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Mentoring: One of the keys to success

By **Natasha Innocenti**

Most of us have seen the statistics, but if you work in a law firm or closely with them, you don't need the numbers to tell you: The partnership ranks are dominated by men. What are the secrets of the women who make it? How did they do it? Was it something they brought to the table, like tenacity or good luck, or did it have more to do with the support provided by their firm? Can we bottle their experience and institutionalize it? In an attempt to encourage more women to scale the partnership ranks, and remain once they've gained the title, many firms are asking these questions.

One of the things successful women partners point to over and over again is the mentoring they received on their way up. The importance of having a good mentor cannot be underestimated, especially for someone battling years of built-in, unintentional prejudice and practice. To find out how to make sure your mentoring relationship is successful (no matter which side of the relationship you are on), I spoke with a number of women law firm partners about their experiences, what they learned and what works for the people they have mentored.

BE PROACTIVE

Very few women who are partners today grew up in firms with formal mentoring programs, though all the women I spoke with now practice in firms that have institutionalized such programs. Most of the women developed organic relationships early in their careers with senior men in their firm who they sought out as mentors. Sometimes this person was a partner they were supporting; in other cases the two just hit it off. The one common thread was that in each case, the woman sought out the relationship. So, the first lesson is to be proactive. Identifying your own specific needs and then lining up someone who can teach them to you is a key ingredient to getting the most out of a mentoring relationship. As Vera Elson, a partner at McDermott Will & Emery says, "Seek out the person you want to emulate, and then team up with them."

Most women say they have had more than one mentor during their career — both inside and outside their firm. Sometimes it can be helpful to have a professional mentor outside your firm — who can give you perspective about the wider world, how issues are han-



dled in other firms, the vagaries of different practice groups and/or geographic markets — to keep you informed and ready, no matter where your professional path takes you.

As you advance in your career, the type of mentor you need will evolve. In the beginning, you need someone (preferably within the firm) who can show you the ropes, identify the different personalities in the firm, explain how to get interesting assignments, and help you be recognized by the appropriate partners in your practice area.

Though some men say they are uncomfortable mentoring young

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women, most women partners I know have been mentored, successfully, by both men and women. There is one caveat, though: If your mentor is a man, you should also identify one or more strong women, particularly in your firm, you can learn from and look up to as role models.

It is important to respect your mentors and the advice they give. If your firm's program pairs you with someone you can't say that about, the relationship will not work. Instead, you should look for someone with whom you have chemistry, who has something to teach you and from whom you would like to learn. As Allison Leopold Tilley of Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman puts it, "We don't just leave it to chance, but if a mentoring relationship develops organically, we respect that." She says the firm recognizes that one's "career path and longevity is directly affected by having a mentor."

When selecting a mentor, look for someone who isn't ambivalent about his or her protégé's success. Truly successful mentors are confident enough to help a younger lawyer surpass them, to not let any of their own insecurities fetter the development of the person they are working with. As one woman partner puts it: "My first really great mentor had the self-confidence to know I was not going to support him forever, and he saw that as success." Another says: "The challenge with mentoring is to know when to let the strings go so the mentee can blossom."

LEARNING THE PRACTICE

On the practical side, a mentor to young lawyers should teach them the practice of law, give them exposure in the firm, and help them market themselves (e.g., by helping secure speaking engagements, taking them on client pitches, etc.). Most mentors also help young lawyers with their writing and pre-

sentation skills. These skills are extremely important when the time comes to market yourself and develop business — both crucial for getting and staying on the partnership track. McDermott's Elson considers early law practice to be "on-the-job training. You learn as you go."

Young lawyers also need help cultivating a finely tuned sense of judgment. Law firms make a grave but common error when they reduce mentoring to nothing more than skills training. Judgment helps define the professional.

The mentoring relationships that work seem to have strong mutual benefits. As Nicki Locker of Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati says, "You have to like each other and have tremendous loyalty. I would do anything for my mentees and they would do anything for me. The benefits are self-evident." Good mentors say they feel responsible for their mentees.

The challenge with mentoring is the same one that confronts professionals across the board, and that is finding the time. Like any important task, and to enable both the mentor and mentee to set aside the appropriate time, mentoring sessions should be scheduled. The following things need to be identified up front: the goals of the relationship; the logistics (when, where and how often meetings are to take place, over the phone or in person) and total time commitments; how confidential information will be handled; how long the relationship will last. Don't leave these things to chance, or you risk running into misunderstandings down the road.

THE BALANCING ACT

Mentoring relationships, when focused on purely professional issues, can be gender-neutral. However, they wander into gender-specific ground when they start touching on issues with which most professional women are struggling. In addition to offering guid-

ance on legal skills, law firm politics, writing, marketing and business development, some women lawyers also need help learning how to balance their careers and their home lives. Women who have experienced these same challenges are usually in the best position to offer guidance. Women mentors can advise younger women lawyers in the areas of time management and getting the right kinds of support at home. Practical suggestions may include choosing schools that are closer to the office, how to find the best day care facility, how to pack lunches while on a conference call, etc. — all tips that have come from their own experiences.

Of course, not all young women lawyers are raising children. In fact, while work-home balance is still more of a factor for women lawyers, an increasing number of young male lawyers are starting to face the same issues, "particularly if their wife or significant other works," notes Cynthia Clarfield Hess, a partner at Fenwick & West.

STOPPING THE BRAIN DRAIN

Senior women who have been mentoring for some time are beginning to share management's frustration over training and developing a population of excellent, even brilliant, young lawyers only to see them leave the law. One woman notes that "too many fabulous, talented women are opting out. There is a good chance the person you are helping will end up leaving the practice."

As more women ascend into law firm management, solutions beyond mentoring will have to be explored. Maybe the need to retain smart women partners will help lead to the end of the billable hour, or to changes in the timeline and track to partnership. One thing is clear — having a great mentor is necessary. The question is: Is it sufficient? ■



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