



A Touch of Grey

The Value of Mentors to Sole and Small Firm Practitioners

BY WILLIAM ANGELLEY

Many lawyers, especially those in the early or middle stages of their careers, dream of making the leap into a solo practice or forming a firm with one or two of their closest friends. The allure of leaving behind complex office politics, strict hourly billing requirements, and demands imposed by others can be strong. While starting a new firm can certainly be rewarding, it also comes with its own set of challenges and hurdles.

Losing a steady paycheck is unsettling. And, health insurance, malpractice insurance, office rent, and telephone and Internet service are just a few of the costly necessities that must be addressed each month. Nonetheless, with proper planning and execution, most lawyers who choose to make the leap into solo or small firm practices find a way to make it work.

Still, one often-overlooked asset that solo and small firm practitioners should consider in building a successful law practice is a senior attorney who can serve as a mentor. Working side-by-side with more experienced lawyers offers invaluable training and development opportunities. A good mentor will

teach young attorneys the nuts and bolts of the substantive law, offer guidance on problems and issues, and, perhaps most important, set a good example for proper professional demeanor. The value of having a second set of eyes, particularly during the initial years of practice, and someone who can serve as a sounding board for arguments and strategy, cannot be underestimated.

Business generation is another area where mentors can be very useful for young solo and small firm attorneys. Most lawyers are aware that obtaining clients is perhaps the most difficult part of the legal profession. In larger firms, many clients are institutional and younger attorneys need not worry about developing additional business. This, however, is not the reality in which solo and small firm lawyers live. For you, keeping the doors open requires a constant campaign of building and maintaining relationships with existing and new contacts.

A good mentor may be able to teach young lawyers the best ways to develop a solid client base and keep the contacts that lead to cases. For that matter, attorneys serving as mentors may be a great source of cases for younger lawyers. If, for example, the older attorney has a conflict or is too busy to handle a smaller matter, he or she may refer the case to a trusted junior lawyer that he or she has groomed and taught.

Mentors, however, can be difficult to find for solo and small firm lawyers. Obviously, if one is working alone, there is not going to be a more experienced attorney on hand to answer questions and offer advice. Similarly, two or three attorneys of the same experience level may be able to brainstorm an issue and form a solid strategy, but they may well overlook a point or consideration that would be clear to a more seasoned lawyer.

Therefore, once an attorney's solo or small firm practice is up and running, the next issue that should be addressed is where to find effective and rewarding mentoring relationships. The most obvious answer is for the attorney to look at existing contacts. The perfect mentor or mentors may already be listed in the attorney's address book. Perhaps you had a good relationship with a senior member of a former firm or developed a good rapport with a lawyer on the other side of a past case. The continuation of existing, solid relationships is certainly the easiest way to secure continued support. If you lack such connections, local bar association groups are also a great place to meet potential mentors and cultivate ongoing relationships. Good mentors can be found in a variety of places.

It is also very important, however, to select the right mentor. Obviously, a strong personal and professional bond is critical, but there are several other significant characteristics of an effective

mentor. Experience, and particularly experience in the same practice area, sits at the top of the list.

For you to get the most out of a mentoring relationship, you should seek out someone who shares your practice area and has been working in that field of the law for many years. While it cannot be said that a seasoned real estate attorney has nothing to offer a young personal injury litigator, the truth is that an

older personal injury lawyer is going to have seen and handled many more of the issues that the young litigator is likely to face in the course of his or her career.

Older attorneys are much more likely to have dealt with the myriad of nuanced questions that arise in any area of practice. This is especially true in specialized fields where knowledge of the underlying subject matter, including technical issues and familiarity with experts may be crucial to the outcome of a case.

A good mentor should also be someone who you trust and respect. Good advice is worthless if one does not trust the source. You can identify early on senior practitioners to whom others turn for direction. Indeed, the fact that the senior lawyer is sought out for his or her guidance

indicates that he or she is already acting as a mentor for others. Developing a relationship with such a lawyer would be a very smart move for any attorney.

Finally, approachability is essential. You will likely have questions ranging from legal issues to business matters to personal concerns. While many experienced attorneys are very good at what they do, they may be too busy or simply uninterested in making the time to talk to you or other lawyers. Such attorneys do not make good mentors. You need to find someone who has the time, patience, and interest to listen to your questions and provide reasoned and sound responses.

Good mentors help lawyers develop the professional and business skills that are necessary to a successful practice. Forming a solid mentoring relationship with one or more senior practitioners is a great way to get an edge in the profession. Attorneys with many years of experience have seen most of the issues that you are likely to encounter. They have probably also made mistakes and learned from them. Younger attorneys, especially those in solo or small firm practices, should be eager to benefit from that wisdom and, perhaps, make a friend along the way. ❖

Mentoring Resources

The State Bar of Texas offers several resources for lawyers looking for a mentor — or for lawyers interested in mentoring the next generation.

Transition to Practice

texasbar.com/transition

Connect with mentors through your local bar association.

Ten Minute Mentor

tenminutementor.com

Online videos on a variety of practice area topics.

Law Practice Management

texasbarcle.com/CLE/LPHome.asp

Find resources to help build your practice.



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