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Find a mentor (or find someone to mentor)

Coming out of law school, most of us didn't have the luxury of a formal, practical training phase for our career. Doctors intern, teachers student-teach and tradesmen apprentice prior to receiving full union membership.

As lawyers, we come out of school having taken "core" classes and a wide array of elective courses in various legal concentrations.

Likewise, the bar exam tests us on a broad range of topics. If we pass, we're given a certificate and are deemed capable of the practice of law. While a vote of confidence is always appreciated, the reality is that recent graduates seldom have practical experience to bolster their education.

That puts the onus on the individual attorney to seek out his or her own "on-the-job" training. It also places responsibility on veteran attorneys to readily impart their knowledge and experience on newer attorneys.

In those first few years out of law school — whether you're a solo practitioner, government or big-firm attorney — it is paramount that you find some person or persons to help guide the way. While we pore over case law and develop argumentative and analytical skills throughout our legal education, very little of what we learn in law school prepares us for that first emergency motion hearing or heated telephone call with opposing counsel.

Aside from the fact that you've never done such a thing, the individuals involved — the judges, opposing counsel, clients and

witnesses — can have a tremendous impact on the outcome. What is the tendency of this particular judge? Is opposing counsel a bluffer? Having this knowledge often can be as important, if not more important, than the applicable legal argument. Mentors can give you the tools you need most in these unfamiliar situations: preparedness and understanding. As young attorneys, we often lack the combat experience that comes with time. But, we can learn from someone who has.

In my experience, the best mentors were those who weren't necessarily aware that they were my mentor. Friends, neighbors, a roommate or the attorney down the hall can act as your mentor. I once called opposing counsel for his interpretation of a statutory provision unrelated to the case we were working on. He took 10 minutes out of his busy day and readily answered my question

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DUE DILIGENCE



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without asking me any specifics.

Some mentors may be helpful in certain areas, such as a specific area of law, while other mentors may be helpful in others, such as internal firm politics. It takes time and effort to develop a mentor relationship. Careful observation and experience will guide you to the right ones. While someone may appear to have similar interests to yours, they may not be the ideal mentor for you or for your needs. Indeed, many of my "what not to do" list items came from things my mentors did do. Whether it is personal preference or the result of hard lessons learned, each of us must ultimately make our own decisions on who we want to be as attorneys.

Mentorship should not end

after a few years of practice. As I progress in my career, I often seek help from those who have been through my particular career stage or situation. I anticipate that my need for a mentor will continue throughout the various stages of my career. How do you move up in an organization? How do you build a book of business? Once you do, how do you keep it? These more seasoned attorneys can give you much needed insight and guidance.

At some point, the mentees become the mentors for those behind them, and the cycle continues as it should. As you progress, it is important to make yourself available and approachable to those following behind you. As was the case with some of my mentors, I was touched to find out that an associate saw me as an example for her career. I didn't know that she considered me a mentor, but I suppose the natural progression of our careers forged that relationship whether we intended it or not. The satisfaction of passing on advice and counsel to newer attorneys is immeasurable. It is truly part of the life cycle of the profession and it is our continuing responsibility.

In our personal lives, our influences and experiences shape our personalities. Our careers are no different. Learning what to do (or what not to do) from those who came before us can make all the difference in a career. While a true apprenticeship does not exist in our profession, opportunities to learn from and teach others present themselves each and every day.