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How to Develop a Mentoring Relationship as a Diverse Associate

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Special to the Legal

A “mentor” is defined as a “trusted counselor or guide.” Young attorneys, from the first day of law school forward, are urged to find a mentor to help steer their career paths. For the diverse/minority associate, finding a mentor seems fraught with complications. How does a diverse associate find common ground with a partner who is generally not of the same age, race or background? This is especially difficult because young associates are naturally inclined to seek out mentors from similar backgrounds.

I have been lucky. At my previous firm in Atlanta and my current firm here in Philadelphia, I have benefited from exceptional mentors. Despite attempting to find a mentor with a similar background, neither of my mentors looks like me. On paper, we have few similarities. We are not the same age, our family obligations are different (I have far fewer obligations), and neither of my mentors are Asian-American with immigrant backgrounds. Rather, my Atlanta mentor, a partner at a 150-plus-attorney firm, is an African-American wife and mother of three who, in addition to her



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practice, holds leadership positions with several community-based organizations. My mentor in Philadelphia, a partner at a similarly sized firm, is a Caucasian father of three who resides on the Main Line.

In Atlanta, my mentor ensured constant contact throughout the tumultuous first year, when I often questioned my abilities as a fledgling attorney. She provided not only constructive feedback, but also access to her large network of colleagues and community-based organizations. By doing so, she not only assisted in the honing of my legal skills, but also helped me develop connections and learn how to successfully network. Surprisingly, I did not actually work for her — rather, she was a mentor in the traditional sense.

I recently asked my Atlanta mentor what it takes to have a successful mentoring relationship. She stated in no uncertain terms that the associate, not the partner, has to take

the initiative in forging the relationship. I was surprised, because it appeared that she reached out to me. No, she stated. She saw that I wanted to do good work, needed feedback and was not afraid to ask for guidance, even from partners who did not assign the work. While I did not formally ask her to be my mentor, the mentoring relationship grew organically with our frequent conversations, my solicitations for advice and a shared sense of humor.

My Philadelphia mentor similarly noted that mentoring is a “two-way street,” and suggested that the associate has to show drive, motivation and a willingness to work before a mentoring relationship can really begin. He also noted that the associate has to work to make him or herself relevant to the firm; it is not enough to simply sit in one’s office and bill. He shared an anecdote of a young associate who was recently mistaken for a secretary by a senior partner. The associate, who had been at the firm for more than a year, had not made the effort to introduce herself to the other associates and partners. Rather, she worked in relative isolation, ensuring that she exceeded the billable requirement, but leaving herself as an “unknown” to everyone outside of her department. Both my Philadelphia

and Atlanta mentors noted that although a strong work product is required to keep a job, relationships are what catapult a good associate to the partnership level.

Through email, telephone calls, Facebook posts and the occasional face-to-face visit, my Atlanta mentor and I have been able to maintain the mentoring relationship even with my move to Philadelphia. After working on developing the relationship for three years, I could not fathom letting go of her trusted advice, especially upon joining a new firm in a new city. My Atlanta mentor recently told me she had begun mentoring a young, Caucasian male associate at her firm. When I asked the partner why she selected her new mentee and not a minority associate, her response was simple. She saw that he clearly wanted to do a good job, had a strong work ethic and was in need of feedback and constructive criticism, which, unfortunately, he was not getting from his own partner. The associate initiated the mentoring relationship by coming to her, initially, for work-related advice. This evolved to discussions about firm etiquette, politics and his career path. The partner did not look at the associate's age, race or background when entering into the mentoring relationship. Rather, her emphasis was on whether he was willing to take advice and grow as an attorney.

Both mentors made a careful distinction between a work relationship and a mentoring relationship. In a mentoring relationship, more attention must be made to long-term goals and career paths rather than general evaluations of legal analysis. Young associates generally get solid feedback from their supervising partners regarding work product. However, it is often difficult to receive mentoring advice from a supervising

partner, such as developing your own book of business. For that, the associate must seek out a mentor, even if there are differences in age, race and background. Then the associate must work to develop the mentoring relationship.

I have been lucky to find mentors within the firm, but realize that finding a mentor is difficult. You must be proactive. If you do not have a mentor within your firm, consider the following options:

1. Join one or several legal organizations.

There are numerous organizations in the Philadelphia area specifically tailored to young, diverse associates, such as the Young Lawyers Division of the Philadelphia Bar Association, the Barristers' Association, the

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Hispanic Bar Association, the Asian Pacific American Bar Association, etc.

2. Volunteer with the organizations you join. Rather than being a passive member, get involved. The executive boards of these organizations are filled with accomplished attorneys who, as busy as they are, generally do take the time to get to know young attorneys.

3. Tap into your own network. Most young associates will ask, "What network?" But you do have one: your friends from law school, law school alumni and law school professors. Reach out to them. Find out whether your friends have mentors and

suggest a lunch or happy hour meeting with the mentor (with your friend's attendance and permission, of course). Ask your law school career office for a list of alumni in the area and reach out to them. Call a professor with whom you connected during law school and ask if the professor knows of any alumni who are willing to serve as mentors.

4. Perhaps most important, do not limit your search for a mentor to someone who looks like you. Get outside of your comfort zone and try to make a connection even though there appears to be no observable commonalities. You may be surprised.

5. Do not limit yourself to developing just one mentoring relationship. Each mentor will have a unique area of expertise, separate networks and different perspectives, all of which may be valuable to developing your career.

At the very worst, you will get no response from the person you seek out to be your mentor. Do not take offense — the attorney may simply be too busy to develop a mentoring relationship. But don't give up. As my Atlanta mentor said, "Nobody owes you anything. It's up to you." •