Mentoring Matters: Teaching Law Students the Value of the Mentoring Relationship

By Cheryl E. Zuckerman

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“Those who need mentoring the most are the ones who are reluctant to reach out and take advantage of the opportunity. Mentoring cannot be forced, but a good match can be a highly effective and rewarding relationship, with the mentors often getting the most out of it.” —John W. Kozyak, Esq.1

I teach Legal Communication and Research Skills, a course designed to prepare first-year law students for the demands of contemporary legal practice. During the third week of school, I invited a second-year law student to speak with my class. The student spoke candidly about the course. He told my students about the importance of learning the practical skills embodied within the curriculum. After taking questions for approximately 10 minutes, he put his name and email address on the whiteboard and told my students that he would be happy to speak with them anytime regarding concerns that they may have about the course or law school in general. Both he and I encouraged my students to reach out to him. Surprisingly, notwithstanding several nudges, less than a handful of my 38 students actually took the time to contact him. I was shocked. I realized that my students did not comprehend the importance of the mentor-mentee relationship. They did not appreciate the inherent value of the second-year law student’s offer to provide helpful advice, without judgment, bias, or competition. They did not understand that the right mentor could change the direction of their legal careers and their lives.

Lawyers should strive to have at least one professional mentor during the course of their careers. I have several mentors and treasure the unique relationship I have with each one of them. One relationship is more than 12 years old and is still rewarding. Another relationship is less than six months old and has been very informative and fun at the same time. Regardless of the length of the relationships, in addition to providing career advice, my mentors have continually stressed the importance of achieving the appropriate work/life balance. I know that the value of the feedback and advice that my mentors have provided me throughout my career is immeasurable. I make a point of telling this to my students in class.

For example, I tell my students that during my first week of practice, my opposing counsel, a senior partner at a reputable firm, bullied me because I was fresh out of law school. I then tell my students how a partner at my firm helped me resolve the issue effectively and gracefully. I also tell them that after four years of practicing general complex commercial litigation, I made the decision to specialize in employment law. My mentor, a senior partner in my firm who hired me upon my law school graduation, selflessly helped me achieve that goal.

A mentor can be invaluable to a junior attorney. Mentors not only provide advice about substantive and procedural legal matters, but also assist junior attorneys with social and professional development. In other words, in addition to explaining the procedural mechanism for admitting documents into evidence, a mentor can provide guidance regarding how to deal with difficult partners and clients. A mentor can also provide advice regarding how to network, how to generate business, what area of law to specialize in, and how to effectively

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1 John W. Kozyak, Esq. is a founding partner of Kozyak Tropin & Throckmorton, P.A. in Miami, Florida. He is also the founder of the Kozyak Minority Mentoring Foundation, which provides assistance to minorities interested in pursuing legal careers, mentoring programs, and networking opportunities. The Foundation finds experienced lawyers and judges to mentor students throughout Florida.
manage caseloads. Regardless of how smart, hardworking, or dedicated a first-year attorney may be, experience plays a major role in becoming an effective advocate and a successful attorney. Input from experienced mentors can provide junior attorneys with the guidance they need. It can also limit the frustration and anxiety that often accompany the first few years of legal practice.

The social nature of the practice of law is critical. Being a mentee is an element of being a well-rounded lawyer that students must embrace while in law school. Practicing law is more than research, writing, motion practice, and being a zealous advocate. In order to effectively practice law, a junior associate should also know when to seek advice and how to get it. But finding the right mentor is tricky. Even if a law firm has a formal mentoring program, the match may not be a good fit. Indeed, most successful mentor-mentee relationships occur organically and develop at judicial receptions, bar functions, after a knock on a door to ask a question, or simply when an attorney is placed on a trial team or assigned to work on a multi-lawyer transactional deal. It does not matter where the mentor falls within the hierarchy of the firm. It does not matter whether the mentor is another associate, a senior partner, a professor, or a judge. What matters is that the junior attorney trusts the mentor, the relationship is easy, and the connection is genuine and reciprocal. Although most mentor-mentee relationships are informal, the relationship must be treated with respect. New attorneys must be committed to the relationship. They must understand the value of someone else’s time.

Through role-playing, hypotheticals, and recitation of real-life examples, we can show our students that mentoring matters. We can tell them the story of the junior associate whose client calls, emails, and sends text messages late at night and over the weekend. We can tell them the story of the mid-level associate who is stuck in a career slump and looking for inventive ways to generate business. We can tell them the story of the senior associate who simply wants to leave the big firm to work in the public sector. What do these stories have in common? They are all realistic and can be resolved through the thoughtful advice of a mentor.

Law students should understand that the mentor-mentee relationship is circular; one day the mentee becomes the mentor. I tell my students about how I became a mentor and helped junior associates deal with, among other things, noncommunicative partners, the annual review process, and the procedural aspects of the practice of law. I tell my students that to be well-rounded, practice-ready, and effective advocates, they need to understand the value of the mentoring relationship and the social aspect of the practice of law. During the course of the semester, I sense a shift in their understanding and the development of our own mentor-mentee relationship. In my view, legal writing professors should discuss the mentor-mentee relationship as soon and as often as possible to help our students get ready for the demands of contemporary legal practice. As their mentors, we owe that to them.

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