

Starting Out: 2000

Learning From Your Mentor

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LUCKY YOU! When you arrived at the firm last week, you learned that a second-year associate was assigned to be your mentor. You are excited at the prospect of having a mentor, but then you wonder: What can you learn from one who's just a second-year associate? Why isn't your mentor a partner who can promote your career? Can you really expect anything from someone who's assigned to help you?

Maybe your law firm hasn't assigned you a mentor. Does that mean you can't have one? What does the firm's lack of a mentoring program mean about the firm's commitment to you? How will it affect your future?

The rising popularity of mentoring in law firms is generating more questions than solutions. There is no doubt about the importance of mentoring relationships in lawyers' career development, but there is a lot of confusion about how mentoring happens and why it works. Whether your mentors are assigned to you or you find them yourself, understanding what mentoring is about will help you recognize and make the most of the mentoring opportunities that come your way.

The Purpose of Mentoring

The fundamental purpose of mentoring is learning. A mentor is someone who takes an interest in you and helps you learn what you need to know to become a successful lawyer. As you form your professional identity, having mentors lets you learn from people with more experience, diverse perspectives, and different personal styles. By observing and interacting with a mentor, you learn more quickly than by trial and error; you get individual attention, encouragement and feedback; you are challenged to stretch, grow and become more self-reliant; and you gain important personal contacts and access to professional resources.

The classical notion of a mentor as an old, wise and trusted advisor who takes you under his wing and expedites your career has been replaced with a paradigm better suited to the fast-paced, high-pressure environment that lawyers work in today. Mentoring now concentrates on your professional learning and development, not a mentor's sponsorship of your career. Mentors no longer carry the burden of directing the mentoring relationship, and mentees no longer depend on their mentors for career advancement. As a mentee, you share responsibility for setting mentoring priorities and goals and **ensuring that the relationship stays on track**. Rather than instruct you or give you answers, today's mentors facilitate your learning — and the learning is your responsibility.

In this new paradigm, you can expect to have many mentors at different times and for different purposes. Some may guide you for many years, while others will have only a brief influence. One mentor is rarely sufficient in the course of a career, as no one person can fulfill all of your development needs. Mentors may act as coaches, role models, teachers, sounding boards, social directors, confidantes, protectors, champions, and a host of other roles. Few fill all of these roles. Instead, they serve limited functions to achieve specific mentoring objectives.



Your mentors may be older than you or they may be peers or even lawyers junior to you who have particular experience, knowledge or perspectives that you can learn from. But you also have to bring something of value to the relationship. No longer a one-way relationship, mentoring is now seen as a learning partnership between mentor and mentee in which both gain a better understanding of themselves, their workplace and their profession.

The best mentoring relationships form naturally as people work together and grow to like and respect each other professionally. These natural mentoring relationships take time to develop, so many law firms have instituted mentoring programs to expedite the process — programs that assign partners or experienced associates as mentors to new associates. When you are new to a firm, an assigned mentor can jump-start your learning experience. But not all firms assign mentors to new associates; even firms that are highly committed to associate development may forego a formal mentoring program. If your firm does not assign you a mentor, it's up to you to find your own. This may sound like a daunting undertaking, but with a little initiative and planning, you can readily find the mentors you need.

If Your Mentor's Assigned

In a formal mentoring program, assigned mentors usually have defined responsibilities which are determined by the objectives of the program. Mentoring assignments are usually limited in duration and in what they hope to accomplish.

You may dislike the notion of such defined relationships, but delineating specific ground rules actually increases the likelihood of a successful relationship. When your goals and expectations are clearly understood, you and your mentor can concentrate on achieving them together. As you work together, you get to know each other.

In the process, some assigned relationships become profound and personal, while others never move beyond simply a transfer of knowledge from mentor to mentee. If you and your mentor hit it off, you may decide together to continue or expand the mentoring relationship beyond the mentoring guidelines. If the relationship remains narrowly focused and impersonal, learn what you can from this mentor and look for other mentoring relationships that may be more satisfying.

If your firm has assigned you a mentor, you truly are lucky. You have at least one contact who is responsible for helping you get started in the firm and in practice. Some firms will give you a memo or booklet that describes the firm's mentoring program and what kind of help you can expect from your assigned mentor. Carefully read the written description of the program, especially its stated purpose or objectives, and the roles and responsibilities of the mentor. If the program also expects you to take responsibility for some aspects of the mentoring relationship, be sure you know what those responsibilities are. Understanding what the program expects of you and your mentor is essential for a worthwhile mentoring experience.

If your firm does not give you any mentoring program guidelines, you need to find out exactly what your and your mentor's roles are. Start by asking your mentor. If he or she isn't sure, ask the program coordinator, professional development director, or a senior lawyer in the firm.

The most typical mentoring program for first-year associates is a peer mentoring system, where second- to fourth-year associates are assigned to help new lawyers learn about life in the firm. The mentor explains the nuts and bolts of law firm life and culture, provides advice and warnings about work assignments and partners, introduces you to others in the firm, answers everyday practice



questions, and accompanies you to firm social events. This is not a mentor in the classical sense, and this associate won't have the reputation, devotion or clout that will assure your career success.

Nonetheless, a peer mentor's experience and knowledge can benefit you in significant ways. As someone who has recently traveled the path on which you are embarking, this assigned mentor can offer practical insights into issues like work assignments, self-management and law firm politics. This mentor can help you troubleshoot a problem and conduct reality checks when you are feeling professionally insecure. This mentor also represents the beginning of an internal network that is important to your work experience, development and advancement in the firm.

Some mentoring programs are more developmentally oriented and count on mentors to guide new associates' professional growth. These mentors may be expected to monitor your work, give you extensive feedback, coach you to higher performance levels, or counsel you about career advancement strategies. Because these mentors need more extensive experience and greater perspective in order to give you career advice, they tend to be partners, counsel or senior associates. The good news is that these more senior mentors can be enormously helpful to you. The bad news is that in spite of their good intentions, they may be so busy that they may have little time for you. Do not despair! Take the initiative; make it easy for these mentors to help you.

Regardless of whether your assigned mentor has a social role or a developmental one, here are some tips for getting your relationship off to a good start:

- Find out what you can about your mentor in advance of your first meeting. You can find such information on the firm's intranet, in its marketing materials, or by asking others in the firm.
- Don't wait for your mentor to call you. If you have not heard from him or her soon after your arrival at the firm, call or go by the mentor's office and introduce yourself. Say that you are looking forward to the mentoring relationship.
- The first meeting is a good time to talk about mentoring in general, including your own and your mentor's prior experience (or lack of it) in mentoring relationships. It is also a time to develop rapport, find personal or professional connections, and get to know each other.
- Be sure you and your mentor have a common understanding about your mentoring relationship. Some of the areas to clarify include: What kinds of things should you bring up to your mentor? What kind of help can you expect? Will your conversations remain confidential? How often and how regularly will you and your mentor meet? How should you record the time you and your mentor spend together? Know what you can contribute to the relationship, and whether or not the program guidelines explicitly place any responsibilities on you. You might be expected to play a leading role in the mentoring relationship (e.g., initiating meetings with the mentor), or it may be sufficient for you to be enthusiastic, receptive and responsive to your mentor. If you and your mentor have different assumptions about your relationship, it's important to find out — and clear them up — early in the process.
- Decide what you would like to learn from your mentor within the guidelines set for the program. Be as specific as you can. If you have identified learning goals, be prepared to discuss them. If you don't have specific goals yet, your mentor may be able to help you decide on some that are appropriate at this early stage of your career. As the relationship continues, however, you should become more self-directed as you become familiar with law practice and get a better sense of what your development needs are.
- As your relationship progresses, try to gauge the mentor's interest in you. If he or she takes a genuine interest in helping you, your relationship may deepen and benefit you in countless ways. Accept and reciprocate the mentor's commitment. If the mentor seems to be going through the motions without enthusiasm, or has been drafted involuntarily into the mentoring



program, you can still benefit, but in a more limited way. Enjoy the relationship for what it offers, then look for additional mentors to serve your other needs.

No Formal Program?

Mentoring occurs informally in all firms. If yours does not assign someone to be your mentor, you can still have valuable mentoring relationships with lawyers in the firm.

At first, you may just need to establish some contacts with people who can explain the facts of firm life to you. That involves finding someone with whom you are compatible and who is willing to share such information. Do not expect a partner to fill this role. Look for an associate who has been with the firm a year or more. If you can't identify a good prospect, ask your Professional Development Director, a savvy legal assistant, or your secretary to introduce you to someone who can help you.

Soon, however, you will want mentors who will be learning facilitators, career counselors, or advocates. You will be able to find such mentors when you need them if you start looking right away. As a general rule, stay alert for people who take an interest in you as a lawyer. There will be more of these people than you imagine. Within your firm, your supervising partners, the Marketing Director or Executive Director, lawyers you sit on committees with or play on the basketball team with, all are potential mentors. Be receptive to them when they offer to help you. Take advantage of those moments when someone wiser and more experienced is available and willing to answer your questions, offer advice, or help you move ahead in the firm.

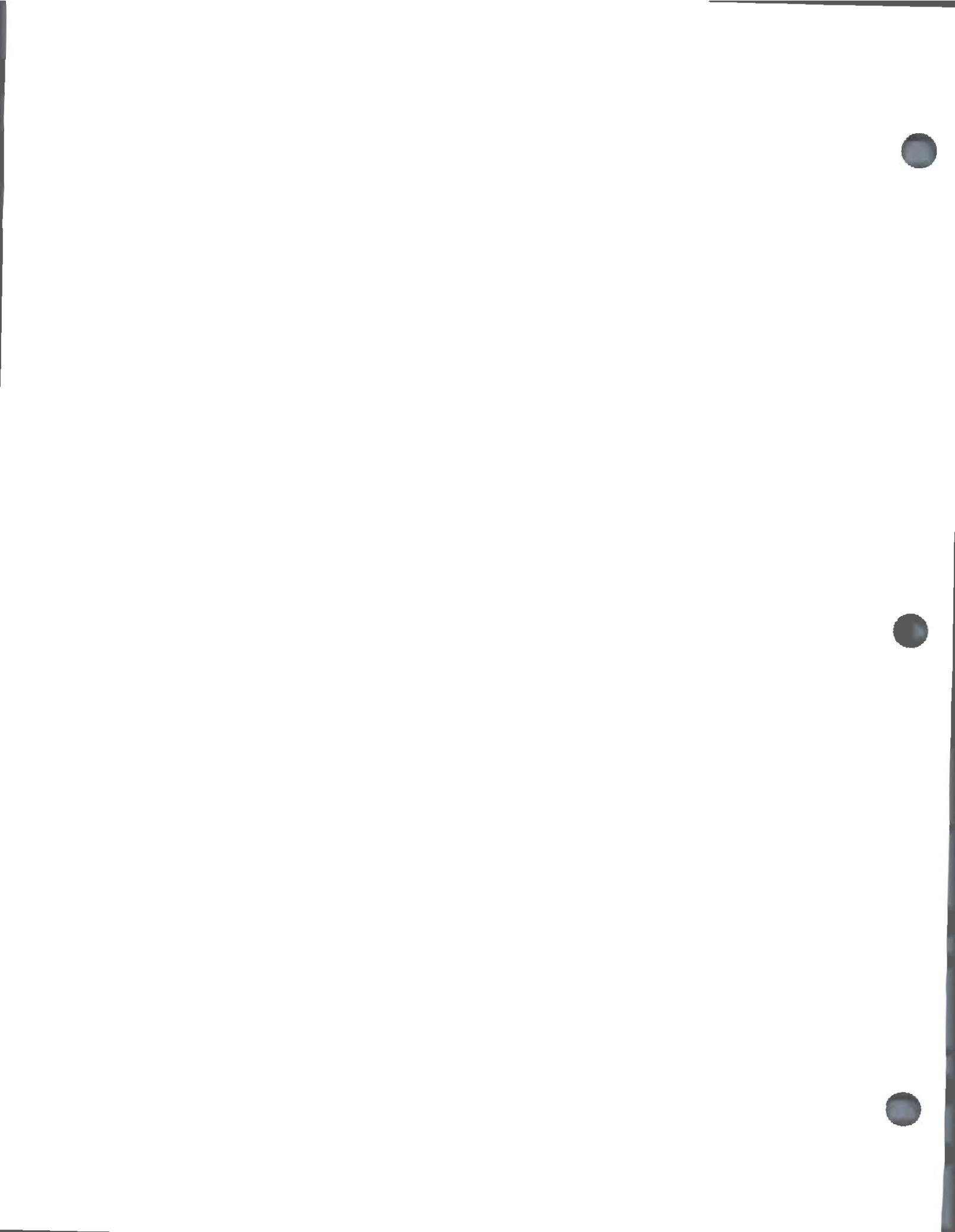
Watch for learning opportunities. If you are aware of your learning needs and interests, you can transform simple assignments and routine encounters into powerful learning experiences. For example, if you accompany your supervising partner to a client meeting, think of some pertinent questions for the partner before and after the session. Inquire about the history of the partner's relationship with the client or why the partner selected a particular strategy or line of reasoning. If you do your homework, show that you are interested, and ask thoughtful questions, the partner will most likely be impressed and respond approvingly. This could spark the partner's interest in you as a potential mentee.

Remember, however, that mentoring relationships take time to grow; you don't acquire mentors overnight. Here are some measures to help you start your search for mentors:

- Be seen as capable, eager and committed to learning. Associates who are perceived as "rising stars" attract mentors. To create that perception, build a solid reputation as a lawyer who works hard and does excellent work. Have a positive attitude. Make yourself visible in the firm through high-profile assignments and committees.
- Demonstrate your commitment to the firm. Because of the high turnover among associates, many experienced lawyers are reluctant to invest their time and energy in associates who will soon leave. They have to believe that you will be in the firm long enough to make their personal investment in you worthwhile. If you want them to be committed to you, you have to be willing to make a commitment to them and to the firm.
- Be a worthy mentee. Consider what you can bring to a mentoring relationship and why a mentor would be interested in working with you. Understand not just your learning needs but also your strengths, and the areas where you perform especially well. For example, your technical expertise, knowledge of a developing area of law, or intellectual curiosity can all be important assets in a mentoring relationship.



- Build a network of potential mentors. You have to get out and meet other lawyers in your firm; they are your pool of potential mentors. As you get to know them, consider their particular skills and talents, and what you could learn from them. Later, when you ask someone for mentoring assistance, you are more likely to get it if you have established a personal connection — and a reputation for integrity. As you form these relationships, be generous with your time and assistance, and be a person who can be trusted. Do not underestimate the value of small courtesies and considerations extended to others.
- Understand yourself. What are your ambitions? What drives you? What are your priorities? What do you want to learn? The better you understand your needs and learning objectives, the easier it will be to set specific goals and find mentors who can help you achieve them.
- Target long-term and short-term development goals for yourself. With these goals in mind, consider the kind of mentors you need. One person will probably not be able to help you with all your goals, so articulating them will help you identify suitable mentors for each. For example, if you want to be better at developing business, you might look for a successful rainmaker who will act as a role model and introduce you to clients; if you want to improve your trial skills, you might benefit more from a patient litigator who will teach you the fine points and give you feedback and advice. Once you know the kind of mentors you want, look at the prospective mentors in your network to identify those who have the appropriate characteristics and who are in a position to help you reach your targeted goals.
- Know what you want of your mentors. When you ask someone to be a mentor, you don't need to use the word "mentor," but you do need to be precise about what you would like them to do and the time commitment that would be involved. Be realistic about the substance of your request and tactful and professional in your approach. Describe your goals and explain how your proposal will benefit your professional development, the mentor, and the firm's business goals. Point out what your own responsibilities and contributions to the relationship will be.
- Make efficient use of your mentors' time and respect their time constraints. Before you meet, prepare an agenda, in writing or at least in your mind. When you meet, ask if it is all right to identify some specific items you would like to cover and if your mentor has any items to add. At the end of each meeting, plan for the next meeting.
- Listen attentively to your mentors. You have to pay close attention in order to understand the information, feedback and advice they give you. Observe them carefully, ask probing questions, and seek challenges. Be receptive to new ideas and act on the feedback you receive. It is important to pay heed to what your mentor says, but that does not mean that you should accept his or her advice without question. A mentor can make suggestions and give you guidance, but your career is in your hands and you must use your independent judgment in making career decisions.
- Appreciate your mentors. Show your gratitude to them and tell others how helpful they have been.
- Assess your progress periodically. Every few months, decide if you are on track to reach your goals, want to reset priorities, or make changes in your mentoring relationships. On a more frequent basis, take time to reflect on what you have learned. Try to do this with your mentor, but you can do it on your own as well. Think about the developmental experiences you had in the last week or two and your reactions to them. Ask yourself:
 - How did I feel about the experience?
 - What did I learn?
 - What went well?
 - What went wrong?
 - What do I wish I had done differently?
 - How can I apply the lessons I learned to become a better lawyer?



Bring your insights to your mentor and ask for his or her reactions and input. If you do this reflection exercise regularly, you will optimize what you learn in your mentoring relationship and you will also develop a valuable life-long learning habit.

Conclusion

Mentoring relationships are more than mere luck. Whether your mentors are formally assigned or develop naturally, rich and meaningful mentoring relationships can be yours if you prepare yourself for them and stay open to mentoring possibilities. Benjamin Disraeli once said that the secret of success is to be ready for your opportunity when it comes. Get yourself ready. Here's wishing you success.

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