



## MY OPINION

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# CEO of Your Career

**A**long with several other in-house counsel, I was invited last year by a law firm to participate in a panel discussion with the firm's associates. The discussion focused on many topics relevant to young lawyers, including career development and mentorship. Perhaps the best advice on those two topics came from a fellow panelist who encouraged the young lawyers to think of themselves as corporations.

She described it this way: You are the chief executive officer of "Your Name, Inc." As your own CEO, you must take responsibility and be accountable for all decisions relevant to your career and personal development. You should think of your relationship with your present employer as that of a joint venture partnership between your employer and Your Name, Inc. If and when the business relationship is no longer mutually beneficial, then it is best to end the relationship.

All publicly traded companies have a board of directors that reviews the company's overall business strategy, performance, and opportunities for growth. Similarly, you should have a board of directors that advises you on career development and performance and seeks opportunities for you to grow personally and professionally.

Your board members are your mentors. As you identify people to serve on your board, your guiding principle should be whether the members will always look out for your best interests. You should seek members with whom you share a common interest or bond. A diverse group offers different perspectives on difficult decisions.

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Over the years, I developed personal relationships with colleagues and friends who truly want me to succeed. These relationships resulted from shared interests and participation in activities outside of work. When putting together your own board for your legal career, here are several categories of persons to consider.

**Lawyer mentor at your firm.** A senior associate or partner at your firm who takes a personal interest in your development is key to climbing the ladder to partnership. You should look for a mentor who understands and exhibits the legal, ethical, interpersonal, and business development skills that the firm management team is looking for in its young lawyers. In addition, the mentor should be able to help you identify the partners who: (1) practice in the areas in which you are most interested; (2) have the biggest book of business; (3) give associates the most responsibility; and (4) will sing your praises to others when you do good work.

**Lawyer mentors at different firms.** If you are a sole practitioner, you may look

for other sole practitioners as mentors who can share similar experiences. If you are not a sole practitioner, you should include lawyers as mentors who do not work with you. You will want mentors who can answer the legal questions that you may not feel comfortable asking someone at your current firm. The questions may relate to ethics, legal issues, personality conflicts, or firm politics. These mentors can also counsel you as to whether you should pursue opportunities at a different firm or at a corporation. These mentors do not have to practice in the same area of law as you do, but simply be experienced lawyers who want you to succeed.

**Non-lawyer mentors.** Every young lawyer should have mentors who are not lawyers. These mentors can help you keep your career and practice in perspective. Your non-lawyer mentors can be college friends, accountants, financial or spiritual advisors, coaches, parents, a spouse, or other family members.

While your non-lawyer mentors may know very little about your daily practice, these persons should know you very well. They should know what makes you happy outside of work and help you stay focused on those things. They may encourage you to take a vacation, find time for a favorite hobby, or go to the doctor regularly. While your lawyer mentors advise you on your career, your non-lawyer mentors are there to advise you on your overall health and happiness.

Finally, no matter who you choose to serve on your board of directors, be sure to get people with varied experiences who truly have your best interests at heart. ★