



Anne H. Whitaker, vice president of Counsel On Call's Atlanta office, has more than 20 years of combined experience in coaching, consulting, marketing, law and education. In 1991, she co-founded In-House Counsel, Inc., a pioneering contract attorney placement company in Atlanta. Prior to entering the business world, Ms. Whitaker practiced real estate law in private practice for five years. She received her J.D., *cum laude*, from the University of Georgia School of Law in 1986, where she served on the editorial board of the Georgia Law Review. She is a member of the State Bar of Georgia, the Atlanta Bar Association, Lawyers Club of Atlanta, and Georgia Association of Women Lawyers (GAWL) and has created, chaired and spoken at numerous seminars for lawyers on career development and transition. She provides career development coaching for lawyers, is founding member and co-chair of the Atlanta Bar Career Management Committee, and is a licensed provider of the Highlands Ability Battery and other career-related assessments.

To contact Ms. Whitaker, visit [www.counseloncall.com](http://www.counseloncall.com).

## Why Coaching and Mentoring Are Vital To Every Lawyer's Career Planning

*By Anne Whitaker  
Counsel On Call*

"I wish I had a mentor." I have heard that statement uttered by more lawyers over the past 18 years than any other except perhaps, "I hate billable hours!" That lawyers want more mentoring doesn't surprise me. Mentoring and coaching are critical to every lawyer's career development. In fact, after education, such support is widely held to be the second most significant factor in becoming a successful lawyer.

### **Law School Does Not Teach You How To Be A Lawyer**

Mentoring is not just for young lawyers, either. The need for mentoring and coaching cuts across all stages of career, all practice areas, all environments, all sizes of law firms, in-house departments, genders, ages, races and geographic areas. From the minute we ventured forth from the halls of law school we heard, "Law school does not teach you how to be a lawyer." Have you ever had one of those dreams where you show up for a final exam and realize you never attended

that class and haven't a clue about the exam? Starting out stone cold in the practice of law felt like that to me. Okay I'm here, now what do I do?

If mentoring is such a key building block in our professional career development, why do most lawyers report that they never received the mentoring and coaching they felt they needed?

### **When The Bottom Line Rules, Associates Lose**

Simply stated, things are not the way they used to be in the legal profession. The modern practice of law with its current myopic focus on the bottom line leaves little time or incentive for developing truly impactful mentoring relationships among lawyers. This leads to a major gap in the acculturation of the vast majority of associates. The lawyers, the firm and clients suffer.

It was not like that in the "good old days." When my father graduated from law school in the early 1950's, he started with a firm and right away had a very experienced, successful mentor who was eager to show him the ropes, share his knowledge, give advice, introduce him to the "right" people, work with him and groom him to be a successful trial lawyer. That was common practice in those days.

This organic mentoring relationship has pretty much gone by the wayside. It exists only rarely, and hardly ever for women and minorities. When my brothers and I got out of law school in the 1980s, we each expected to be mentored as my father was. We were surprised and disappointed when that never happened. A large number of my law school classmates had the same negative experience.

### **Associates Must Take Matters Into Their Own Hands**

What has been done to fix the problem? Law firms started various kinds of formal mentoring programs in the 1980s but these have had only marginal success. According to managers in major law firms I have interviewed, these programs that continue today are not meeting the need (even though the firm proudly touts them!) and associates are still not experiencing the relationship part of mentoring that is so critical to their development. The mentor they are assigned is either not fully invested in the concept of mentoring, or does not have the training to be good at it. In fact mentoring skills run contrary to a lawyer's strengths. On the other side of the equation, young associates do not know how to look for

mentoring experiences and instead wait passively for something that rarely happens.

Is there anything that I could have done differently coming out of law school? Is there anything that lawyers today can be doing for themselves while waiting for firms to implement better mentoring programs? Absolutely! Instead of waiting for the ideal mentor to show up at your office door, you can take full responsibility for your career and seek out opportunities to be mentored. It's the approach I share with the lawyers I coach in other aspects of career development - whether finding new jobs, alternative careers, or building bigger client bases.

### **Take Full Responsibility. Build A Network. Create A Plan**

There are excellent mentors to be found, but you have to orient yourself three ways. First, you have to take full responsibility for your career and understand that your career development has always been and always will be up to you. Second, you need to shift from thinking of mentoring as something you get from one person. You need to have more than one mentor and think in terms of building a network of people you can turn to for a variety of things - a mentoring "board of advisors." Third, you need to create and follow a strategic plan, much as you would when conducting a job search or targeting a new client. This is where the rubber meets the road and it takes time, focus and purpose.

You need to get clear about your personal goals for career and business development and create a career development plan. Temporarily at least, you need to stop thinking like a lawyer. Instead of driving yourself crazy obsessing about all the risks and potential downsides in every situation just try to relax and picture where you want to go with your career. Ask yourself: Who do I want to be in five years? Ten years? What kind of clients do I want to be serving? What kind of practice do I want to have? And what are the qualities and attributes of a successful person with that kind of career and practice?

Once you have a vision for your career, you can break it down into manageable, tactical pieces and set goals to get there. You can identify the steps you need to take at each stage, including the skills you need to have, the people you need to meet, the clients you need to have, and so on.

## **Find A Mentor Who Fits The Stage Of Your Career**

There are some mentoring needs that most lawyers have in common. New lawyers need to focus on developing skills, competencies, professional identity, work/life balance and how to progress on the partnership track if that is what they want, or where to look for alternatives if they don't want to be a partner. Lawyers who have practiced three to five years also need to learn about leadership, marketing, human resource management, and the financial realities of the law business. Nor does lawyer development stop when you reach partnership. For experienced lawyers, it is important to find mentoring at transition points - redirecting one's area of practice, changing employment, or even changing professions. For senior lawyers it can be about many of the same things as well as keeping up with technological changes.

Once you have your career plan in place, you can create a mentoring plan. I don't mean look for one person to fill all your needs. As I said earlier, the odds of that happening are slim to none. Once you have identified the various areas in which you need mentoring, you can identify the people who can help you. For example, if you have decided that one of your long-term goals is to be a well-known speaker, then you need to find a mentor who has contacts, influence, and may be able to teach you presentation skills. You would likely choose a different person to mentor you in managing competing work demands; one who is well organized and could show you practical techniques and strategies.

## **Good Mentoring And The Role Of Coaching**

Aside from technical skills, what should you look for in a mentor? What I have found in my personal experiences on both the mentor/coach and protégé sides is that good mentors need to be able to play different roles at different times, depending on the situation. Sometimes they need to instruct and give guidance, sometimes they need to give constructive criticism, and sometimes they need to be more of a coach. Always they need to have patience, to care about the other person's success, to be supportive, perceptive, a good listener and able to help protégés help themselves.

What I see missing from most formal mentoring relationships in firms is the coaching role, which most lawyers do not know how to play effectively. It requires dramatically different skills from the analytical, directive ones expected from a lawyer. It is more like the Socratic method that is used by first year law professors. The mentor asks the protégé questions that help her discover answers

that are inside her already. The coach's role is that of a sounding board, facilitator, counselor and awareness raiser. Often the coach says little to nothing. Instead, he asks questions to get a clear understanding of what the protégé thinks, wants, and needs. He listens closely to the answers and often asks more questions to help the protégé discover her own answers.

Instead of the mentor telling the protégé how to correct a difficult problem, handle an assignment, or rescuing her from a mistake, he leads her to think through a situation, tap into her own experience and knowledge, and find her own way. By investing a little time on the front end of this 'coaching conversation' the partner saves much more time going forward because the associate becomes increasingly more self-reliant, confident and less dependent on the partner. It's much like the adage, 'Pay me now or pay me later.'

There are two key reasons why the coaching role is so important to good mentoring. First, it leads to a deeper level of learning both for the person being mentored and for the mentor. Second, it also makes for a higher quality relationship characterized by mutual trust, respect and more open communication. Not a bad payoff for a few extra minutes of attention by the partner!

Since very few lawyers have intuitive coaching skills it may be difficult to find a mentor who also can play the coach role. However coaching skills can be taught and learned, and hopefully one day this type of training will be a regular part of formal mentoring programs. Meanwhile coaching skills can be found in people who may not otherwise be positioned to serve as your mentor. So you can have both, just not in the same person.

Now that you know what you want in a mentor, how are you going to articulate to a potential mentor what you offer? Be ready to talk about your specific goals and explain why this person has the skills and abilities to help you. You don't even have to use the term mentor - just be precise about what you want him to do and why.

### **Mentors Come In All Shapes, Sizes And Philosophies**

How do you find mentors? You start by networking to identify prospects, both in your firm or company and outside of it. Look at partners, co-workers, ex-bosses, and colleagues in other practices. Business and professional organizations,

community groups, and personal interest groups are other sources. For a senior lawyer, a junior partner who is technologically savvy can be a mentor. Don't assume it has to be someone senior to you - you can find mentoring opportunities everywhere. Talk to friends in the profession and find out who their resources are. Remember, non-lawyers can be great mentors and can teach important practice skills. If your goal is to be a better negotiator, look to business people and mediators as possible mentors. If you need to be better at analyzing complex financial data, seek out an accountant or financial advisor. In return, you can offer your experience and insight as a mentor to them.

Once you identify someone, take the initiative to build a personal relationship. You can take the indirect approach and find opportunities to get to know her better before asking her to assist you. You can also take the direct approach - ask her for ten minutes to talk and lay your cards on the table. Describe your goals, be clear about what you want, and estimate how much of her time it will take. Approach this person with the attitude that you are trying to emulate her, not asking to be taken care of. She is more likely to be willing to share what works for her rather than to help you do your work.

Demonstrate from the outset that you are someone worth investing time in. What I hear most mentors say they want to see in a potential protégé includes: ambition, integrity, determination, a positive attitude, good listening and interpersonal skills, and willingness to take responsibility for her own career. Emphasize your own responsibility in the relationship and be confident about your abilities and how they can help you become a better lawyer.

### **Lessons That Last A Lifetime**

I have to admit that I did not practice what I'm preaching to you here when I entered the profession. Partly because I did not know how, but mainly because I knew early on that the practice of law was not for me. I have, however, followed this approach in my subsequent careers. When I stepped out of the practice in 1991 to start a company placing experienced contract lawyers, I immediately came up with a business plan and determined who I wanted on my personal Board of Advisors. I knew I had a lot to learn about networking, marketing, and all the other aspects of running a business. I began to develop close relationships with a few like-minded, experienced lawyers who believed in what I was doing, who could help pave the way in my networking efforts. I hired a business coach to work with me weekly in all aspects of business skill development.

I have continued to do this in my new career as a professional life coach. When I decided to transition into a coaching career, I sought out coaches I already knew and joined several coaching associations. By doing this I have established wonderful relationships with coaches more experienced than I, to whom I turn for coaching when I need it. I now have another personal Board of Advisors. As I identify new competencies and situations for which I need mentoring, I seek out new mentors and will continue to do so the rest of my professional life.

Remember to treat the mentoring relationship like any other important relationship - with respect - and honor your commitments. Be open and receptive to what is offered and be ready to put on the mentoring hat for others when it is offered to you. You will experience tremendous growth and great rewards in your career and personal life.

[http://www.yellowwoods.com/ezone\\_cl/vol01\\_iss01/anne\\_whitaker.html](http://www.yellowwoods.com/ezone_cl/vol01_iss01/anne_whitaker.html)