



MY OPINION

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Mentor in the Making

When I first started practicing law, my boss let me get into the courtroom as soon as I was licensed. I loved the independence and the experience, but I also knew that I needed to find someone to turn to when I had questions. Fortunately, there were two attorneys in town that I started calling on when I needed help. They quickly became my mentors and are still my very close friends today.

Many young lawyers start out either not knowing how to establish a relationship with a mentor or they do not know where to find a mentor. When I chose my mentors, I chose colleagues who I knew were ethical practitioners. My mentors taught me that my word was my bond and that when I did not know what to do, I should not be afraid to ask questions. I felt safe asking them questions and knew that I could count on what they were telling me.

So what exactly is a mentor? "Mentor" is defined in the dictionary as "a wise and trusted counselor or teacher." In my opinion, the word "trust" is the most important part of this definition. A relationship of trust is critical for two reasons: 1) you do not want to pattern your professional habits after someone others do not respect or you could end up repeating the same bad behavior; and 2) you want to be comfortable asking your mentor anything without fear of judgment while also feeling safe that your conversation will go no further than the two of you.

Where do you go to find a mentor? If there is not someone in your office, professional organizations in your field of practice or your local bar association are

great places to find mentors. Oftentimes, in a CLE or bar-sponsored activity, you are able to interact with someone on a more relaxed basis. Informational interviews with established local attorneys in your practice area may be another way to start a mentor-mentee relationship. Once you develop a rapport, you can ask your



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new contact if they mind you calling them if you ever have questions. Chances are that they will be flattered that you asked and will take the time to help you.

My friend and fellow TYLA board member **Lacy Durham** says she does not limit her mentor-mentee relationship to just one person. She uses what she calls

"the board of directors" approach to mentorship. Her board of directors consists of a coach, a confidant, and a champion. The coach is the person who will counsel you on the best decisions to make or give you the technical guidelines for solving a problem. The confidant is the person you confide in to give you personal or ethical guidance. This person may often be the one you seek help from the most because you have a deep foundation of trust and know you can share anything with them. The champion is the person who roots for you no matter what and whom you can count on to sing your praises in the professional world. Oftentimes, this is the person from whom you can solicit letters of recommendation and who can boost your confidence when something goes awry.

No matter what approach you use, it is important that you establish a relationship with a mentor. It will help your practice and your professional life immensely. As time goes on, professional mentoring often becomes a two-way street and your mentor may end up calling on you for advice and learning as much from you as you do from them.

Conversely, as you advance in your career, it's important to help those lawyers who are new to the field of law. Be sure to assist when you can, and you'll find that you'll learn from your mentee too.

P.S. I cannot thank **Amy Bryan** and **Kim Wilson** enough for being such outstanding mentors to me when I first started practicing law. I am thankful for their advice and their listening ears, even when they did not have time for all the questions from a "baby lawyer." ✪