

Lunch with your Mentor

An Agenda

What can you do to accelerate your mentoring relationship? How can you get to know your mentor quickly? How can you develop a functioning framework within the tight constraints of current legal practices? You may want to consider the following.

Times have changed

“Mentoring has always existed in law firms. Traditionally, mentoring was a long-term, one-on-one relationship between an inexperienced protégé and a more experienced lawyer who acted as teacher, guide, advisor, advocate and confidante.”¹

These relationships typically lasted for many years without a particular beginning or end and tended to evolve through common interests and chemistry. Historically, mentoring relationships were neither forced nor assigned. Much has changed in recent years.



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In today's legal environment, you may have many mentors over the course of your career. You will seek specific individuals who are in a position to assist you at critical points throughout your career. For example, junior lawyers often have two mentors: a partner who provides challenging work, gives regular feedback and helps you define and achieve your development goals; and a senior associate who helps you to socialize within the firm, shows you the ropes and answers questions. If you are approaching the threshold of partnership, you may search for individuals who can help you build your profile. If you have been a workaholic throughout your career and “had a health scare,” you may seek a mentor who appears to have achieved a better balance. Or you may find someone to help you redesign your practice – your career may well depend upon this option.

The bottom-line pressure for timekeepers in law firms today is extreme. The pressure on associates to learn quickly in order to justify their high salaries is extraordinary. The pressure on partners to balance their time among producer, business developer, manager, mentor and owner is higher than ever before. And, the pressure on law firm leaders to provide programs and structure within a profitable model is constant. Mentoring takes time and time is money.

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So, you have taken the initiative and asked your mentor to meet over lunch. The distance between you in terms of life and professional experience is daunting and your demographic perspective is very different. How do you find common ground from which to build a relationship that will be of mutual benefit? Here are questions from which you can choose to help you initiate conversation and suggestions of how these questions may be useful.

1. *What is the professional achievement of which you are most proud?*

Lawyers are high achievers and extremely hard workers. This gives your mentor an opportunity to reflect on his or her success and share "war stories." Stories about real clients or matters make the practice come alive. Lawyers and law firms are not especially good at sharing their successes and celebrating their wins. Show your interest by giving your mentor that opportunity.

2. *How can I best provide you with information?*

Some people like a lot of detail while others are content with concepts or ideas. Some prefer information in writing so they have an opportunity to reflect upon it before reacting. Others are happy to deal with things "on the fly." Find out early and simply ask which method your mentor prefers.

3. *How can we best communicate?*

There are three broad communication styles. The direct communicators are frank, straightforward and honest. This group can be viewed as distant since they keep their private lives to themselves. You are expected to get to the point quickly. They won't hesitate to tell you to come back later if they are busy. The communicative people believe that communication is a valuable activity. They tend to use anecdotal stories, historical references and hypothetical examples. They enjoy philosophical discussions and like when you ask questions. The interpersonal communicators view the exchange of information as secondary since their primary focus is maintaining and advancing the relationship. These people really want to know that you care, before they care what you know.

4. *Voicemail, e-mail or paper?*

We all fit work and personal life together in different ways. I prefer voicemail. I check it regularly from wherever I am and everybody who knows me, understands that if a message is left, I will return the call as quickly as possible. E-mail is not as convenient because I only access my e-mail when I'm in my office... and finally, paper – (for me, well forget it!) Once again, ask which method your mentor prefers.

5. *What experiences should I seek over the next few months?*

Many firms have developed experience sheets that set out specific situations to which lawyers should be exposed over the course of their careers. If your firm doesn't have them, offer to work with the partners and associates in your group to develop experience sheets for your practice area. Goal setting is often vague. The more you are able to clarify incremental goals in your own development, the more successful you will be in attaining those goals.

6. *How do you like to structure your day?*

There are morning people, night owls and middle-of-the-day people. Determine your best time of day and your mentor's best time of day. If you need time with your mentor and his or her time is not in sync with your own, be prepared to adjust your schedule to your mentor's in order to find time.

7. *How will we tackle tough issues?*

Developing your skills is an iterative process. You will make mistakes. You will have to talk about "what happened." You must "own" your contribution to the error

so you can learn from it and move on. You will earn the respect of your mentor if you step up to the plate with maturity and move on with resilience.

8. *How do you want me to handle client relationships?*

Your level of relationship and authority with clients will vary greatly from partner to partner. Some mentors guard client relationships very carefully. They will want you to show them everything you have done, to be briefed on all calls and to ensure that you not develop a relationship with the client yourself. Other partners will want you to handle client matters and to take ownership of those matters and your dealings with the client. You have earned their trust and they are happy and confident in your abilities. The trick is determining which scenario works best for each senior lawyer with whom you work.

9. *How am I doing? Invite feedback.*

Providing feedback is difficult. Most senior lawyers have had little or no training in how to give effective feedback. It's a generational reality. If you invite feedback, be specific – "How could I have handled that situation differently?" When you receive feedback, do not become defensive, ask questions and learn from your experiences, good and bad. If you can invite feedback and make it comfortable for the partner with whom you are working, your chances of obtaining feedback, informally and often, will increase.

Talk is Cheap

These questions are a good beginning in terms of finding your way with a mentor. Be sure to listen to what you both are saying in your conversations, but observe actions as well. Become an astute observer of human behaviour – your own and of those around you. Learn from every experience, interaction and conversation.

Finally, remember you are building a relationship and the discussion around some of these questions will help you to achieve that goal.



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1. The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring; Ida O. Abbott, Esq. published by NALP 2000

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