

PUBLICATION

Baker's Dozen: How to Create Meaningful Mentorships

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We recently asked the Baker Donelson community to share "one tip or piece of advice on how to create meaningful mentorships."

1. I had the good fortune as a senior associate and young shareholder to work closely with John Tomasso, General Counsel of our client, Rexel, Inc. Rexel had bought electrical supply distributors across the United States, and John was tasked with piecing it all together from a legal standpoint. John entrusted me with a great deal of responsibility for the employment law compliance in that regard. We worked together to prepare a multistate employee handbook and to resolve various employment disputes and litigation across the country. Along the way, John gave me feedback and helped me understand his role and how what we were doing related to the inner workings of the company. Thanks to John, I learned to understand the general counsel role and the challenges and pressures associated with it. I also learned how to be a better advisor and problem solver.



To be blunt, John is one of the most influential and impactful people in my entire legal career. His advice, feedback, and trust were critical in developing me as a trusted advisor on significant matters for a large, indeed international, company. We worked together for many years and accomplished a great deal, for which I am still very proud. I cannot thank him enough for all that he did for me.

– *Russell W. Gray, Shareholder, Baker Donelson*

2. We've all heard that you get out of something what you put into it. This is especially true for a mentor/mentee relationship. Both parties must be willing to commit to "doing the work," it simply will not work if only one person is invested. True successful mentorships that I've been a part of or witnessed have two active and engaged participants, two parties seeking to learn from and lean on each other.



I have been blessed by a very strong mentor who has unselfishly shared his time, guidance, and support throughout the years, and I would not be where I am today without him. As our mentorship has grown, because we both continue to be invested, it is now more of a two-way street, and we lean on each other for advice and support. In my opinion, this is the only true way to succeed. Relationships are vital to our success, and that success is rarely, if ever, a solo effort. I try to focus on billable work during the week and non-billable work on the weekends. I am also trying to do better at what I say "No" and "Yes" to; making sure I am saying "Yes" to the important things in life.

– *Whitney M. Dowdy, Shareholder, Baker Donelson*

3. One of the most important things I learned from my mentor, Darlene Davis (now Managing Director at SMBC Leasing and Finance, Inc.), is that effective mentoring is a 360-degree process. Teaching technical skills is important, but it is equally important to expose mentees to all aspects of being a Trusted Advisor. As a result, I introduce my mentees to a variety of



tasks, including attending structuring conference calls with clients, listening to negotiations with opposing counsel, learning how we produce fee estimates, understanding the billing process, and attending in-person business development activities.

– *Kevin P. LaTullip Jr., Shareholder, Baker Donelson*

4. Sometimes I put so much pressure on formal mentorship and programming that I forget to appreciate the value of all the little nuggets our mentors can organically pass on every day. Firm shareholder Michaela Poizner went from being my associate mentor when I was a summer associate to being my shareholder mentor early in my career to now being my practice group leader, and the value and knowledge I've gotten simply from watching her progress and tips along the way, has been invaluable!



– *Tenia L. Clayton, Associate, Baker Donelson*

5. I am supposed to provide one tip, but I really have two that I believe ultimately define whether a mentorship is successful. First, it is absolutely critical that both the mentor and the mentee take ownership over all aspects. Yes, the mentor has more experience to share, but a good mentee is not a passive part of that relationship. A successful mentorship requires that both the mentor and mentee view it as a commitment to a common goal in which they both are ready to commit time and energy.



Second, we are all busy, and I have found that once a regular cadence of meetings falls off the schedule, it is difficult to put it back on. So, at the conclusion of every mentorship session, I have found it helpful to schedule the next session, on the spot, at that moment. Invariably, a loose commitment to circle back up in a month turns into two or three months. But, if both the mentor and mentee get the next meeting on the calendar at that moment, it is more likely to hold, and they can keep a regular pace of development.

– *Steven F. Griffith Jr., Shareholder, Baker Donelson*

6. My advice would be to make a regular, recurring appointment to meet. You may dread it, you may not be prepared for it, you may not have time for it, but, in my experience, the best way to make the arrangement work – either as a mentee or a mentor – is to meet regularly, even if only for a few minutes.



– *Blair B. Evans, Shareholder, Baker Donelson*

7. My piece of advice is that both parties be authentic and open to learning from each other. The relationship does not need to be perfect, but everyone must make an effort for the relationship to be successful. Do not be afraid of being uncomfortable and ask thoughtful questions.



– *Mark A. Baugh, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Baker Donelson*

8. The best mentorship advice I have is to be intentional about setting a recurring meeting. The best mentor/mentee relationship I have involved scheduling a weekly 15-minute "coffee break" on my calendar with my mentee. They happened to be in my same office, so we would grab a cup of coffee and sit in one of our offices to discuss what was working well, what could be improved, opportunities I could provide, and obstacles I could help remove. The intentionality of a recurring time to sit and talk, albeit for a brief time, paid dividends over the long term as that individual was the best associate who ever worked with me.



– *Timothy M. Lupinacci, Chairman and CEO, Baker Donelson*

9. I really like this quote from Oprah Winfrey that I wish I could claim for myself:

"A mentor is someone who helps you see the hope inside yourself."



But to answer your question about how to create meaningful mentorships: The greatest gift you can give is to listen with your full focus, your full presence, and your full attention.

– *Dr. Mindy Howard, Cosmic Girls Foundation*

10. I've been in-house for 13+ years, so my perspective may be different than someone seeking a mentor specifically at their firm. However, here is what I have learned: (1) it's worthwhile to consider that the best mentor for you may not be at your firm, or company, or may not even be a lawyer! I'd encourage seeking out someone whose career, leadership style, executive presence, or community relationships you admire, even if that person and their role is radically different from you. The best mentor to help you reach your goals, whatever they may be, could be an outside-the-box person. (2) I'll take what others have said a bit further: I suggest that mentor and mentee define at the beginning of the relationship (or beginning of each year or other increment of time) a joint expectation, or "KPI" for the relationship. What is the ultimate goal of the mentorship, or the goal for this year/quarter? What does a successful outcome look like? For example, is it the ability to handle more matters for the mentor? Is the goal for the mentee to be ready for a non-profit board membership? Perhaps it's a general learning experience that will evolve as time goes on. The point is, that by having a joint KPI or agreement on the goal(s) can help keep the relationship on track even when we get busy!



– *Katherine Knight, VP, Chief Legal Officer, HR & Corporate Governance at Mitsubishi Motors North America, Inc.*

11. In my experience one of the most helpful things a mentor can do is to introduce the mentee to others within the organization or field to help the mentee build their professional network and resources.



– *Anna Long-Humphrey, General Counsel, DCI Donor Services, Inc.*

12. In my experience, the strongest mentors in my life have been those whom I connected with on both a professional and personal level. Having someone whom you feel truly supports your



growth and development but also cares about your well-being, is absolutely invaluable as a woman in the legal profession.

– *Katie Martin, VP Operations Legal Counsel, Trilogy Health Services*

13. For both parties in the mentoring pair, it is critical to understand the answer to three questions: 1) What is her passion; 2) How does she want to grow: and 3) How does she want to be recognized? It's impossible to have a successful relationship without understanding deeply what motivates your mentoring partner. And don't overlook partnering with someone you consider to be at the same stage in their career so that you are equally mentor and mentee in the relationship - That type of mentoring relationship can hold you accountable in very honest ways.



– *Christy Tosh Crider, Chair, Baker Women*