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Business of Law by Stephen Korniczky

MENTORING—WHAT'S CHANGED?

LIFE IN A HYBRID ENVIRONMENT

The partner entered my office as I, one of 17 new associates, struggled drafting my first complaint. Having only been at the firm a few months, I had no idea what I was doing.

"Make it to tonight's game? We need a fifth. Otherwise, we forfeit."

The lobby trophy case announced the firm's pride in its basketball team. With most of the team away at trial, he was strong-arming me to play.

"I'm not much of a basketball player. Besides, I need to get this done tonight."

"Thought you played sports in college."

"Wrestler."

"Perfect. Just pass the ball. Don't shoot." He picked up the draft complaint. "Talk to my secretary. Get a team shirt. And some sample complaints. Why are you drafting this from scratch? Get sample pleadings. Start a form file. No need to reinvent the wheel."

My first mentoring experience. So obvious after he said it. He saved me hundreds of hours my first year and helped me to be more efficient throughout my career.

Mentoring continued post-game at Molly Malone's Irish Pub. The partner and a senior associate recounted war stories and gave unsolicited advice: which partners to work for, which to avoid, and other useful information. The setting made it easy for newbies to ask questions. The same ritual followed every game. Over time, we learned how to seek out work we wanted; what it took to make partner; and other information that helped propel our careers. We didn't call it "mentoring." We were just hanging out.

Not everyone was mentored at Molly Malone's. Early birds were invited to the "breakfast club." At 7:00 a.m. on Thursday mornings, a partner walked the halls and invited whoever was around to The Grill across the street. Over pancakes and coffee attorneys got to know each other, caught up on firm lore, and brainstormed legal research projects.

This is a bygone era with the shift toward remote/hybrid work. That change impacts young associates and lateral attorneys more than any others. Much of what a young lawyer learns

about firm culture and how to lawyer is through interaction with partners and senior associates. The benefits of mentor-mentee relationships are straight forward: they cultivate high career satisfaction in associates and stronger commitment to the firm and clients, and teach lawyering and business development. But dropping by an associate's office with an invitation to play basketball may not be feasible; associates may no longer be able to knock on a partner's door with a question. So, how does one build a mentorship in a hybrid environment?

Mentoring, once informal and spontaneous, may now need to be planned and intentional. Some law firms have professional development programs matching new associates with partner and senior associate mentors. Involving the mentee in the selection process is essential; an incompatible match benefits no one. Mentors and mentees should discuss expectations at the outset, such as how often to meet and whether by phone, videoconference, in person, or other venues (e.g., golf course, client meeting, court hearing). Two other important topics are expectations of confidentiality and an agreement for gracefully exiting the relationship without assigning fault.

An ongoing mentor-mentee relationship may require a list of topics to chart professional development (performance expectations, time management, work/life balance, goal-setting, and enhancing visibility at the firm) and firm-specific topics (partnership and in-house counsel career paths, firm politics, building relationships, business development, and client service). Allowing the mentee to select topics for discussion may provide insight into the mentee's interests and concerns. But, necessarily, the mentor should choose topics relevant to the firm or the mentee's career.

Mentors can capitalize on the hybrid/remote-work environment. Court hearings, depositions, and client meetings are important learning events for younger lawyers, but were sometimes prohibitively expensive for them to attend. These events now regularly occur by videoconference, allowing an associate to participate remotely or share a conference room with a partner to observe an oral argument, deposition, lawyer conference, or client meeting.

The environment may have changed, but the need for mentoring remains. Successful mentoring builds strong firms.



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