

Small Group Mentoring Model

The American Inns of Court has developed several mentoring models for Inns to adapt, implement, and maintain mentoring programs of their own. This model is based on small group mentoring, either triads or quads.

Overview

This program is designed to facilitate smaller groups of three to four people who represent a wide variety of experience and career stages. These general guidelines may be altered depending on the needs of individual Inns, which may have more experienced members in need of mentoring, younger members with new skill sets to share, or a mentoring structure that is integral to the development of educational programming. No matter how your Inn operates, these steps can help you achieve your mentoring goals.

Why Small Groups

There are many reasons why an Inn may choose mentoring to be done in groups rather than in the traditional 1:1 pairings:

The pressure to “hit it off”: With three to four people in a group, there are more ways to communicate regardless of any individual discomfort or awkwardness.

Time is precious: Some people are reluctant to engage in paired mentoring because of the time commitment. In small groups, there is more flexibility and responsibilities are shared.

The more the merrier: Gone are the days of mentoring akin to apprenticeship. Many younger attorneys have a stable of people they go to for advice or information so their mentoring need per person is smaller. Additionally, with small groups, there are at least two people who can weigh in on a matter and offer advice or perspective.

Slow and steady: Not every moment in a mentoring relationship has to be life-changing in an immediate or dramatic fashion—sometimes just talking with someone you admire, hearing issues faced by colleagues, or feeling like you’re worth someone else’s time is a needed confidence builder.

STEP 1: Establish an Inn Mentoring Committee

Administration of the mentoring program should fall under the purview of an Inn Mentoring Committee. Inn officers should establish a mentoring committee of three to four members, one of whom is an Inn officer to serve as the Mentoring Chair. In addition to general operational oversight of mentoring efforts, the committee’s responsibilities should include the following tasks:

- Communicating the existence and organization of the program—early and often

- Communicate activities and responsibilities for participants early and often
- Establishing guidelines for mentoring groups to engage in activities during the Inn year
- Generating and maintaining a non-inclusive, illustrative list of discussion topics
- Recruiting both mentors and mentees to form the groups
- Creating and communicating guidelines regarding expectations between group participants
- Establishing appropriate accountability mechanisms
- Evaluating success and areas for improvement
- Troubleshooting

A sample Mentoring Chair job description is available on our website: http://home.innsofcourt.org/AIC/AIC_For_Leaders/AIC_Leadership_JobDesc/Sample_Job_Description_Mentoring_Chair.aspx

STEP 2: Organize your Mentoring Operations

- Mentoring will take place in small groups; these small groups will be organized by the mentoring committee.
- Each group will share responsibility for its activities for the program year with the goal of meeting or interacting at least three to four times a year outside regular Inn meetings.
- Groupings will be made—whenever possible—by the mentoring committee prior to the start of the Inn’s program year.
- When forming groups, the mentoring committee will take into consideration areas of practice, common interest, and other relevant factors to facilitate a successful mentoring experience. Using an interest form, filled out by all parties, can be very helpful.
- Have clearly stated roles and responsibilities for each group member at the start of the year.

STEP 3: Organizing Your Groups

Each Inn should make the determination of how to organize their group program based on the needs and personalities of their own Inn.

Some Inns swear by the “triad” method, which is a group comprised of Master/Barrister/Associate or Pupil group. In this type of group, the Barrister plays a much larger role in the mentoring than in traditional pairings.

Barristers are usually closer in career stage or age to the least experienced member of the group; they are able to speak more specifically about challenges faced in the first one to

two years of practice. At the same time, they are often at a career crossroads to becoming partner or moving from public to private practice, which makes Barristers good candidates to be mentored by the Masters. Both Masters and Barristers can benefit from the insights of the most junior of the group to learn about social media or managing millennials. Barristers and Associates can always learn from Masters.

STEP 4: Apply Guidelines

Each Inn should apply the following guidelines to their program, ensuring they are tailored to meet the needs and personalities of individual Inns:

Size: Inn mentoring groups should generally have no fewer than three and no more than five members.

Duration: Each mentoring cycle lasts for the duration of one Inn program year—usually 9–12 months. *[Note: Mentoring relationships created through this program may continue for longer.]*

Frequency: Each group should have at least four to five contacts or meetings during the Inn year outside regular Inn meetings.

Length: Group meetings should last at least one hour, but some contacts may be as short as a quick phone call or email.

Location: Be creative with the location: rotate between group members' offices, at your Inn meeting place before or after a meeting, judges' chambers, local restaurants or coffee shops, the library, a law firm conference room, or even a city park.

Topics: The mentoring committee—in conjunction with the groups—will agree before the start of the program year on the topic or topics to be covered in mentoring. Some groups may choose to make their own topics dependent upon the needs of the members.

STEP 5: Focus on Professionalism

In any mentoring program, it is important to make professionalism the centerpiece. The transmission of American Inns of Court professional values to mentees should be the ultimate goal. Ensure that members have a strong understanding of what professionalism includes:

- High competence in legal skills.
- Adherence to ethical obligations.
- Appreciation of the importance of civility and professional demeanor in all dealings.
- The importance of pro bono representation and access to justice issues.
- The importance of participation in bar organizations at the local, state and national levels.
- The transmission of professional values and standards to members of the legal profession.
- Balance of self-interest with the interests of clients, the justice system and the public interest.
- Accountability for one's actions.

STEP 6: Continually Assess your Efforts

Knowing what is working and what is not is the only way to improve. All group members should have a chance to evaluate their satisfaction at least twice a year:

- Mid-year
- End of year

An online survey is the easiest way to gather assessment information, but the mentoring committee should establish the evaluation format for assessments. Have a process in place for using the data from one year to inform and assist the following year's mentoring committee.

More valuable data is collected if the assessments are done in an anonymous fashion. Anonymous aggregate information can help your Inn become data-driven, making decisions about how to improve the program that much easier. Continuous improvement is the goal.

If you would like to keep the national office apprised of your efforts, please send an email to mentoring@innsofcourt.org—we'd love to hear about them. We are always looking for new ideas to share with other Inns.

Mentoring samples, tools, and templates are available on our website: <http://home.innsofcourt.org/Mentoring>

Be bold. Be creative. Be successful.

Have a story you want to share? We want to hear it!
Have a question about mentoring? We're here to help answer it!
Running out of ideas? We're here to help!
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