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SUSAN SALTONSTALL DUNCAN • TIPS & TACTICS FOR NEW LAWYERS

Building Strong Mentor Relationships

While all professionals can benefit from mentors at nearly every level of their careers, new lawyers have perhaps the most to gain from productive mentoring relationships. Finding and taking advantage of the benefits of mentors is a proactive, ongoing activity. It is never too soon to begin.

Define the concept of mentor. Most of us think of a mentor as an older, more experienced person, usually a senior partner. But other, less-senior lawyers, perhaps even some junior to you, may well have skills and expertise you lack and could mentor you. Also, non-lawyers might provide much-needed perspective about business, technology, finance, networking, sales and other areas. And don't overlook judges and other lawyers who serve in public or government capacities.

Know your needs. To find an effective mentor, you must formulate your goals and determine what it is you want a mentor to advise you on. Some of the areas you're likely to need guidance in include legal skills and work issues, time and practice management, business development, firm culture and internal politics, client relations, leadership skills and work-life balance issues. Be clear about your expectations.

Adjust with the times. You'll need a variety of mentors over the course of your career, as your current skills,

responsibilities, perspectives and feedback requirements develop. No one person can fill all your needs at any given time. Be prepared to change mentors to fulfill your goals as the need arises.

Look near and far. You may want to cast your net more broadly than you think. You can find good mentors in many places. First, look internally to those lawyers and non-lawyers in your office who can guide you. Second, look to lawyers in other firms and legal organizations. Then expand your search to include bar association events, CLE conferences and other venues and networks, such as college classmates, business networking groups and community organizations. There are even online communities that can provide advice on issues that challenge you.

Form a trusting partnership. In some instances, new lawyers are formally assigned to a mentor. This match may or may not work for you. Even if it does, you'll need to build several mentor relationships over time based on your needs and those who become available to you. Mentor partnerships are more effective when both mentee and mentor can self-select based on



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mutual interests, chemistry and shared benefit. As the mentee, you receive helpful advice and tutelage. You, in turn, need to reward your mentor with respect, hard work and achievement. ■

Checklist

- Be proactive about finding a mentor. Don't expect one to find you. And don't assume that the one to whom you might have been assigned will satisfy all your needs.
- Define your needs. Be clear about the skills, contacts or advice you want.
- Define your network. Look inside and out, to lawyers and non-lawyers.
- Look for mutual outside interests that will help cement the personal aspects of your relationship with your mentor.
- Don't try to mirror yourself in your mentor search. Look for someone who has different skills and approaches to things. That's how you will learn the most.
- Don't ask for an overcommitment of time and effort from a mentor. Be specific about what you need in the short term, and build the relationship over time.
- Build in reciprocal value. Show your respect and appreciation, work hard, and, if possible, provide input or contacts that will benefit your mentor.