

PUBLICATION

Featuring: Off-the-Record Mentoring

Authors: Virginia Todd Weaver

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A structured, formal mentoring plan is an important part of any female professional's career path. Helping the next generation of female leaders through mentoring has been shown to be enormously helpful to both parties. However, the relationships you foster, both within the office and in your community, are just as important. Ginger Weaver and Alicia Hall, both of the Firm's Jackson office, explain how they help build each other through this informal mentoring relationship.

We (Ginger, the mentor, and Alicia, the mentee) practice in different areas within the same office, but we have developed an informal mentoring relationship. This relationship has been valuable for both of us, especially from a morale standpoint, and we encourage other female professionals to foster similar relationships.

Mentoring Without Borders. Baker Donelson has a formal mentoring program, which is helpful for issues such as feedback on writing, managing workload and shareholder track questions. In contrast, our informal mentoring relationship focuses on more general issues, from identifying rewarding community activities, to the secrets of "work-life balance," to general encouragement about professional and personal life. Even though the informal mentoring is outside of the Firm's program (and budget), we take turns buying lunch or we go "Dutch treat."

Mentoring Without Supervising. If possible, we recommend that the mentor not assign work to the mentee, so that the "off-the-record" mentoring relationship involves honest feedback without the pressure of a pending assignment. While all successful mentoring relationships (formal and informal) incorporate the essential qualities of both trust and confidentiality, mentoring without a supervisory element helps to further alleviate confidentiality concerns.

Trust is also critical as we hold each other accountable for taking ownership over our careers. In encouraging each other to take active roles in our professional futures, we are reminded of the good advice from Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe law partner Patricia Gillete who, using the unlikely source of the Wizard of Oz, cautions women not to follow the "Dorothy" leadership model: "Dorothy was a true leader. She identified the tasks at hand, formulated a plan, and overcame obstacles to reach her goals: a brain for the scarecrow, a heart for the tin man, and courage for the cowardly lion. But when push came to shove, what did Dorothy ultimately ask for herself from the Wizard? Nothing...Some might say Dorothy's behavior represents the stereotypical female leader. She builds teams. She encourages collaboration and consensus. She reaches resolution efficiently. And, at the end of the day, she asks for no credit, no reward, no recognition. And thus, no one knows what she has done and no one thinks of her as a leader."¹

Who do you trust enough to tell you if you are being a Dorothy, to the detriment of your career? Honest feedback about the right ways to self-promote and to become leaders in our careers is important. When your mentor isn't "the boss," it's much easier to have frank conversations about the path to leadership. For example, Ginger was recently honored as one of the "50 Leading Businesswomen in Mississippi" by the *Mississippi Business Journal*, and she shared with Alicia the process of being nominated and named to the list.

Working Across Practice Areas. Although we do not work together on particular cases or deals, we had an excellent opportunity to prepare for an appellate argument together. Ginger (real estate attorney) helped Alicia (litigator) prepare for Alicia's first appellate argument before the state Supreme Court. Because the litigation involved the mortgage industry, Ginger provided unique insight for potential panel questions that other litigators could not. It was also valuable for Alicia to have feedback on both substance and style from a fresh set of eyes and ears. After the appellate argument ended in a client victory, Alicia was sure to thank Ginger for her invaluable assistance. Giving credit where credit is due is critical to a winning mentoring relationship.

Mentoring across practice areas also provides unique insight about Firm culture and what is going on in other areas of the Firm. We can keep each other up to date on who is bringing in new clients, who is going to trial and how things are generally going on "other floors." It helps us to avoid hibernating in our comfort areas and it may help with cross-selling to clients one day!

Allowing a Natural Mentoring Relationship to Develop and Taking Time to Socialize. Because we did not limit ourselves to mentoring relationships within our distinct practice areas, we were able to focus on a good personality match. We naturally get along and have common interests, which helps us get the most out of the mentoring relationship. For example, we both *try* to practice healthy lifestyles, so it is nice to have a co-worker who wants to eat at healthier lunch spots (even if we still get frozen yogurt on the way back to the office).

We have also noticed that men tend to realize the value of social time more than women realize it. Putting forth a stereotypical example: an afternoon on the golf course can be valuable for business development, but many women shudder at the thought of losing four or five billable hours out of the office. Maybe we hunker down while we are at the office (i.e., eating lunch at our desks) so we can attend to our other priorities (family, friends, hobbies) outside of the office. And while those other priorities are important and worthy of our time, professional development – and client development in particular – demands getting to know someone on a personal level. We take the time to occasionally enjoy a longer lunch. We have other female co-workers with common interests, and we'll take time on a weekend to exercise together or attend someone's wedding shower. We've visited with clients on personal vacations because we know that having a great dinner with a client can have the same impact as producing great work for them. We encourage each other to slow down and socialize so we can develop closer relationships with clients and each other.

Finding the "Fine Line." There is a fine line between developing an informal mentoring relationship and preventing informal mentoring sessions from becoming "dumping" sessions. By "dumping" sessions, we mean that there has to be sensitivity about too much day-to-day work chatter or too much unsolicited, personal information. The key to the interpersonal aspect of a successful, informal mentoring relationship is picking up on the cues of the other person. This should be easier if the mentor and mentee are already a good personality fit. Perhaps if the mentor shares personal information about her summer vacation, the mentee can talk about her vacation plans. While it sounds like a common sense piece of advice, sometimes the floodgates can open too much on one side when the meetings are informal. Pay attention to the depth of the conversation in the beginning, and follow the other person's lead. If you perceive the situation correctly, there will be plenty of "I'm so glad you mentioned that," and "Me too!" moments.

Sharing 50/50. Just as friendships thrive on give-and-take, we try to encourage a balanced give-and-take in mentoring. There is the obvious conversation rule that you generally should not be doing more than half the talking during a conversation. Other than that rule, the balance can be skewed a bit by how mentor relationships tend to work. Mentees often derive more from mentoring relationships because they are learning. But mentees can contribute more than they might think. Mentees can ask questions about issues the mentor is facing, listen to struggles the mentor may be having, and offer to help in any capacity the mentee is able to help. For example, if Alicia sees an industry article that Ginger may appreciate, Alicia takes a minute to forward it along. Or, if there is an opportunity to write an article together (maybe like this one!), the mentee should take

the lead on the actual writing and let the mentor guide the direction and tone of the article based on her experience.

We hope this article provides fresh insight on mentoring relationships in the workplace. It may sound like we are really just friends (and we are), but our relationship developed in the professional context and continues to flourish in the same way. We hope that female lawyers have the good fortune to find a true mentor/mentee *and* a friend.

This article was originally published in Sharing Success, the newsletter of DRI's Women in the Law Committee.

¹ <http://amlawdaily.typepad.com/amlawdaily/2009/07/self-promotion.html>