

Learning from Each Other: The Importance of Mentorship in the Practice of Law

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There is the old saying: “There’s no such thing as a stupid question.” Enter a new lawyer, freshly admitted to the practice of law and ready to tackle the world of defense litigation. The lawyer receives their first assignment — drafting a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim upon which relief can be sought. Except... where does the new lawyer begin?

For more seasoned attorneys, the answer is clear. However, this task can be daunting for the new lawyer, especially in the setting of a fast-paced litigation firm. Having a mentor is an invaluable part of being a young lawyer. A mentor can help answer questions you may not feel comfortable asking about at your firm or office, such as how to handle interpersonal relationships and negotiating your salary. Likewise, a mentor can help with working through the simplest of issues through to navigating how to handle an evidentiary hearing or trial.

Finding a mentor can happen in any number of ways. You may connect with your mentor through networking with a local voluntary bar association, law school alumni association, or your firm office. There may be a formal mentor-mentee “relationship” or an informal one developed through a series of interactions and conversations. The number of mentors you can have is limited only to the number of relationships you can foster.

Once you find a mentor, be cognizant of their time, ask your questions with a purpose, and be aware that they are taking time out of their busy day to help you. Repeatedly asking the same question may leave your mentor wondering if you are truly listening to their advice or recommendation. While this may seem intimidating at first, the relationship formed with your mentor can be instrumental in development as a young lawyer. The mentor may give insight into their past experiences, regale you with stories of their most recent jury trial (including how trial boxes apparently fell over and papers flew all over the road), and tell you a lesson they learned the hard way.

It may not be too long before the young lawyers of today become the mentors of tomorrow. And once that happens, remember that someone once took time out of their day to help you. Be present with your mentee. Avoid juggling multiple things if you are meeting with them, whether virtually or in person. Mentees may ask you a difficult question they are grappling with. Try to ensure that you answer their questions timely, as you would respond to a client.

The value of mentorship is cyclical. My mentor once said that the practice of law is ever evolving, and we, as lawyers, are charged with keeping up with the changes. Mentorship is not just for young lawyers but can extend to even the most experienced attorneys. For instance, young lawyers can bring their skills, familiarity, and comfort with technology to make a task more efficient and seamless.

Let’s turn our attention back to the new attorney. They have connected with a mentor (perhaps in their own office or through the Florida Defense Lawyers Association), and they are armed to tackle the previously overwhelming task of drafting the motion to dismiss. With our hypothetical new lawyer well on their way to success, I leave you with this quote by Lily Benjamin: “Regardless of our title or years of experience, we can learn from each other. Through mentoring and by being open to learn we can reach our ultimate potential.”