

Published in *Professional Development Quarterly*, August/September 1998.

## CAN YOU TRAIN PARTNERS TO BE GOOD MENTORS?

by Susan G. Manch

Is it possible to instill in partners the stellar interpersonal skills necessary to provide you with a cadre of warm, sensitive mentors for your struggling new associates? The answer is no.

But do not despair! That "no" reflects the absurdity of the suggestion that you can "train" individuals to become natural mentors and magically endow them with the characteristics that will draw new associates to them. Most of you probably have at least one excellent mentor who nurtures and develops the many associates who are naturally drawn to him/her because of his/her winning personality and sage advice. The seeming ease with which these gifted individuals engage others and develop successful mentoring relationships belies the inherent challenges of such a feat. You may look around you and lament the lack of these natural mentors, but ultimately I have found that *all* kinds of lawyers can be excellent mentors given a thoughtfully crafted mentoring program and a little bit of guidance.

By thoughtfully crafted program I mean one that is not dependant upon the mentor's personality. Many firms tell partners to take associates out to lunch once or twice a year and call it a mentoring program. I will not say that these lunches cannot provide opportunities for positive mentoring, but there can be so much more to mentoring than this. Lawyers who are uncomfortable chatting over sandwiches may be able to make other strong contributions toward mentoring associates. Guidance and ideas are the key and here is where the need for training comes in.

Recognizing that you cannot change the person, you can focus on the *behaviors* that you hope to influence. Identifying key mentoring behaviors you wish to reinforce, and providing training in those behaviors, will help you make the most of your program. Behaviors such as learning how to set ground rules for a mentoring relationship, developing realistic goals and objectives with the mentee, planning appropriate mentoring activities, honing listening skills, and finding effective methods for giving feedback and advice are all mentoring behaviors that can be successfully taught. The key to effective training is an organized approach and an emphasis on practical application.

As you consider the possibility of training your partner mentors, ask yourself these questions:

- Does your mentoring program provide both mentors and mentees with a clear definition of the objectives of the program, guidelines of what is expected of mentors and mentees, and avenues for evaluation of the success of the program?

*(If your answer to this question is no, you know what you have to do.)*

- Is firm management committed to the concept of associate development and retention and are they willing to throw some weight behind the effort to get partners to participate in a training program?

*(If not, put on your lobbying hat and start adding up the costs of associate attrition at your firm to present to firm management.)*

- Have you determined what it is that you hope the training process will accomplish?

*(Setting reasonable and specific goals for the behaviors you want to influence among your mentors is the best way to ensure that your training will pay dividends.)*

- Do you know the partners well enough to provide a trainer with a good idea of what will fly (and what will not) in a workshop setting?

*(Good trainers should be able to adjust their training materials and style to match that of the audience. You should be able to work with the trainer to develop an outline that will address the issues you want to focus on in a manner that will hold the partners' attention. Reject the idea of a canned workshop that you cannot tailor to your needs.)*

Once you have resolved the majority of these issues, it will be possible for you to offer an effective, stimulating training program for partner mentors. Providing training can be a great way to set a positive tone for the beginning of a new or re-energized mentoring program. Successful mentors do not have to come out of one mold. Partners with a variety of personalities can be positive mentors if they are shown how to use their individual strengths to their best advantage. In my experience, those charged with the responsibility of mentoring junior associates are hungry for ideas on what to do with them, and the ways in which they can be most helpful to them. Working with the mentors to address their concerns and to help them develop creative solutions to their own mentoring challenges can increase the effectiveness of partner time spent carrying out these responsibilities.

Of course after that it will be time to train the mentees! But that is a subject for another day.

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