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How to Be a Great Mentor to Associate Attorneys

By **Rebecca Glatzer**

“The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.” — William Arthur Ward

A law firm’s legacy hinges on the engagement and retention of junior associates. Mentorship is a key element of associate engagement and retention. While most law firms have formal and informal mentoring programs, not all firms give explicit instructions on how to be a good mentor to junior attorneys. Below are some tips that can prepare you to be a great mentor to the associates at your firm.

SET EXPECTATIONS

When you become a mentor, you are committing to supporting and advising someone when they need it, while keeping their best interests in mind. It is important that you consider what kind of commitment you can — and are willing to — make. Then you need to communicate that clearly to the associates you mentor.

Ask your mentee what he or she wants out of the relationship. Doing so does not mean you are at your mentee’s beck and call. Set boundaries. Make regular appointments with your mentee and determine how you will utilize one-on-one time. Explain your preferred form of communication and any scheduling limitations. Make sure you are on the same page, so both of you know what to expect from the relationship.

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MAKE IT PERSONAL

A great mentor sees his/her mentee as a unique human being, not just an employee. The mentorship experience will be more rewarding and enriching if you take personal interest in your mentee. Further, the best advice is personalized. Therefore, get to know your mentee on a personal level. Go out for a meal together and talk about your hobbies, interests, and lives outside of the office. Do not simply stay in a conference room and talk shop.

Part of being a good mentor also is getting your mentee to trust you enough to be forthright about personal issues that might affect their work, which then allows you to provide advice about how to navigate those issues. As with all relationships, fostering trust is essential. Further, knowing what makes your mentees tick will allow you to better engage with them. The more invested associates are in firm life, and the more they sense that someone is taking a personal interest in them, the less likely they are to leave. It is in your best interest and the firm’s long-term best interest for you to be invested in your mentee.

DON’T JUST TELL, DEMONSTRATE

Engage your mentees in the mentorship progress. Give them “homework,” such as writing down their goals and making a one-, three-, or five-year plan. Help them to contemplate gaps in their skill sets and provide resources such as books, continuing learning programs, or other ways to bridge those gaps. Further, you should consider how your mentees can assist you with your *own* goals. Give them opportunities to co-write journal articles, co-present at conferences, and help you prepare for business

development meetings. Merely telling them how you made partner is not the same as showing them.

PUT ASIDE YOUR EGO

Some of the best lessons are learned through failure. Great mentors put their egos aside and share their failures with their mentees. Being honest about your mistakes will not only make you more likeable, but also more trustworthy. It also will give the mentee permission to ask for advice about his/her own mistakes. The relationship between the two of you will likely be stronger — if you demonstrate some vulnerability — and will enhance the mentee’s experience at the firm. At the same time, you should not be shy about sharing your achievements with your mentee as well as celebrating their achievements.

Seeing your mentee succeed can provide a great deal of personal satisfaction. Further, a great mentor-mentee relationship can enhance your own law practice. Like most things in life, you will only get out of the mentor-mentee relationship what you put into it. So decide whether you want to be a great teacher — or just a mediocre one.



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