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## **The Evolution of the Mentoring Movement**

**By Susan G. Manch**

The quality and availability of associate mentoring today is not a great deal different than it was in the mid-1990's when it was a top ten-list demand from associates in large law firms (*perhaps second only to money*). But the "movement" among law firm leaders with vision and insight to provide this important developmental experience has taken on a life of its own and is continuing to evolve in an interesting fashion. Part of the evolution process has been the refining what we mean by the actual word, **mentoring**. Associates once wishfully defined mentoring as guidance and a watchful eye, help maneuvering to partnership or into that cushy in-house job, or first divs on all the best assignments. Partners viewed mentoring through a filter formed by the kind of relationships and experience they themselves had as associates—good or bad. Law firms, in general, viewed mentoring as important, but didn't feel comfortable promising much in the way of mentoring because they couldn't force partners to mentor. So as 2002 begins to wane, we find associates not really knowing what to ask for, and partners and firms not really sure of what they can reasonably offer in the way of mentoring. The good news is that the "Mentoring Movement" has undergone an evolutionary process that has provided clues that point to a more successful future for mentoring.

A brief history of the Mentoring Movement may be useful here. What we call mentoring today is a way of describing the apprentice/protégé relationship that historically supported the development of private practice attorneys as long as firms have been around. A senior lawyer would pass on his or (much more rarely in those days) her knowledge and experience and make sure the new attorney become a true "member" of the firm. In those days every law student hired was considered a potential partner and this type of individualized support was seen as critical to individual development and the inculcation of each lawyer into the firm's unique culture. In the late 70's and early 80's, everything changed. With rising associate salaries (thanks to the New York firms), everyone started working harder and the path to partnership became a bit less of a sure thing. By the time the stock market crashed in 1987, most associates felt there was very little mentoring going on but it wasn't until the demand for legal services rebounded that they felt empowered enough to ask for it. From 1993 on, large law firm associates began to demand that firms provide some form of mentoring beyond what you could find on your own. A combination of high attrition rates and a lack of senior associates caused by classes decimated by the downturn forced firms to take a hard look at how they might improve the overall associate experience.

With retention at the forefront of the law firm agenda, firms across the country and even a few across the pond embraced the idea of creating programs that would provide associates with the mentoring they wanted and probably needed. They focused on creating programs that gave associates the ultimate control over the nature of the relationship and the frequency of contacts. Mentoring relationships were to be

confidential, mentors were often drawn from outside the pool of an associate's direct supervisors or even the practice group, and a committee or administrator was assigned oversight responsibility to make sure it all worked as planned. Pairs were duly matched and mentors and mentees introduced to all that could be made of their relationships. In the best programs, partners were given training in communication skills and were provided with clear ideas of how they might support associates. Associates often received direction as well, and were shown how to use the program effectively. They were told to share their thoughts, concerns, and questions with this more senior attorney in the knowledge that the relationship was confidential and provided distance from their everyday working relationships.

Most programs got off to a great start. Many firms held festive kick-off parties to launch the program, hoping the bonding would begin immediately. Mentoring couples met for lunch or dinner and talked, promising to stay in touch and keep open doors to one another. Best intentions abounded, but not much followed. If the partner and associate were not in the same practice group, shared little common ground, or were both busy, the meetings probably ended after the first lunch—the mentoring relationship a victim of the rigors of law firm life. Mentoring programs entered that never-never land of “tried it, but it didn't work” developmental assistance programs. Even firms who loved their programs admitted that they only worked for a small group of participants—arguably those who would have found or been mentors regardless of the formal program.

It wasn't all for naught. Some great things happened on the way and much was learned. There were associates who did find great mentors through these programs, or at the very least, gained a greater understanding of how to find one on their own. There were partners who learned they could indeed be mentors after all and who found they looked forward to it. There were firms who saw the potential developmental opportunities that could arise in mentoring relationships and who realized they could play an important role in a comprehensive approach to attorney training and development. And there were lots and lots of breadcrumbs to follow on the path to “What went wrong?”

The law firm environment was changing radically in the late 1990's and the approach that seemed to make the most sense for mentoring failed to evolve with the firms it was meant to serve. The core goals for mentoring programs made all the sense in the world then, and still do:

- Make certain that every attorney is given the opportunity to develop the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to produce the highest quality legal work;
- Ensure that developing attorneys are integrated and oriented into the firm culture and work environment; and
- Create an atmosphere that attracts and retains the best, most talented lawyers.

Firms thought they understood what it would take to meet those goals during the time that they were considering creative approaches to associate mentoring. But that was before the salary wars and the dot.com revolution and the new lawyer shortage and the

business boom and finally, the bust. Mentoring programs designed and put in place before 1998 were suddenly quaint and frankly obsolete.

Yet the goals discussed above are relevant regardless of the market, and associates still have mentoring on their top ten list. So the approach has to be freshened to allow for consideration of some new realities that include 1950 to 2100 hour norms for both partners and associates, higher billing rates for associates and greater pressures to amortize those higher salaries, megafirms with hundreds of attorneys and offices spread all over creation, cost-conscious clients, and associates trying to build career protection by making sure they get the right skill set. Most firms are taking a new look at professional development as a total package that includes mentoring in some fashion—reviewing what they currently do, how well it works, and where the holes are. In many cases, firms have come to see that a comprehensive approach to development has three component parts:

1. Formal training programs inside and outside the firm
2. Training that takes place in the assignment process or “hands-on” learning
3. Individualized support and guidance

Each aspect of this developmental triumvirate supports the others and none are as strong alone. While most firms have or are carefully building their formal training programs and are able to keep a flow of challenging work in front of their associates, the majority still struggle with the regular provision of individualized support, *or you guessed it*—mentoring. Some of the obstacles seem insurmountable, but firms have been rising to the occasion. New programs and approaches are beginning to take shape and mentoring—albeit in a form that looks very different from its previous incarnation—is back. The new approach to mentoring (and one that actually seems to be working) is very structured, focused on professional development and shared accountability for that development. It recognizes the realities of private practice in the 2000’s, but manages to recreate a bit of a feeling of earlier times in the history of law firm life. The programs that are working today are a combination of the apprentice model of the past and the best practices that came from the formal mentoring programs of more recent history. Programs that are working have the following things in common:

- They have a clearly defined purpose, structure, and set of expectations for participants;
- They focus on assisting in the development of seniority and practice-appropriate skills, knowledge, and experience for associates;
- They are practice-centered and foster relationships within the practice area;
- They are flexible in shape, depending on the numbers of senior and junior attorneys;
- They offer multiple layers of individualized support, recognizing that no one person can address the needs of each developing attorney;
- They are tied in to the firm’s other attorney management systems, such as performance appraisal, promotion, and merit-based compensation and bonuses;
- They provide training and ongoing support for all participants; and

- They measure the effectiveness of the program and continually adjust its structure to meet the evolving needs of each incoming class.

These are the hallmarks of effective law firm mentoring in the 2000's. Every firm's program is slightly different, depending on the unique needs of their associate body. Some have some form of individual pairings, while others choose to employ a cluster-type approach that creates a small team of junior and senior attorneys. The names of these programs have changed, as well. In an effort to avoid the expectations and sometimes stigma of (based on failed past efforts) mentoring programs, the newest programs are Professional Development Initiatives or Advisory Programs. They are named in a way that reflects the fact that the primary focus is professional development, not the delivery of warm fuzzies.

I have great hopes for the future of mentoring in its truest form in the law firms of the future because the firms of today are creating more adaptable programs. Programs aspire to be agile and those that achieve it will support developmental objectives over the long term. The key is being able to admit what isn't working and move beyond it. They say history repeats itself, but in this case it appears that history is only improving upon what was always a really good thing.

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