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Tools for a Fulfilling Mentorship

By Paige L. Carlos, Esquire

When I first started law school, I met with a fellow alumnus from my undergraduate university who was practicing law in the area where my law school was located. Even though he had never met me before, he told me he was proud of me and that if there was anything he could do to help me, to let him know. Quoting him loosely, he said, “I had a lot of people help me get to where I am, and when I can, I like to reach back and help others get to where they need to be.”

This is it. This is why many people volunteer to be mentors. They realize that they owe their success to other people who they may never be able to thank or repay. When they cannot pay back, they pay forward. As beautiful as it is to pay it forward, the focus is sometimes only on the giver. Yes, there is always some grateful recipient on the other side of someone’s benevolence, but there is a thin line between “what I can do for you” and “what you need from me.” These two statements may seem to say exactly the same thing, but the focus of the former is on what the mentor can give and the focus of the latter is on what the mentee can take. When these two concepts combine, you have an effective mentoring relationship—the type of mentoring relationship that can exist between two people with generation gaps and drastically different skill levels. The mentoring relationship becomes excellent when the mentor and mentee are both giving and taking in a symbiotic fashion. Beginning by defining goals can assist with answering “what I can do for you” and “what you need from me,” and establishing a level of comfort will allow both parties to function with ease.

Over the past five years, I have been privileged to participate in several different mentoring programs in the Orlando area. In law school, I was a student member of the George C. Young American Inn of Court and was mentored by a very seasoned, well-respected member. She imparted little nuggets of wisdom upon me and did her best to expose me to different areas of the practice; she even took me to my first (and only) attorneys’ fees hearing. She always took a sincere interest in my life as a law student, and I always felt comfortable asking her whatever questions I had, no matter how silly they seemed.

As a young attorney Inn member, not only am I being mentored again by another seasoned, well-respected member of the Inn, but I am also serving as a mentor to a 3L student through a local bar association, and to a high school student through the public school system. In all of these mentoring relationships, developing goals, active participation by both mentor and mentee, and establishing a level of comfort have been extremely effective.

When trying to develop creative and effective mentoring strategies to address the many changes in the legal profession, identifying goals is key. Are the mentees trying to figure out what area of the law they want to practice? Are they trying to gain more practical experience? Do they need someone to discuss their cases with? Having clearly identified goals and deciding how you will measure success allows the mentor and the mentee to steer the relationship in the direction they want it to go. These goals do not have to be too formal and they do not have to be written down. Allowing the relationship to evolve is important, but a general agreement on what you both are working toward will help you progress together.

Next, establish a level of comfort. This is one of the first things you should set out to do but can sometimes be one of the most challenging. Get to know your mentee personally, tell them about your legal experiences, and share a funny or embarrassing story. Create a relaxed environment, letting your mentee know that you are available and a person just like they are. If your mentee is not comfortable with you, it can deter the progress of your mentorship.

Third, commit. The mentoring relationships that yield the highest dividends are the ones in which both the mentor and the mentee make significant investments. Of course, being mindful of each other's schedules, you should both play an active role in mentoring and being mentored. It is common for mentors to initiate meetings, but mentees should not be afraid to extend invitations to different events. Law students can invite their mentors to mock trial competitions or activities where they can be observed in a professional setting. Young attorneys can invite their mentors to a conference where they are giving a presentation or, if it is appropriate, to a deposition. This will give the mentor the chance to give the mentee constructive feedback on what they have observed. Mentors should also encourage their mentees to keep them abreast of what is happening in their world. Mentors may ask their mentee to teach them about some new technology or may want their honest opinion on a legal concept they have been pondering. As a law student or a young attorney, feeling like you have something to offer can give your confidence a healthy boost. If a mentor is able to inspire a healthy dose of confidence in their mentee, that is a success in itself.

There is no secret formula to a successful mentoring relationship; however, these fundamental strategies of creating goals to measure progress,

active participation by both the mentor and mentee, and establishing a real level of comfort are an excellent place to start. If you are in a mentoring relationship and you have not employed any of these strategies, start now. Here are a few more ideas and suggestions to help you foster strong bonds and overcome some of the challenges that mentors and mentees face:

Set meetings once a month:

One of the challenges of the mentoring is finding a time when your schedules align. Mentoring often starts off really strong and then fizzles out as the months pass by. Set up regular meetings once a month and treat them like you would any other business meeting. Having regularly scheduled times to meet and honoring those meetings by not canceling will help establish comfort and will allow you to see positive progress in your mentorship.

Set boundaries*: This also helps with establishing a level of comfort. Some mentors and mentees may want their families to meet, others may not. Some mentors invite their mentees to drop by their office without an appointment, others do not. Define these boundaries so that things do not get awkward down the road.

Get together with other mentoring pairs*: Bar associations and groups like the American Inns of Court often have mentoring groups and programs already in place. Go one step further and get together with other mentoring pairs for lunch or a social activity.

Write an article together*: I really like this idea. It will help your mentee build their resume and will give them great experience on a particular area of law.

Acknowledge important occasions*: Find out when their bar anniversary is and send them a note. Give them a card on their birthday. This goes for mentors and mentees. These small gestures can go a long way. ♦

* These and other great ideas can be found in the NALP publication, *Being An Effective Mentor: 101 Practical Strategies for Success* by Ida O. Abbott, Esq.

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