

# **THE MENTORING PROGRAM MAKEOVER:**

## **A Model for Retention and Professional Development**

*by Susan G. Manch*

Many firms have them, most associates want them, and they are always highlighted in the recruiting brochure--What are they? **Mentoring programs** in law firms have been touted alternately as the ultimate path to retention and professional development or as disastrous forced relationships. In law firms throughout the country, the availability of a mentoring program has signified a commitment on the part of the firm to the development of its associates. Also, the programs have served as evidence of a firm's commitment to diversity and the success of women and minority associates. Finally, because positive relationships with partners appear to make the key difference in retaining top performers, mentoring programs represent a means of creating an environment in which such relationships can be built and nurtured.

In the rebounding legal services market, many firms have more work than they can handle and everyone, associate and partner alike, is working at maximum output. While the upswing in business signals greater opportunities for interesting work and enhanced career potential for many attorneys, it also has an isolating impact that creates a loss of communication and time for activities in which relationships can be built. Many associates and partners are concerned with the lack of community feeling, the loss of time for informal relationships with colleagues, and the pressing need among new associates and lateral hires for one-on-one developmental assistance.

After many years, and too many different models to discuss, mentoring programs are still considered an important means for firms to answer these concerns and other attorney development issues. But the truth is, most mentoring programs do not work. They have rarely lived up to the ambitious goals and objectives set for them. Today, the loss of top performers to in-house jobs and the government, the failure of most firms to retain and promote women and minorities, and the eight-year downward trend for private practice as the first year employment choice of law students<sup>1</sup> point to a need to rethink the design and focus of mentoring programs.

To address these concerns, associate development committees and legal personnel administrators have struggled with the design and implementation of mentoring programs. Regardless of the careful planning

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<sup>1</sup>Class of 1996 Employment Report and Salary Survey, National Association for Law Placement.

involved, most of the programs in place do not accomplish their goals and I suggest that it is time for a new model. It definitely is time to change the name.

## **MENTORING VS. COACHING**

First, the name change. Let's stop calling it mentoring. Becoming a "*mentor*" is a pretty lofty goal. A real mentor would take a hand-picked associate under his or her wing, guide the associate's pathway to advancement, and foster their acceptance among the other partners. Anyone who has ever had a true mentor in their career knows that the relationship stemmed from mutual respect, earned over time. Being a mentor to an associate is a heavy responsibility, particularly when mentees are being *assigned* to them! Assigned mentoring relationships with those kind of expectations may be seen as an additional burden to an already overflowing plate.

Let's find a word that better matches the kind of experience that can honestly be attained in such a relationship. "*Coaching*" is a word that evokes a very different feeling. It brings to mind the picture of a senior figure giving encouragement and guidance in short bursts, on the fly, as the game is being played. It is a more realistic way to describe the way partner/associate relationships actually play out on a day-to-day basis.

Beyond making unrealistic demands of partners, another reason mentoring programs fail to achieve the results of attorney development and retention is because there are not clear goals set for the programs. A successful coaching program must have clearly defined goals and objectives, it must be tied to the existing professional development strategy, and it must appeal to the partners who will shoulder the time burden and responsibility.

## **ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL COACHING PROGRAM**

Key elements that should be in place to ensure greater success of a coaching program would include the following:

- An associate development committee or legal personnel administrator who can create, manage, and evaluate the program
- Defined goals and specific objectives tied to existing professional development strategies
- A systematic method for matching associates to coaches, taking into consideration personality, practice area, and time availability
- Training for coaches in interpersonal communication and supervision skills and for

associates in how to get feedback and support they need

· Performance credit (billable or otherwise) for participation on the part of partners

## **ONE MODEL FOR STRUCTURING A COACHING PROGRAM**

The following steps outline one approach to the development of a coaching program that has specific goals, that defines expectations and limits the time commitment for partners, and that provides measurable results.

**STEP 1:** Designate the group or person who will create, manage, and evaluate the coaching program. Review the existing mentoring program (if one is in place). Determine how coaching activities fit into the professional development processes and which experiences will fit the nature of a coaching program.

*Beyond suggesting informal meetings in which the coach and associate can get to know one another, define other developmental objectives for the relationship. One way to do this is to create a skills development checklist of experiences that an associate at each level should have had within a defined period of time. An example of a checklist for a fourth-year litigator might include involvement in taking a deposition, spending a day in court with a partner, or attending a client meeting. Coaches are given the responsibility of making sure the associate has had specific experiences from the checklist.*

**STEP 2:** Identify partners who will be designated as coaches. Qualities that might be considered key for successful relationships may be found among those who have an interest in the success of self and others; who take pleasure in giving advice, in training, and in talking with new members of the firm; and perhaps most importantly, who are politically adept and who understand the culture of the firm.

**STEP 3:** Train the participating coaches in interpersonal communication and supervision skills and train the associates in how to get the best feedback and support. Coaches should be given a clear set of objectives for the program. They should be made familiar with the firm's professional development strategy and the way in which the coaching activities are expected to fit in.

**STEP 4:** Suggest an appropriate time commitment for coaches and outline the types of activities that will be expected of each coach.  
*For example, assign each associate to two or three partners. Set a requirement for*

*the coaches to meet with their associates at least twice in six months. The meetings can be a lunch or other casual setting or it can be in the office. The coaches will also be asked to provide some of the activities included on the skills development checklists.*

*A specific time can be defined at which time the formal relationship will terminate and the associate will be assigned to another coach. Six months or one year might be appropriate. If the relationship takes on an informal mentoring aspect after termination, so much the better. If not, the associate is offered new opportunities to meet and interact with other partners. The rotation concept provides a defined period of commitment so that no one coach is overburdened while at the same time giving associates the opportunity to build relationships with more partners.*

STEP 5: Develop an evaluation process for the coaching program and set distinct periods for review. Tie the coaching system to the current professional development strategy in terms of the key criteria for progression in the firm. Have the coaches' level of involvement be a part of their evaluation and compensation review.

## **HOW DO YOU KNOW IF IT'S WORKING?**

It is very important to monitor the progress of a program such as this. A successful program needs to remain flexible and adaptive to the needs of the participants. The original design may need to be tinkered with many times before a workable program emerges. The coaching relationship in and of itself is probably the most important aspect to which attention should be paid.

*Characteristics of a positive coaching relationship would include these:*

- It is informally evaluative, providing feedback that advises rather than determines fitness
- It provides outlets for admitting one's fears, frustrations, or failures without fear of negative impact
- It is supportive but critical when necessary, providing a "reality check" if and when it is needed
- It is informative about the firm culture and environment that encompasses the political and social nature of the firm

## **SUMMARY**

Encouragement from the sidelines, a gentle nudge, guidance that comes from experience--coaching can be all of these things or none. In order to have an impact on retention and professional development, the program must meet the needs of the firm and it must fit the personalities of the participants. The goals remain consistent--reduce attrition and retain key associates, create a sense of community, foster strong relationships within the context of overburdened schedules, and increase workplace satisfaction for both associates and partners.

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