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Mentorship Leads the Firm to Success

By Kevin Harris

Law firm employees are so busy that it may seem impossible to find time to be a mentor or to be mentored by someone else. However, squeezing mentorship duties into a packed calendar can be rewarding and helpful in many ways.

The best way to embed mentorship in the DNA of the law firm is to get buy-in from the firm’s leadership so that participation is heavily encouraged if not required. The firm’s leaders taking mentorship seriously paves the way for lawyers and staff to follow. And because of their central management role in a firm, legal managers are in an ideal position to gain executive support for mentorship, advocate for it and foster those relationships.

Mentorship creates opportunity for greater employee retention, skill-building and company engagement. Brian P. Gilman, CLM, is Chief Operating Officer at Smith Debnam and also serves on the ALA Board of Directors. “The growth and development of those around you strengthens their individual capabilities, which strengthens the entire organization,” Gilman says. “The positive impact [that mentorship has] on retention is also widely understood, further benefiting the organization.”

REFRAMING THE RELATIONSHIP

The stereotypical mentor-mentee arrangement is between an older boss and younger, direct report employee. Presumably, this model is the cultural “norm” because the more experienced executive is guiding the less experienced junior person. However, in today’s world, the picture of a successful mentor-mentee relationship must be reframed. There is no right or wrong way to mentor, and promoting flexibility is crucial to success of mentorships at the firm.

Now, it’s possible that the mentor may be younger than the mentee. Or perhaps the mentor and mentee are periodically switching roles for dynamic reciprocal learning. (For example, Millennials may not have years of tenure as lawyers or paralegals, but they have grown up in the age of technology and social media and therefore have some skills that older employees do not.) The mentor relationship only needs to make sense and be beneficial to the two people participating in it. Rigidity can extinguish the spark of mentorship, so creating an atmosphere of inclusion, not exclusion, is key to helping mentorships thrive.

If you are the mentor, one of the greatest challenges you’ll face is to remember that the mentee is not you and is not supposed to be just like you. Individuals have integrity and dignity just as they are, even if they have some rough edges that need polishing. The mentor must identify and check in with the mentee to understand where help is needed, while also avoiding the temptation to create a clone of themselves.

As mentors observe their mentees, they can carefully assess which strengths and energies can be harnessed and communicate their observations to the mentee. This keen level of attention will help mentees realize their full potential. At the same time, it’s important for mentors to note challenge points such as naïveté, impulsivity, impatience and ambition (or lack thereof), which may lead mentees down the wrong path. When discussing flaws or weaknesses with mentees, mentors must do so constructively to maintain trust.
Mentors generously provide their time and expertise, and they will expect proactivity and appreciation in exchange. The mentee must play an active role in the mentorship. Mentees should be receptive and humble. At the same time, the mentee should be willing to take initiative and calculated risks to show that they are committed to developing themselves and taking responsibility. The mentee should also be candid with the mentor, even pushing back when a suggestion is unhelpful.

“A mentor must possess credibility in the eyes of the mentee and be able to establish a context of trust and openness,” Gilman says. “Mentors should avoid a sense of superiority and avoid using condescending or judgmental language. Instead, they need the ability to break down and communicate ideas simply.

“In turn, a mentee must bring openness, humility and self-awareness that allows a sense of their need to learn and grow and a desire to do so. Neither should fall into the trap of thinking that their relationship and exchange of ideas is absolute. We all learn best when we consider multiple perspectives and sources,” he says.

Open communication is important to building a strong mentoring relationship. The mentor must feel free to share recommendations to guide the mentee toward improvement. However, if the mentor is too intimidating or overly judgmental, the mentee will feel diminished rather than motivated. The mentee must work hard to avoid taking constructive suggestions or criticism personally, which may shut down receptivity and progress. Good mentorship bolsters the mentee’s confidence; the mentee must feel empowered to ask questions and take chances to promote personal growth.

INVEST NOW FOR A STRONGER WORKPLACE
Legal management professionals are big thinkers, and they are concerned with the overall success of a law firm. They understand the concept of investing time and money for future gain, and they understand how to promote quality relationships among people. Promoting mentorship is the ultimate investment in the future of the firm, as it creates a voluntary network of people helping others to attain their personal best.

As busy as people are, they have all experienced someone showing them the ropes, taking a stand for them and caring about their success — in other words, a mentor. Think big when it comes to nurturing mentorship at your firm. The benefits will far outweigh the investment.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR
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