



Feature

A Look at Lawyers as Mentors Today and Yesterday

A Mentor is one who allows a Protege to come under his/her tutelage so the Protege can move ever closer to his professional goal. This is accomplished through their working relationship and the two involved must interact, responding to the needs each wish to satisfy through the Mentor/Protege cooperative. This was a very common method of learning the art of lawyering before billable time.

If you are a senior lawyer today, odds are you were mentored early in your career. When a fresh graduate started into the practice of law or moved to a new place to practice there was usually an older experienced attorney (Mentor) who taught the younger lawyer (Protege) the ropes in the courtroom and outside the courtroom. The Protege looked for the most experienced Mentor in the locale to take him into his tutelage where he gained know-how and became a seasoned lawyer.

Mentors would also help lawyers who were in transition from one field of law to another. The duty of the Mentor was to do whatever he needed to help the younger Protege be successful. Sometimes Mentors listened and responded to the Protege like a coach on the sidelines and other times they were right there in the game playing beside their Protege, helping them with their work. A Mentor was helpful in guiding Proteges with ethical decisions and closing the distance from; new guy on the block, to a capable mature lawyer.

Those were the old days to be sure. It was before billable hours when lawyers had time to teach both the practical and the ethical lessons which could only be learned in the field while practicing. Today the gods of economics overshadow the early days of Mentor/Protege relationships. A lawyer's time is valuable and must be spent in doing work that can be billed to clients. The extra time for mentoring is naturally squelched out of the equation in many legal firms today.

A young law graduate tells it the way it is today when entering the law firm as a new lawyer. After graduating from a prestigious law school in the early 1970's the new recruit felt a bit insecure about "practicing law." Sure, he had practiced in clinics and mock trials, but he wondered if it would be different in the legal firm.

The Head of the Labor Department called the young lawyer to ask if the witnesses were prepared for the arbitration. He resounded with a "Yes." The witnesses knew where to go and what time to be there. This was not what the Department Head meant at all. The new lawyer had at least a day to understand the meaning of "witness preparation" and get it done before the next day's appearance.

The young lawyer said in those early days he learned more about labor law from a senior attorney with whom he rode back and forth to hearings and labor negotiations. What were the issues in the hearings and which were important to the client's case? He was learning under the old method of being mentored and neither one recognized that it was happening. The young lawyer said he learned important lessons from his senior colleague on the case like procedural techniques. He learned that values needed to be a good lawyer meant "integrity is not negotiable." Does this type of mentoring exist today in firms? The answer is probably yes if there is a code and a client to bill.

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