. One of the first things my first mentor told me was to find good example documents and keep a folder of samples for reference. If you have a reliable library of sample documents you draft repeatedly, then it becomes an easy shortcut to writing the next motion or pleading or contract. Another great piece of advice I was given is to not copy and paste from your samples. Re-type the document. The importance of doing so is that it allows you to catch those misspellings, wrong citations to the law, or other errors that inevitably made it past the prior author’s review process. I also keep a library of caselaw on various topics that I refer to often. Most lawyers are familiar with the key cases that affect their practice area, but every so often I have to conduct new research. When I do, I save copies of those cases to a topic-specific folder in my “research library” so if that topic comes up again, I already have a starting point to my next project. This is a great shortcut and time saver that you should encourage new attorneys to do and do consistently. Another area where young attorneys often stumble is local rules. I keep a notebook full of the local judge and local county rules so that every time I am in a new court or a new county, I know what the local expectations are. As someone who practices across Texas (and still maintains my California license) knowing the local rules is key to avoiding a misstep in front of the local judge or opposing counsel.

Teach by Example

When the opportunity presents itself, take the time to discuss with your mentee your case analysis, take them through your strategy step by step, and help them to recognize the importance of doing certain tasks and why these tasks are important. If you are drafting a contract, talk to your mentee about why certain terms are included or why you chose to include or exclude certain provisions. Look for these teaching moments. Concrete, real-life examples make better teaching moments than obscure theoretical discussions in a vacuum.

One of the most useful tools I can give to a young attorney is to share my standard operating procedure, or “SOP.” This is a live document that I continuously update. In this document I lay out everything that goes into my day-to-day work, from

organizing my calendar to having tasks laid out with detailed instructions for my associate attorneys, paralegals, and even secretaries. Part of mentorship is teaching young attorneys how to manage their support staff. Successful lawyers recognize the importance of an organized support system. Young attorneys do not have bad habits; they have no habits. So, teach them right the first time and they will be successful from day one.

Be Available

As we progress through our careers, it is harder to take time away from our own work to devote to “teaching moments.” Mentorship does not happen in just one moment. Mentorship takes time. If you are committed to ensuring that the new attorneys coming to work for you have the skills to be successful and will want to remain with your firm, then you have to be available. Mentorship does not need to occur daily, but it has to occur regularly. You need to have a real “open door” policy.

If you are a mentee and you are looking for guidance from a mentor, you must take the initiative. Ask questions, ask if you can go along to court or deposition and observe. As a mentee, you have to recognize that opportunities to observe are one of the best ways to learn. Some clients will allow a junior associate to “tag along” but most will not pay for a second attorney to be present. This is especially difficult for attorneys subject to billing requirements. Mentees, if you want to be successful, you have to accept that certain learning opportunities are off the

clock. Rather than looking at the unfairness of having to learn on your own time, take this opportunity to recognize that you are only going to be successful if you put in the time. As a mentor, it is incumbent upon us to provide these opportunities to young lawyers, but young lawyers, it is incumbent upon you to take a vested interest in your own career.

Mutual Reward and Benefit

Mentorship truly is a two-way street. There is a feeling of pride in knowing that you have helped someone reach success. Someone took the time to mentor me when I was a new attorney, and I recognize the help I received made me successful. It takes nothing away from your own success to help someone else achieve their own. That is the goal of mentoring—to ensure the next generation carries on our success. **TBJ**



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