

Articles

"Is Mentoring All It's Cracked Up to Be?"

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Old-Fashioned Methods May Work Better Than a Regimented Approach

Much has been written about the need for law firms to offer more mentoring programs. Particularly for women, the logic goes, an official mentoring program can provide the kind of informal career guidance that can make or break a lawyer's chances for success.

These proposed mentoring programs (and I don't know of any law firms that actually have them - for all I know, they've gone no further than the minds of a handful of law firm consultants) set forth a wealth of guidelines under which they will run: a program coordinator who will make the mentor/mentee matches; time requirements for those participating; a formalized system of evaluation and feedback; firm credit, billable or otherwise, for participants, etc.

In theory, all of these are wonderful things. In theory, all lawyers would be judged as much by their contribution to the firm's "quality of life" as their billable time. But, like most things theoretical, it rarely happens in real life.

Mentors are great, I'm sure. Truth be told, I didn't have a mentor. I had a number of lawyers I learned from, however. They rarely sat me down at their knee - or over Manhattans - and gave me the skinny on how the law firm world really works. I never went hunting with them, and I never felt like we had a special bond.

But without their guidance, which was often no more than scribbled corrections in the margins of a contract I had drafted, I would have never made it beyond rookie status. Every time a partner corrected my work, I made note of the correction and vowed never to make the same mistake again.

It seemed like a fairly simple cause-and-effect relationship to me, but I've learned as a partner that it's not as common-sensical as I once thought it was.

Holding Hands

What formalized mentoring programs seem to offer is a more regimented version of what I learned over the years - a handholding that, while nice, is rarely forthcoming. For men or women.

Successful mentoring relationships - be they the piecemeal variety I partook in or the more long-term relationship-based - typically come about naturally. It's usually a result of colleagues with similar values, practice areas or personal backgrounds who seek each other out or are thrown together in work assignments.

The wrench in that system is that women are often left out in the cold because of the lack of women in senior positions at law firms. Without those "role models," we sometimes feel like we can't succeed.

But that's not really the case. Women often get in the "if only" mode when it comes to our careers - if only I didn't work in a male-dominated profession, if only I had some women to look up to, if only the law wasn't so hard on women.

But the good news is that breaking out of that syndrome is one of the most empowering things a woman can do for herself.

Articles

We have to admit that all of those lousy things we mutter under our breath about our bosses, our firms and the profession as a whole are true. Then we have to ask ourselves, "So now what?" We aren't going to change the profession (at least not anytime soon), and we probably aren't going to change our bosses.

The only way we can cope with these problems is to accept them and work around them. That often means finding mentors and role models in unusual places, or in unusual people. Just because we're women doesn't mean our mentor has to be a woman. And just because we work at Smith & Jones doesn't mean our mentor has to be at the same firm. He or she doesn't even have to be a lawyer.

A firm-imposed mentoring program is a little like computer dating: It matches participants based on objective criteria and ignores personal chemistry. And it imposes a system of review and evaluation that even further removes any spontaneity from the relationship.

Those women (and men) seeking a mentor shouldn't depend on their firms for guidance. Any program that the firm implements - no matter how well-intended - is doomed to fail unless the people involved make it work.