

## **Mentoring: A Career Must!**

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Some junior lawyers are flat-out charming, score off the charts in IQ and EQ tests and will succeed at whatever they choose to do; however, they are the exception. For most, having a good mentor is key to a successful legal career.

What a junior lawyer has yet to develop is the wisdom that is acquired through years of practice. This wisdom might be related to “best practices” in a specific area of law (to always ask in a Notice of Motion for ‘such other relief as the Court may permit’), might be related to your law firm (the best way to go about asking for vacation time), or might be related to your personal life (how to find work-life balance). This is where mentors come in.

A mentor is a more experienced individual who helps and guides another individual’s development. There are many different ways that the mentor can be beneficial to a junior lawyer.

As explained by Cheryl Stephens, in the CBA publication ‘Mentoring: Learning from Others’ Experiences’:

Mentoring benefits the junior lawyer in both personal and career arenas. The support of the mentor engenders increased self-confidence, beneficial self-reflection, and a conscious approach to balancing work and life. Mentors also provide career guidance and help with goal setting.<sup>1</sup>

Often, a junior lawyer is unaware of the larger picture. A mentor can help the junior lawyer to think of his or her legal career on a broader spectrum, to set goals, and to figure out how to get there.

As explained in a CBA publication entitled ‘The Importance of Mentoring’ by Ginger Grant, the President of Creativity in Business Canada Inc.:

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<sup>1</sup> Cheryl Stevens, “Mentoring: Learning From Others’ Experiences” in Canadian Bar Association, *Practice Link*, online: <http://www.cba.org/CBA/practicelink/tips/mentoring.aspx>.

Mentoring is not about technical competence or establishing a greater skill set. Mentors are all about wisdom – how to function, how to survive and how to thrive. The function of a Mentor is to advise us of our aim, to keep us focused on the target and to communicate the importance of the target as it has been established by the partnership...That target needs to be communicated in such a way to the Mentee that his or her path is directed towards the goal...This is part of the difficulty in being a Mentor – you must recognize each individual’s strengths so that you may help that associate find his or her own path.<sup>2</sup>

The benefits of formal mentoring, however, are not just for the protégés. Mentors benefit from learning about new trends in legal education and develop a better understanding of the priorities and interests of young lawyers. The two way communication benefits both parties and alerts the mentor to issues that might affect the work environment.

Law firms are also buying into formal mentoring programs for a number of reasons.

First, articling students are asking for mentoring programs. They are seemingly less willing to trade long hours at the office for a paycheck and partnership. Although we still see a lot of hardworking articling students, students today are also looking for meaningful work, work-life balance, and for mentoring from senior lawyers to help them become successful lawyers. To ensure access to the best students, firms are trying to accommodate students’ mentoring needs.

Second, mentorship programs involve enhanced communication between junior and senior lawyers which promotes competence and enhances morale. These factors directly contribute to career satisfaction and associate retention. Financially, it simply makes more sense to invest in associate retention than to lose dissatisfied associates.

Third, there is a practical, risk management benefit to mentoring. A mentored associate who is taught the right way to do things will be less likely to make mistakes, and therefore the firm is less likely to get sued by its clients.

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<sup>2</sup> Ginger Grant, “The Importance of Mentoring – Part II: Leading to Your Brand” in Canadian Bar Association, *Practice Link*, online: <http://www.cba.org/CBA/PracticeLink/Bsky/mentoring2.aspx>.

## **Professional Development**

A further benefit of the mentorship relationship to the protégé is that the mentor will often open up new networks for the protégé. Junior lawyers are not frequently invited to lunch with clients, and while junior lawyers will attend CLE seminars, they generally won't approach senior members of the Bar to introduce themselves. However, a junior lawyer's mentor can bring their protégé to lunch with clients, and introduce them to other lawyers at professional events. In this fashion, mentors can assist their protégé in making professional connections.

During these networking opportunities, the senior lawyer assists the junior lawyer to develop the interpersonal skills used in these types of settings. The junior lawyer not only watches and learns how his or her mentor interacts with clients and other members of the Bar, but also gains some confidence in these interactions themselves.

As Ginger Grant explains:

Rainmakers do not come from the womb proficient in the skills of building relationships with clients. Rainmaking is a skill like any other. Some have a natural ability in sales which is, to a large extent, what rainmaking really is (selling your firm over any other). The expert rainmaker has another skill – tacit or invisible knowledge about the act of rainmaking itself that is hard to define, impossible to teach and can only be learned. This is why mentoring is so important. For it is in the act of mentoring that these interpersonal skills are developed and then honed.<sup>3</sup>

Other professional development benefits of a mentoring relationship cannot be forgotten. If a junior lawyer has a mentor within his or her area of practice, the mentor can keep an eye on the junior lawyer's professional development, and ensure that the junior lawyer is developing the skills that will be required of him or her in his or her area of practice. If the mentor notices that the junior lawyer is lacking skills in a certain area, or is ripe to learn more skills in a certain area, the mentor can suggest or organize appropriate professional development opportunities for the junior lawyer.

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<sup>3</sup> Ginger Grant, "The Importance of Mentoring" in Canadian Bar Association's *Practice Link*, online: <http://www.cba.org/CBA/PracticeLink/Bsky/mentoring.aspx>.

Finally, many junior lawyers consider the most valuable feature of having a mentor to be that they now have a more senior lawyer who they can speak openly with, a senior lawyer with whom guards can be let down, and a place where he or she won't be judged.

It is therefore critical to a successful mentor-protégé relationship that the mentor and protégé have an understanding that their communications will be confidential. If it weren't for the understanding of confidentiality, the relationship between mentor and protégé would be no different from any interaction between a junior lawyer and a more senior lawyer, that is, a relationship more akin to employer and employee.

### **The “Unwritten Rules”**

In all professions, organizations, and relationships, there are unwritten rules which must be followed in order to succeed. A junior lawyer either learns the unwritten rules that must be followed in the legal profession or in his or her law firm through his or her own mistakes, or preferably, through the guidance of a mentor.

In the report “Unwritten Rules: What you don't know can hurt your career”, Catalyst surveyed men and women from a variety of industries and asked them a variety of questions regarding the “unwritten rules” of their workplace that have an impact on career advancement. The top unwritten rules that are not communicated in an explicit or formalized way, but that clearly play a role in developing career and advancement opportunities (as well as the % of survey respondents who cited these unwritten rules) were found to be the following,:

- Network and build relationship within and outside the organization (71%)
- Find ways to become visible (51%)
- Play politics and lobby for yourself and your work (45%)
- Communicate effectively and ask for lots of feedback (43%)
- Perform well, produce results (35%)
- Find a mentor, coach, sponsor (32%)
- Work long hours (29%)

- Develop a good career plan (20%)<sup>4</sup>

Of note, 32% of survey respondents indicated that finding a good mentor is an ‘unwritten rule’ that impacts on career development. More interestingly, when asked how the participants eventually came to learn the unwritten rules that impact on career advancement in their organization, half of the respondents indicated that they learned of these unwritten rules through their mentors.

### **Career Advancement**

A good mentor-protégé relationship results in the mentor becoming a career advocate for the protégé and, in some cases where there is a working relationship, the protégé can be an essential component of the mentor’s success. When a rainmaking senior lawyer can delegate work to a junior lawyer with the confidence that it will be completed to the client’s satisfaction, that senior lawyer is able to focus on marketing and other work-related activities.

The reality of life in a large law firm is that the right mentor is an essential ingredient for career advancement.

### **Formal Mentoring Programs**

Lots of diverse mentoring relationships spring up naturally and spontaneously. However, for one reason or another, not all junior lawyers naturally develop a mentor-protégé relationship with a more senior lawyer. Recently, law firms have been putting significant resources into mentoring programs to ensure that all associates receive the benefits of mentoring.

There are various forms that a mentoring program can take and a different approach is required in a large office as opposed to a smaller one. An often discussed question is whether a mentor should be someone with whom the junior lawyer works on a day-to-day basis. The benefit of having such a lawyer as a mentor is that these individuals tend to be most accessible to the junior lawyer, and they have knowledge of the files on which the junior lawyer is working. However, the downside is that if a problem develops between the junior lawyer and the mentor on the file,

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<sup>4</sup> Laura Sabattini, “Unwritten Rules: What You Don’t Know Can Hurt Your Career”, (New York: Catalyst, 2008), at 5

the protégé would be left without a mentor from whom he could seek advice. Further, the junior lawyer might feel uncomfortable seeking work-life balance advice with a lawyer who is one of his primary work-providers.

We are in our first year of a formal mentorship program at FMC Ottawa (an office of approximately 30 lawyers). We were lucky enough to draw on the experience of FMC Toronto and adapt a program it developed over the past two years to our smaller office.

We decided not to recommend that our junior lawyers seek mentors either within or outside of their practice groups, but to permit the junior lawyers to select the mentors they felt would be the best match for them. Each associate was asked to select up to three lawyers who they felt would be a good mentor match for them. The associates were asked to keep in mind their level of expertise and their goals for the next two years (after which time the associates can consider whether they might benefit from another mentor with different skills and expertise). Once all associates had made their selections, each associate was matched with a mentor. Each senior lawyer has only one protégé.

Mentors and protégés were then each provided with a summary of the benefits of a mentoring relationship, an agenda for their first meeting, protégé tips, and mentor tips. It is then intended that the benefit of the mentoring relationship will be canvassed with each of the mentors and protégés during yearly evaluations.

To date, we have received excellent feedback. While each of the mentor-protégé pairings has organized their interactions and the frequency of their interactions differently, the consensus is that the program is a positive one.

### **Mentor Tips**<sup>5</sup>

**-Invest:** Take an active role in your protégé's career. Think about them and how you can help them succeed. Learn about your protégé as an individual.

**-Be Open and Share:** Discuss how your practice has evolved and give examples of experiences that you learned from. Share your expertise and experience. Give practice tips to help your

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<sup>5</sup> Fraser Milner Casgrain LLP, "Mentor Tips"

protégé become more efficient and effective. Suggest ways your protégé can develop leadership skills. Talk about what it takes to become a partner in the firm and the rewards of achieving partnership.

**-Create Opportunities:** Think about how you can include your protégé in your practice or business development initiatives – or make connections for them internally or externally to help them build their network. Ask your protégé out for lunch or to a firm event, include them in a client meeting, lunch or event, etc. – and then talk about it afterwards and invite their questions.

**-Be Enthusiastic:** Encourage your protégé to develop their goals – both short-term and long-term – and be supportive of their initiatives. Challenge your protégé to be creative and to really think about what they would like to be doing as their career progresses so that they can take steps now to realize their goals. Urge them to actively participate in the firm. Celebrate their successes.

**-Build Trust:** Keep your word and follow through on promises. Be supportive. Be proactive in building the relationship. Be responsive. Resist quick judgments. Listen first. Ask for their advice sometimes. Respect the confidentiality of your conversations.

**-Be Prepared:** Try and review your protégé's File List before your meetings, review their Quarterly Goals or Business Development Plan and provide your input and ideas.

**-Give Feedback:** Try to give specific, sincere and constructive feedback as often as possible. Try and observe your protégé in action – offer to sit in on a difficult call, review a complicated assignment – and provide feedback.

**-The Little Things Matter:** Dropping in to your protégé's office to see how they are doing, asking them to come to a firm event with you, sharing a funny story or an article about an area of interest, sending an encouraging note or offering your help when you know they are under stress – all of these things are fundamentally important to building your mentoring relationship. Informal meetings are often far more valuable than scheduled sessions.

**-Know Where to Draw The Line:** Do not become the quick fixer. It will not assist your protégé in the long-run if you solve their problems for them. Instead, support your protégé to find his or her own solutions.

**-Say Thank You:** We all know how far a thank you can go – but often in the midst of the chaos this is all too often overlooked.

### **Protégé Tips**<sup>6</sup>

**-Pick Wisely:** Look for a mentor with whom you feel comfortable, someone you respect and trust.

**-Be Honest:** Discuss with your mentor your expectations of the mentor-protégé relationship.

**-Invest:** Be interested and demonstrate you are committed to achieving your highest potential. Come to your mentoring sessions prepared with a view to having a meaningful discussion about how to advance your practice. Also take an active interest in your mentor and his or her work and clients.

**-Be Open:** Try and learn from your mentor, listen to his or her constructive feedback, be curious about practice, management, client relationships, etc. Learn about your mentor – his or her career, practice, clients, outside interests, etc.

**-Create Opportunities:** Bring forward ideas to your mentor, think about how you can reap the most out of the relationship, ask your mentor out for lunch or to a firm event, ask him or her to include you in a client meeting, lunch or event, etc.

**-Be Realistic:** You need to be active in managing your career – your mentor is there for guidance and advice but ultimately you must pursue your plan.

**-Be Enthusiastic:** Don't wait for your mentor to invite you – invite them! Show you are interested in developing the relationship and treat them as an important part of your network.

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<sup>6</sup> Fraser Milner Casgrain LLP, “Protégé Tips”

**-Don't Be Afraid To Ask:** Your mentor is there to help you – don't hesitate to draw upon his or her experience and judgment to help you in advancing your career. Ask for his or her feedback and comments on how they think you can improve as a professional.

**-Build Trust:** Keep your word and follow through on promises. Be supportive of your mentor and think about how you can help him or her succeed. Share your expertise with your mentor too. Be responsive and accountable. Respect the confidentiality of your conversations.

**-Accept Feedback Openly:** You don't have to do everything a mentor suggests but you need to appreciate the mentor's experience and insights.

**-Say Thank You:** A little appreciation goes a long way.