

# PUBLICATION

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## How We Built a Mentoring Program that Actually Works

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Since its inception in 2005, the Baker Donelson Women's Initiative has included a mentoring component for the Firm's women attorneys. Over the years, our Women's Initiative has listened to the concerns of our women attorneys and learned how to best equip them with the mentoring relationships most beneficial to them and their career development. Based on this feedback, the Firm introduced a revamped, multi-faceted program in 2015. With a few years and even more feedback under our belt, we hope our journey to develop a robust mentoring program will help you create or expand women's mentoring networks at your company.

The need for formal mentoring relationships for women is supported by strong statistical evidence. Research shows there is a positive correlation between strong mentoring programs and women's advancement in law firms. It should be no surprise that more support from accomplished women can contribute to one's success and advancement. The 2014 National Association for Women Lawyers (NAWL) report identified the key obstacles to the retention and promotion of women in law firms, including lack of mentors for women in leadership, attrition as women leave firms for better opportunities, work-life balance issues, and lack of business development opportunities. With these obstacles in mind, we set out to create a mentoring program that (1) ensures every woman lawyer and advisor has multiple options and avenues for mentoring at the Firm; (2) creates an environment in which women receive feedback and advice to help them take ownership of their careers and advance within the Firm and the profession; and (3) develop a Firm culture that supports and values mentoring.

After conducting several focus groups throughout the Firm's offices and honing in on our women attorneys' concerns, we found there is not a "one-size-fits-all" model. In the same way that each person has different ideas and expectations about their careers, each person has different mentoring needs. Reports from our focus groups revealed there are varying opinions, interest levels, and requested types of mentoring. We concluded that the best approach is to offer our women attorneys and advisors a menu of options and opportunities in order to develop meaningful mentoring relationships. The Women's Initiative constructed four overarching options and avenues for mentoring.

**One-on-one mentoring.** Baker Donelson facilitates a robust mentoring program for our associates, staff attorneys, and of counsel when they join the Firm, and many individual lawyers have organic one-on-one mentoring relationships. In addition, some of our women attorneys and advisors expressed they would appreciate an additional, dedicated Women's Initiative mentor. The idea is simple – mentors and mentees can discuss their careers and obtain advice and encouragement on an ongoing basis. The focus here is on *productive* relationships. The Women's Initiative was careful not to make anyone feel pressured to say "yes" to one-on-one mentoring merely because it is offered. In fact, surveys revealed many of our women prefer larger mentoring groups (discussed more fully below), rather than an assigned individual. For those who seek a dedicated mentor, the Women's Initiative endeavored to pair each interested individual with a mentor after discussion about that individual's preferences and needs. For example, a mentee may prefer a mentor in her practice area or located in another office to help expand her network.

**Topic mentors.** The Women's Initiative asked our male and female shareholders to let us know if they would be willing to provide advice on specific topics, including work-life balance, business development, community and professional associations, and leadership. All of our attorneys and advisors are encouraged to contact topic mentors, who we list on the Firm's intranet. Serving as a topic mentor is a great option for attorneys interested in serving as a mentor, but who may not feel they are able to commit to dedicated, individual mentoring assignments.

**Mentoring circles.** The mentoring circles provide opportunities for peer mentoring and broader discussions of issues of concern and interest for participants. The Women's Initiative Mentoring Committee provides our Women's Initiative Office Leaders with guidance on the frequency and timing of meetings, monthly discussion facilitation guides, and best practices from other offices. Our mentoring circles vary in size, with some offices including all women attorneys and advisors and others hosting smaller circles that may include five members. Our Office Leaders adjust the frequency and timing of meetings based on regular feedback we solicit from our women attorneys. Some circles host "Coffee and Cocktail Talks," which alternate between morning meetings at coffee shops near the office and happy hours at new, hip bars or restaurants. Other circles host "Cupcake Breaks" and walk to local bakeries mid-afternoon for discussions over sweet treats.

**Random lunch groupings.** Modeled after a program developed in the Firm's Atlanta office, the Women's Initiative works with each office's managing shareholder and Women's Initiative Office Leader to implement quarterly lunch groupings of three to four lawyers, including men and women. The Women's Initiative's focus groups revealed that these periodic, random lunch groupings build camaraderie, aid the integration of women attorneys, and provide opportunities for lawyers in different practice groups at varying stages of their careers to connect as well as potentially foster natural mentoring relationships. Every other month, small groups of attorneys chosen at random are asked to have lunch together and the most junior attorney in the group is tasked with scheduling. Attorneys are encouraged to get to know one another, discuss their practices and clients, and actively pursue opportunities to collaborate. Notably, this program requires no budget and minimal time commitment.

All of these offerings take work and commitment. With 22 offices, we face challenges to coordinate and maintain momentum. We are fortunate to have strong support for our Women's Initiative mentoring program, as well as lots of fantastic mentors willing to share their experiences and provide advice and counsel. We continue to make adjustments as we monitor what is working and what is not, and will strive to listen to and meet the changing needs of our lawyers.

Beyond the basic tenets of our mentoring program, we receive questions frequently about how the program truly works. Here are the questions that we receive regularly:

### **Why offer mentoring through the Women's Initiative when the Firm already has a mentoring program facilitated by the Professional Development Department?**

Mentoring is important to the development of women lawyers. A national survey conducted by NAWL revealed a lack of mentors for women was a key obstacle to retention and promotion of women in the workplace.

### **What are some of the ways that mentoring can enhance one's career options?**

- Mentoring helps attorneys develop expertise, knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- Mentors are critical to successful integration into the Firm.
- Mentors can provide behind-the-scenes information about organizational politics that more junior attorneys may not be privy to typically.
- Mentees benefit tremendously from one-on-one support.

- Mentoring allows an attorney to have an advocate with a larger voice within the Firm.

### **Are mentoring relationships successful when the mentor and mentee are located in different offices of the Firm?**

Yes. The Women's Initiative found that inter-office mentoring can be very successful. It may be the case that the lawyer who is the "best" fit to mentor a mentee is in another office. Among other benefits, these mentor-mentee pairings provide the mentee with the opportunity to expand her network and offer a fresh viewpoint.

### **I'm interested in establishing a mentoring program at my workplace. Can I contact you for more information about mentoring best practices?**

Please contact [klroberts@bakerdonelson.com](mailto:klroberts@bakerdonelson.com) to discuss your workplace's mentoring needs.

### **How can attorneys participate in mentoring without overstretching themselves?**

Attorneys concerned about overcommitting should consider being willing to take questions now and then. We introduced our topic-mentoring program to allow busy attorneys to make themselves available, as needed, to provide one-on-one advice and answer questions on specific topics on an ad hoc basis. Attorneys tap into topic mentors periodically, so this role should not be particularly burdensome.

### **What topics should mentors discuss with their mentees?**

We have found that successful mentoring relationships take many different forms, and each mentoring pair should communicate regularly to chart their own path. Mentoring discussions may include goals and plans for the future, strategies for developing new client relationships, how to balance competing workplace demands, how to become more involved in the community and/or bar associations, and how to develop leadership skills. The sky is the limit! Mentees should be proactive in letting the mentor know of particular mentoring needs or areas of concern and interest. Each month, we disseminate discussion topics to the Firm's Women's Initiative Office Leaders, with the goal of sparking mentoring conversations.

### **How often should mentors and mentees meet?**

The frequency of meetings is purely at the discretion of each mentor-mentee pairing, although the advice and encouragement mentors provide should be ongoing.

Ultimately, we have found that the need for mentoring relationships ebbs and flows throughout a career, and different needs arise dependent upon the phase of life. We believe that knowing they have a support system available helps our women attorneys and advisors to combat issues that may otherwise lead to attrition and encourages our attorneys to take charge of their own careers. We hope that these lessons aid in the development of a mentoring program that works for your organization.