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MENTORING:

Observations from the Bottom

By Rebecca Diel, Esquire

What side of the courtroom do I sit on? What citation style is proper? Where do you get your suits? How do you decide the strategy of a case? What do I do myself, and what do I delegate to my assistant? How do you prepare to face a judge? How casual is casual Friday? Where do I start my research? What are the office hours? When is lunch?

I have been an attorney since December 2014. Although my experience in the legal field is limited, I feel comfortable making the following observation: This profession is hard. The learning process is continuous and, as the old adage goes, “There’s a reason they call it *practice*.” The thing about law is, at some point everyone is a novice, even if they won’t admit it.

The number one piece of advice that is passed around to new lawyers is to get a good mentor. This word *mentor* is frequently mentioned but rarely described. Finding a good mentor can be difficult when you have no idea what you should be looking for in a legal guru, and conversely,

being a mentor can be difficult when it is unclear what your mentee needs from you. There is great difficulty in bridging this gap because, as any unseasoned attorney knows, we need guidance on practically everything. Our needs are not limited to concrete, practice-based inquiries, but range from employer preferences to the basics of practice to social etiquette at networking events.

Compounding the chaos and uncertainty that defines the beginning of a lawyer’s career is the fact that many new attorneys are timid, hesitant to ask questions for fear of looking naïve or bothering a busy partner with seemingly stupid questions. Being at the bottom of the totem pole is intimi-

dating, and at the forefront of our minds is not to create too much trouble, get our jobs done as efficiently as possible, and stay out of the way.

I imagine it is difficult on the other side as well. Seasoned lawyers forget the struggles of adjusting to a legal career and have a workload that keeps their minds engaged on clients' issues. Often a generational difference makes an established attorney as unsure how to approach a new lawyer as a new associate would be about approaching the managing partner of a big firm. Despite this common disconnect, picking the brain of an experienced lawyer is worth the effort for a new lawyer and most attorneys are more than willing to share their wisdom with the next generation.

The key to good mentorship is ensuring a level of comfort. In order to navigate the transition into an effective attorney gracefully, a mentee needs to be able to ask candid questions. Creating comfort takes time and availability, and requires assurances that the relationship is valued rather than burdensome. Dedicating time and energy, along with finding a commonality of interests, will create comfort in both parties and build a strong foundation. In my experience, I have found that having a mentor of the same gender and similar age has been incredibly helpful. A mentor who is a decade or less older than the mentee can sympathize with the plight of a new lawyer in a way that can be difficult for those who have been practicing for 30 years.

I have had several mentors during my legal career, and while all offered me valuable advice and wisdom, the most comfortable and all-encompassing mentoring relationship was with a female partner who is less than ten years older than me. While my experience may not be generally applicable, I have found that the ability to relate on a generational level has allowed me to feel more comfortable in my practice, as a partner interacts with an associate. I feel comfortable asking about little, unimportant curiosities, and have less anxiety about being a bother.

I'm not going to make the mistake of suggesting that this is the only way to have a beneficial mentor relationship; my experience may be far from universal. In fact, a friend has an incredibly close mentor relationship with a professional of the opposite gender, and who is 30 years older—seemingly on opposite ends of their careers with nothing in common. But even in that case, the two share a strong passion for public service, a commonality that allowed them to build a personal relationship as a foundation to a mentor relationship, and relate to each other on a level that both

parties enjoy. Ultimately, the key is probably not age or gender, but finding common interests or characteristics on which to base a human relationship.

A mentorship will not fail for lack of a mentor's ability to sympathize with a mentee, but a mentor should be able to empathize. Whether the problem concerns strategies for juggling family and work life, managing the politics of a large firm, or interacting with people with whom you have a personality conflict, a good mentor should be able to give advice and counsel, even in the absence of identical experiences. This ability to empathize is a human emotion, requires no specialized legal training and allows lawyers to retain that human aspect we are so often accused of abandoning.

Not to be forgotten among this discussion of interpersonal relationships is the importance of mentoring yourself. While this is especially true for the young solo practitioner, it should not be overlooked by the new associate. Getting involved in local bar sections and American Inns of Court will allow for networking with legal professionals outside your firm and give a young lawyer a sense of community, which in turn expands the pool of mentors to approach with questions or concerns. Read up on the civility guidelines, subscribe to legal publications and learn from other attorneys' war stories. Most importantly, remember that there is opportunity to be a mentor yourself; law students are always eager for the advice and counsel of young lawyers just barely on the other side of the bar exam. Mentoring others is a great way to learn and grow as a new attorney.

What I know is this: Both sides need to be prepared to put themselves out there for successful mentorship, and that gap is a little easier to bridge when the lawyers involved can relate to each other outside of the legal profession, whether through a shared gender and generation, a passion for public service or an affinity for the same sports team. Building a mutually beneficial mentor-mentee relationship requires a level of comfort. Like any relationship, this process cannot and should not be rushed, and requires time, availability and an empathetic ear. Oh, and patience, definitely be patient, because we are adjusting to this chaotic career. Which reminds me: What is the dress code? How should I behave around clients? And what are these "billable hours" everyone keeps talking about? ♦

Rebecca Diel, Esquire is an associate at Parish Guy Castillo, PLC, in Stockton, California. She received her J.D. from the University of the Pacific, McGeorge School of Law in May 2014 and was admitted to practice in December 2014.

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