The Importance of Mentors

By Areva D. Martin, Esq.

If we are lucky, we have fond memories of special teachers and other grown-ups, including our parents, who helped us grow and develop into the successful adults we are today. Whether it was the encouraging words of wisdom that got us through that first breakup or practical advice that helped us decide which job offer to accept, the influence of key adults helped us avoid land mines, peer pressure, and other influences that would have led us off the path of fulfillment and success.

As we mature and gain tenure in law firms, corporate offices, and other organizations, our needs become more specialized and sophisticated. But our fundamental need for assistance in navigating complex systems and organizations remains. We can meet this need by developing strong mentoring relationships.

Mentors are individuals who play vital roles in your success as a professional. They bridge the gaps that exist between the theory and reality of how the workplace operates. Mentors can also partner with you and help you develop specific skills that will aid you in your career. An effective mentoring relationship can provide a bridge to needed resources and exposure to key people and processes. By drawing from the years of experience of a seasoned mentor, a mentee can avoid mistakes and reduce exponentially the time it might otherwise take to ascend to the top positions within organizations.

If mentors are so important and necessary to career advancement, why do so many lawyers report that they either do not have a mentor or that they rarely consult with a mentor? Some attorneys also believe that they don’t have time to develop good mentoring relationships. They complain that there is not enough time to add an additional relationship to the many responsibilities that they already have to manage. Again, this can prove to be a major mistake in judgment.

Career success is about working smarter not harder. So if you have an opportunity to develop a positive mentoring relationship that can help you navigate the workplace, do so. If you have to eliminate other less productive activities from your calendar in order to make yourself available to benefit from the wisdom and experience of a mentor, do so.

Getting and keeping a mentor is one of the most significant investments you can make in yourself and your legal career. Getting needed help that will allow you to avoid mistakes, obtaining an endorsement from a respected member partner of a law firm, and gaining access to what otherwise might be closed business circles are well worth the time commitment.

Identifying and developing a strong mentoring relationship takes strategy and planning. If you are fortunate enough to have access to women or men who are willing to mentor you, act quickly to secure those relationships. However, if you don’t have such resources, don’t be shy about seeking someone out. Look for someone who you respect and admire and who is of value to your organization and industry.
Ideally, the person should work in the legal or a related field. Try to avoid your direct supervisor, as you want someone you can talk openly and honestly with regarding issues at work. Also, avoid anyone who is your work rival or in line for the same position you are. No, too, to those who are already critical of you. The person you seek out must be neutral so that you can discuss both your strengths and challenges with him or her and feel safe and free of judgment while doing so.

Ultimately, you may want to use professional organizations, social groups, and other informal networking opportunities to find a mentor. Once you develop a relationship, think of the mentor more as a coach than as an advisor. You want to present your ideas to the mentor and elicit feedback. Look to the mentor to help facilitate decision making and important career choices. Don’t expect to relinquish your responsibility as master of your own fate. The mentor is there to provide feedback and resources, but you remain the final arbiter of your success.

About the Author
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