

It takes a village to build a lawyer:



The importance of mentors in your legal career

As a lawyer, you may have a good understanding of where to find historical legal documents, cases, or precedents, but what about advisers, or mentors, or counsellors? Starting a legal career can be an isolating experience, with many new lawyers spending time working alone while drafting documents or doing research. That's why it usually takes a deliberate effort to find effective mentors.

Mentorship builds better lawyers, and it also builds happier lawyers. Professionals benefitting from mentorship often find they have higher satisfaction with their careers and are more likely to feel capable performing their daily tasks. A strong network of knowledgeable and helpful confidants may be the most important investment you will make in your career, and this article will give you a sense of how to start building that network from day one.

Multiple relationships for multiple roles

When building mentor-type relationships, it's important to keep in mind that it's relationships, plural.

In their paper, *Is More Truly Merrier?: Mentoring and the Practice of Law*, Fiona Kay and Jean Wallace conclude that "individuals benefit more from having multiple mentors over the course of their career." It is the ability of professionals to draw on a "constellation" of mentors and a broad and diverse range of individuals for mentoring support that best portends success. Having multiple mentors leads lawyers to higher job satisfaction, better perceived

career success, better earnings, and a sense of real social value to their legal work. It also provides a new lawyer with a variety of perspectives, drawn from a broad range of experiences.

More importantly, having multiple mentor-figures allows many types of individuals to play different roles in a lawyer's career. For example, as a lawyer, you will sometimes be looking for the assistance of **teachers**. Learning about an unfamiliar area of the law, or staying up-to-date on new developments, is the purview of continuing professional development, higher education, or self-directed learning. At other times, you may be in need of **sponsors**: people that are able to act as personal references and provide networking contacts. Perhaps most importantly, lawyers may, at different points in their career, need to look beyond their professional mentors and advisors if they require the assistance of **counsellors** or mental-health professionals. These relationships are important, normal, and can be accessed through the Member Assistance Program available to all Ontario lawyers and law students (see page 17 for more information on the MAP).

Two other important forms of mentoring relationships are those of **advisor** and **coach**.

An **advisor** is someone that can help with a particular problem and has particular practice area expertise. This relationship will often be characterized by questions and answers, and may be with someone you seek help from only once.

A **coach**, on the other hand, is someone that can help you improve a particular skill, such as client communications, time management, or business development. Coaching relationships are built on a specific goal you wish to work toward.

The Law Society of Ontario's Coach and Advisors Network

Sole practitioners or those practising in small firms often have the most difficulty finding mentors. And while lawyers practising in larger firms will often have access to mentoring-type figures in both formal and informal contexts, they can often benefit from seeking assistance outside the firm.

Addressing this need is the mandate of the LSO's Coach and Advisor Network (CAN). Launched in November 2016, CAN is offered to all Ontario lawyers and connects those looking for coaches or advisors with experienced counsel that can offer assistance. As of June 2018, the program coordinated more than 200 volunteer senior lawyers from around the province who each have, on average, more than 20 years of experience.

CAN focuses exclusively on coordinating coaching and advising relationships. Advisors within CAN respond to one-off inquiries, completed in a single, confidential telephone call, and are usually matched to a lawyer seeking assistance within three days.

A coaching relationship, on the other hand, consists of five one-on-one meetings between parties and is usually completed within three months. In addition to professional legal experience, coaches are trained by CAN on coaching techniques using texts, videos, and workshops.

Tina Lee is a senior lawyer that acts as a coach with CAN. As someone who started her own employment law firm, she helps lawyers at various stages of their career. She says that the newer lawyers she works with are "bright legal minds, who just need experience. I think the biggest benefit they receive is having someone listen to them and confirm that everything they're feeling and experiencing is normal."

Tina says that she wishes she had reached outside of the firms she worked at earlier in her career for more coaching and mentoring assistance, because there are benefits to speaking with people that don't know you personally, saying "it can sometimes be very hard to ask questions, but there's never a dumb question. One thing I hear from young lawyers using CAN is that, since it's structured and through the Law Society, there's peace of mind that they're not going to be judged by anyone they know. So it can build confidence to be able to just ask these questions and get answers."

Kerry Boniface, the director of CAN, stresses that finding the right fit is important, saying, "we're happy to do a rematch, and you can use the service as often as you want. You can have both an advisor and a coach at the same time, or multiple advisors." Matches are made based on the particular goals of the lawyer requesting assistance, and on their request can also take into account gender, ethnicity, and shared communities of interest.

Antonio Urdaneta is another lawyer with experience as both a mentee and a mentor with CAN. When he first moved his practice to Canada from his native Venezuela, he benefited from senior lawyers sharing their knowledge and providing important contacts, which led to volunteering opportunities, which led to career opportunities. Now, as an established workplace lawyer himself, he gives back, in part, by acting as a coach and advisor to other lawyers.

Antonio suggests that anyone looking to establish mentor-type relationships should first ask themselves what they want in their careers. Speaking about the mentor-figures in his own career, he says, "for some particular points I needed a coach, for other areas I needed a mentor, or an advisor. If I was looking for help with technology, that may be a different person than someone that can assist with business development, for example. I was then able to manage my expectations for each relationship."

Making and using your team

Knowing who you can and should consult to address particular problems or goals is one of the most important things you will do in your career.

While CAN provides invaluable coaching and advising services, it's important to remember that it is just one piece of a successful support system for a legal career. Some particular issues and questions, such as ethical conundrums, can be best assisted by a call to the LSO's Practice Management Helpline. Wellness and mental health problems, which affect many lawyers and non-lawyers, can best be addressed through assistance from the counsellors and wellness professionals available through the Member Assistance Program. And a phone call to LAWPRO, of course, will provide lawyers with assistance pertaining to potential or actual malpractice claims.

As you build your support network, don't be afraid to ask for help from those who are best able to provide it. Whether it be career or life advice, skill coaching, specific file advice, or professional counselling services, a larger team will allow you to receive the best assistance possible, while not expecting any individual mentor figure to provide help outside of their own expertise and knowledge. ■

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