



## **Does Mentoring Really Add Value?**

By Laura Reid, Originally printed in VALA Topics, Fall 2004

Many law firms struggle with the concept of mentoring in their firm. Given the job of bringing young professionals along at an accelerated rate and having them contribute to the firm in a productive way can be daunting. Many partners responsible for mentoring conceptually agree that it is important, however they find that it can often be a thankless task, one to which they have difficulty in committing their time and energy.

Many partners, who say they already work extremely hard, find that associates do not appreciate how much time and energy goes into trying to train them, only to have them leave the firm or seemingly to be unsatisfied. "Frankly," the partners will add, "we pay them a lot of money, and they do not seem as dedicated as they should be." When speaking with associates on the topic of mentoring, most indicate that there is really lip service applied to the general concept, and that they often do not receive the mentoring they feel they need. Going for lunch once every six months – or even monthly – to discuss how things are going is really not what they have in mind. An effective program can achieve what both sides say they want from a mentoring relationship:

- A lower turnover of young professionals
- Improved risk management
- Improved client management
- Improved general productivity, including more effective returns on billable hours and increased profitability.
- Improved long-term retention of senior associates with effective entry into partnership.
- Improved general morale.

So why are law firms still struggling?

Many do not truly commit the resources required to have an effective program. In the past, professionals received their day-to-day mentoring or training by working closely with a senior partner who showed them the ropes and took them under their wing.

Today, 95% of partners do not have a practice that allows them to support both themselves and a full-time associate. As a result, most associates work with a variety of lawyers and partners. They receive little direct feedback, and are generally left to the concept of 'survival of the fittest'.

With the focus on associates needing to be financially viable at a much earlier stage in their career, combined with the increased pressure to have a viable practice – which includes marketing their services – they are often overwhelmed and dissatisfied. They feel that there is not enough focus on becoming an effective lawyer who is able to provide a client with quality legal services. If they feel they are failing at achieving the standards that they believe they should be accomplishing, they often look else-where for professional satisfaction.

The bottom line is not the only benchmark. A number of firms, after examining their internal demographics, become seriously concerned about succession issues at the partnership level. The best practices and the most successful programs acknowledge that these are real business issues that face a firm, and, at the core, they include:

- A formal mentoring program: Compared with simple ad-hoc programs;
- Achievable and measurable results: These ensure that the resources and efforts provided by the firm produce the results required;
- Clarity: A clearly defined mentoring role, with clearly defined expectations for both the mentee and mentor, are essential;
- Education: Training senior partners with new skills for the most effective mentoring techniques, including how to mentor associates at different levels of development. Internal training and professional development programs should be designed to fill in the gap in the current mentoring;
- Thoughtful mentor matches: For instance, have you considered the generational gaps? Does John, who has been practicing for 30 years, really make an effective mentor for Susan who is a new call?
- Feedback: Providing feedback to associates on how to become successful practitioners, and ultimately successful partners, is a requirement. Intelligent, thoughtful planning with effective feedback is at the core of good mentoring programs;
- Management on-side: A strong commitment to mentoring by the leaders in the firm, both in the management and professional ranks, ensures support.

If you can say that your firm is running at a high profit margin, has low turnover, and that, when you look around the firm, the associates are coming up are clearly stars on a partnership track, you likely have no need to improve your current internal mentoring model. If, on the other hand, you wake up at night wondering if any of the associates working at the firm are going to end up staying, and whether your top billing partners will be able to retire and hand over their practice with no concern, you may need to revisit your mentoring program.

