



Feature

Counseling Colleagues: Progress for the Profession

By Carey Bertolet

In New York, we just had our first cool weekend of the month. It's starting to feel a little like fall and all the good things that come with it. In my corner of the world, we're looking forward to seeing leaves change, the baseball post-season, and fall's crowning achievement: Thanksgiving. It's really a stunning time of the year in New York City, and it makes me sappier than I'd like to admit.



Because it always marked the beginning of a new school year, fall has always felt like the best time for a new start to me. September was always sharpened pencils, new school shoes, and nothing but opportunity as far as the eye could see. It's no wonder that I became

a legal recruiter, if for no other reason than the opportunity to see bright people embark on their own exciting new chapters. I have a renewed vigor for positive change at this time of year, and it got me thinking about why starting fresh can feel so invigorating when so many people accuse law firms of being carbon copies of one another.

I suspect that most people would be surprised to learn that not all job searches are money driven. In fact, most aren't. While many people are understandably concerned about compensation, the truth is that many lawyers are less concerned about being the most highly paid lawyer in town than they are about their own development. Other than relocation, I find the single biggest motivating factor behind lawyers embarking on searches to find new firms is rooted to whether they have the support and work to help them progress through the courses of their careers.

When associates complain that they aren't developing in the ways they anticipated, their complaints are often related to lack of work in their firms or practice groups. Simply put, a bored associate generally isn't learning at the rate of his or her busy colleague.

It also may be because of the complexity of work a firm brings in. Associates who have access to one standard transaction over and over feel less sophisticated than their colleagues who have participated in a variety of deals.

Most definitely, though, a junior-level attorney needs a person or people who can provide him or her feedback, structure, and

guidance. After talking in detail with associates to divine the sources of their concern about their individual development, I have found that it is almost always the case that the associate feels he or she has no one at the firm who serves as his or her mentor. As one associate told me, "I have no rabbi."

I was speaking to a candidate who was telling me that the single most significant factor in his decision about which firm he would join next was the opportunity to find partners who would take their valuable time to help him lay the foundation for long-term success in the law firm environment. He wanted a mentor.

"Of course that's important," I replied. But after I hung up the phone, I thought, "Is there anything more important?"

Indeed, my advice for associates is to seek out opportunities where you will have the opportunity to work with lawyers who are invested in the professional and long-term health of the firm. These tend to be the types of lawyers who are most likely to value the development of their up-and-coming associates.

For most lateral candidates, it's not the size of the firm or the square footage of the office that makes the real difference; it's whether they are surrounded by lawyers who buoy each other up as lawyers and as professionals. Do you value the opinions of the lawyers around you? Can you ask for their advice?

At law firms, the commodity that's offered to clients isn't a tangible product. Law firms broker in expertise, counsel, and advice. The tired joke in law firm circles is that associates are fungible goods. But we know that because clients rely on their lawyer's mind and judgment, nothing could be farther from the truth. An excellent law firm needs to raise excellent lawyers. Many of these future law firm superstars are looking for that person, or those people, who will invest personally in them as they mature in the practice.



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I would suggest that law firms and the partners who run them never lose sight of the fact that developing lawyers need mentors. I doubt I'd get any argument on this point. But the truth is that no matter how important mentoring is, people who invest time in up-and-coming attorneys are rare. While savvy firms highlight monthly lunches with partners and routine in-house CLE opportunities for new and lateral recruits, I believe that this only scratches the surface. As loath as I am to suggest that lawyers be nurturing, it is the one-on-one that separates a large firm from its competitors.

I am often asked why I left the practice of law. The assumption that many people make is that I left practicing because I didn't like it. The truth is that I loved practicing law; I loved my former law firm. I believe very strongly that the work that lawyers do in law firms is important, challenging, and fulfilling. It's because I saw the potential that law firm careers have for young lawyers that I am so passionate about what I do now. I know the power that the right law firm home has for any one lawyer because of my own experience. One of the reasons that I was able to realize this is that I had a great mentor.

A partner in my department at my former law firm made it his priority to invest his time in the junior associates of our department. This partner had an impressive list of clients, had a great legal mind, and was dedicated to his family. But when I sat down in front of his desk to talk about a research project, an upcoming mediation, or nothing in particular, I had his full attention. There is no question that he challenged me as a lawyer, but my greatest takeaway was knowing that there was someone who would go to bat for me, who would counsel me, and who wanted to see me succeed. He was my rabbi.

At the time, this partner was the principal reason I didn't consider other firms and declined recruiters' phone calls. If

for no other reason, law firms would do well to consider the ramifications of genuine mentoring relationships because of their effect on associate retention. But more than that, investing in the development of any one particular lawyer contributes to the profession in the long run.

It's incredibly easy to talk about supporting the development of your colleagues but practically difficult to do. We should always remember how important these professional relationships are without ever minimizing the effort it takes to maintain them.

I'm embarrassed to say that it's only now that I really appreciate what I had in that particular mentoring relationship. I know that now, when a colleague approaches my desk to ask me a question, I sometimes struggle to keep from reading the open email on my computer screen. It's hard to give your full attention and measured advice to someone in your office in a world of beeping BlackBerry devices and client demands. Mentoring, at any one particular moment, may not seem to be a priority.

I think back to a day my partner sat behind me at a bench trial. He whispered only a few pieces of advice ("I'd like to see you be a bit more deferential to the judge"). He winced at one of my very bad jokes. But most important, he told me that he'd be standing behind me if I had any questions. It was one of the best days of my professional career, in part because I knew that someone was behind me.

It's been years since that trial and more years than I'd like to think into a law firm recruiting business. I have come to realize that it's those who help teach others to be honest, wise, and successful whom we need to thank most for their contributions to the profession.

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