

Comment

Being a Mentor Also Makes a Difference to Oneself

By Laura L. Geist and Sara M. Thorpe

There are two things people want more than sex and money: recognition and praise.

—Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics

Most articles about mentor programs focus on the benefit to the people being mentored. An additional benefit of mentor programs is the important leadership skills gained by those chosen as mentors. Mentoring in a law firm can include involvement in summer associate programs, recruiting of new and diverse lawyers, committee memberships and one-on-one assignments to mentor a more junior lawyer.

Being a mentor is not just another non-billable assignment. The role of mentor offers an opportunity to get involved, make a difference in another lawyer's experience, find solutions, make decisions and gain recognition and praise for those efforts. All of these are important in developing and keeping firm leaders.

Lawyers who are given and take on roles in mentor programs are able to gain recognition and praise for their efforts, often long before they develop a broad client base or legal expertise. This is a great chance for the firm to highlight their "stars" and increase a mentor's professional satisfaction.

One of the top three proven elements to effectively creating employee loyalty is praise and recognition. In "First Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently," by Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman (Simon & Schuster 1999), the authors discuss the importance of praise and recognition based upon the research of a Gallup Organization study of more than 80,000 managers in 400 companies about motivating and retaining great people.

They report that praise and recognition is more important than money. The real value of praise and recognition, however, is not only from supervisors or managers but from peers. In many ways the recognition and feedback from other lawyers in a mentor program can be more meaningful in rewarding and retaining great lawyers than the praise even of a partner.

Leadership is not something that is done to people. Leadership is unlocking people's potential.

—Bill Bradley, three-time all-American, Hall of Fame basketball player for the New York Knicks and former U.S. senator



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"The investment in choosing the right mentors ... is worthwhile. Not only are mentor programs the way to train and cultivate new lawyers in the organization, they are an equally valuable way to train and give experience to the future leaders of the firm," Laura L. Geist said.

A firm can grow leaders. In guiding lawyers into mentor roles, the lawyer is given an opportunity to learn more about the organizational structure of the business, meet people, be ingenious, use their imagination and take action. Because of this, mentor programs are the training grounds for the firm's future leaders.

Mentor programs require participants to get other lawyers integrated into the firm and may require the mentor to navigate through conflicts. Through working as a mentor to other lawyers, the mentor has an opportunity to develop valuable friendships and relationships that enhance the firm's culture and give the lawyer an opportunity to establish trust and garner loyalty.

These programs also offer a future firm leader the chance to explore, take on challenges, even make mistakes or simply enjoy projects that are nonlaw related. Quite frankly, the early years of practice can be full of drudgery, discovery and disappointment. Taking on a leadership role in a mentor program can invigorate and encourage the lawyer to enjoy their work

environment, make decisions and take risks.

If people are coming to work excited ... if they're making mistakes freely and fearlessly ... if they're having fun ... if they're concentrating on doing things rather than preparing reports and going to meetings — then somewhere you have leaders.

—Robert Townsend, former chief executive officer of Avis Rent a Car.

Ask any managing partner or practice group leader at a law firm what law firm committees she or he chaired and what associates she or he mentored. Universally, partners in leadership roles within the firm were not just participants but took an active role in shaping and executing firm programs, training or administrative tasks they were assigned. Acting as a mentor to junior associates in the firm gives the lawyer an opportunity to look beyond her or his own professional and business development and take care and assist with another's development. From that, leaders are made.

It is not long before a mentor or committee

chair learns the value of listening to what other people have to say, seeking out other information and the other side of a controversy, and asking the right questions to determine a solution. The role of mentor can help with developing the art of consensus-making. A mentor is in the position to develop the tools to address conflicts and negotiate resolution within the framework of the law firm. Lessons learned from these experiences will assist in future and greater roles within the firm.

Thus, law firms should not overlook the additional benefit of mentor programs. The investment in choosing the right mentors and giving them the tools and support to succeed in these programs is worthwhile. Not only are mentor programs the way to train and cultivate new lawyers in the organization, they are an equally valuable way to train and give experience to the future leaders of the firm.

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