

# POST-PANDEMIC MENTORSHIP

BY KATE SKAGERBERG

**E**VEN IN THESE UNPRECEDENTED TIMES, some things never change. The value of strong and constructive mentorship is one of those things. Mentorship is at the heart of our profession and is a critical part of how lawyers learn to be effective advocates and smart businesspeople. *How* we mentor, though, should change to adapt to the lessons we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed what the day-to-day practice of law looks like. Video conferencing platforms have drastically reduced days spent on long flights for short depositions and waiting in the courtroom gallery while the judge hears a full docket of motions. It has literally changed the landscape for firms scaling back their office space and adopting permanent remote work arrangements. We should apply those lessons to strengthen our mentoring practices, benefitting mentors and mentees alike.

## What has 2020 taught us?

We have not all been affected by the pandemic in the same way and to the same degree. But there are some lessons we have all learned in the context of the pandemic that we can apply to improve our mentoring relationships going forward.

### 1. Deliberate action

Lawyers are problem-solvers by nature and by training. Responding to the pandemic has called upon our problem-solving skills to chart a course through unprecedented times. Over the past year, we have all advised our clients on ways to step back from immediate problems to plan a course of deliberate action. Effective mentorship asks us to do the same thing.

Mentorship of less experienced lawyers is often seen as such a given that we take it for granted. We may put cursory formal mentorship structures in place and assume those structures will be enough of a foundation to grow the organic mentoring relationships that are often the most valuable. But working from home has made it much harder to casually stop by our colleagues' offices or shadow more senior lawyers. Instead of assuming that proximity will lead to mentoring relation-

ships, we must be deliberate in creating opportunities for less experienced lawyers to connect and learn.

One option for deliberate action is to refresh and update firm-wide formal mentorship programs. There is a generation of law students graduating straight into remote work. Even if your new associates spent last summer with your firm, have they ever set foot in your office? Think through how new associates learned how to navigate your firm and practice area in past years. They may have been assigned formal mentors, but probably also asked the associate in the next office questions they did not want to take to a partner. They got to know the colleagues they went to lunch and dinner with and learned who could best answer which types of questions. Now that informal contacts are much less frequent, it is up to firm or organization leadership to bolster formal mentorship opportunities to fill those gaps. For example, it will likely be helpful to assign associate mentors as well as partner mentors to new associates. That will give lawyers who are new to the firm multiple starting points for their questions as they learn to navigate your firm or company as well as the practice of law.

Mentorship groups may also be effective options. Firms with many newer attorneys, especially across multiple offices, have had great success with mentorship circles where multiple mentees meet with multiple mentors. These programs help the mentees lay the groundwork for mentoring networks where they build relationships with their peers as well as more senior attorneys with different perspectives and experiences. Mentorship group meetings present opportunities for senior attorneys who are not otherwise formal mentors to share subject-matter advice even if they do not have the capacity to commit to being one-on-one or long-term mentors. Now is a good time for firms of all sizes to capitalize on their senior lawyers not being in trial and set up mentoring group meetings or round table discussions that allow newer lawyers to meet and learn from their more experienced colleagues.

Local bar associations and bar sections provide another opportunity for formal mentorship. These programs offer

attorneys ways to deepen their knowledge of specific practice areas and are especially useful for newer attorneys who are solo practitioners or in small firms. These programs are ineffective, though, if they are not approached deliberately by both the mentor and mentee since they do not have the built-in accountability of intra-firm mentorship programs. It is critically important for both the mentor and mentee in this type of program to define their goals to ensure the mentoring relationship is constructive.

Your firm may also benefit from deliberately creating opportunities for informal mentorship, as counter-intuitive as that may sound. People are no longer running into each other in the hallway or chatting by the coffee maker, so we must all be more deliberate to replace the opportunities those casual interactions led to. Encourage your attorneys to invite a newer lawyer to watch a Zoom hearing and then discuss it to replicate the experience of shadowing someone in court. Set up regularly scheduled practice group coffee breaks and firm happy hours for people to drop into as their schedule permits. Ask your attorneys to clearly communicate when and how they are available so that sending a chat message or picking up the phone can substitute for popping into someone's office. Adapting to the pandemic has introduced us to technology platforms that we can use to help our attorneys connect and foster informal mentoring relationships.

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## 2. Teamwork

None of us can do it all, all at the same time. Especially not as we juggle working from home (which can feel like living at work), transitioning to remote proceedings, learning new practice areas, monitoring our families' safety and well-being, and taking on responsibilities as teachers, technical support people, and caregivers. The pandemic has taught us to lean on our support network more than ever before, and now is the time to apply that lesson to mentorship.

Traditional formal mentorship programs have often defaulted to a one-on-one model of mentoring relationships, as reflected in the hackneyed advice to new graduates to "find a mentor." "Cultivate a flexible team of mentors" is better advice for 2021.

As a mentee, you will benefit from deliberately thinking through what you would like to learn. Do you want to become more involved in a specialized practice area? Do you want to see examples of how attorneys at your firm work with clients

and try cases? Do you have questions about what your career could look like five, ten, and twenty years from now? Do you want advice on how to balance your professional and personal commitments? When you think about mentorship with clear goals in mind, a whole world of potential mentors opens up to you. Instead of limiting yourself to a single mentor with limited hours in her day, you will see options for assembling a team of mentors who are in different stages of their lives and careers and who can answer your questions from different perspectives based on their different experiences. The partner who your firm assigned as your mentor may be a great person to help you shape your career path within the firm. He might also introduce you to a partner in another practice group from whom you can learn about another field of law. Doing that work may introduce you to an opposing counsel

who you respect and can learn from long after your case is resolved, or allow you to work with a slightly more senior attorney who remembers the questions she had when she was in your shoes. This mental shift will also transform mentorship from a box you check as a young lawyer to a lifelong process of building relationships and learning from people you respect,

regardless of their age or seniority.

As a mentor, you will benefit from helping your mentees build their mentoring teams. Looking to teamwork transforms your role as a mentor: instead of feeling pressure to be an omnipotent font of knowledge on all topics, teamwork frees you to be a guide who helps less experienced lawyers chart their own courses. Approaching mentorship through the lens of teamwork and building connections allows you to focus your mentoring time on the areas where you can be most effective in helping your mentees, and also allows you to share your wisdom with more mentees without committing more time to mentorship activities.

## 3. Communication

I confess that prior to the pandemic I considered running into people at the office to be a primary mode of communication. I would stick my head into my mentee's office to ask how she was doing, or assume the new associate I was working with would find me if he had questions. The pandemic has forced me into communicating more proactively, which benefits my mentoring relationships.

It is difficult for mentorship to be effective unless both the mentor and mentee make it a priority. The best way to make

anything a priority is to put it on the calendar. Setting a recurring mentorship meeting ensures that both parties will make time to work toward their mentorship goals instead of treating mentorship as an imposition or afterthought to be fit in around other priorities.

Regular check-in meetings also keep open the line of communication. There may be weeks when you have a quick chat about your cases and that's it. But blocking that time on your calendars holds the space open for bigger questions about long-term career goals or talking through specific questions. Recurring meetings will facilitate communication and help the mentor and mentee to get to know each other, build trust and respect, and form the foundation for a long-term professional relationship.

#### **4. Flexibility**

The pandemic has taught us to prioritize empathy and flexibility in our interactions because we do not know what other people are going through. Whether you are a mentor or mentee, the person you are working with may be trying to work while their children participate in remote learning across the table. They may be financially supporting family members who lost jobs. They may be worrying over loved ones who are seriously ill or at risk of dangerous consequences if they get sick. And they may not want to share any of those circumstances with their coworkers and colleagues.

Being mindful that we do not know what boats other people are in is helpful advice for post-pandemic mentorship. Empathy and flexibility can hold open doors that would otherwise slam closed. Flexibility may take the form of helping mentees set work schedules that accommodate other obligations, setting mentoring calls for first thing in the morning or on the weekend, or being available by text when something comes up. A mentor and mentee can prioritize their mentoring relationship and also build in flexibility with the time and method of their meetings. That flexibility and accommodation may be what keeps a person in the practice of law through a difficult season, whether that difficulty is because of the pandemic or other life circumstances.

#### **Conclusion**

We have all learned lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, and sometimes learned those lessons the hard way. Those lessons have changed how we practice law and should refine how we practice mentorship as well. Approaching mentorship deliberately, as a team, and with open communication and flexibility will lead to stronger, more rewarding mentorships for mentors and mentees alike.

*Kate Skagerberg is a trial lawyer and partner with Beck Redden LLP. ★*