

the YOUNG LAWYER

The External Mentor

American Bar Association > Publications > The Young Lawyer > 2012-13 > December / January 2012-2013 (Vol. 17, No. 3)

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By David Ackert

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At many large firms, junior associates are discouraged from originating business. They are told to focus exclusively on servicing the firm's existing clients, improving their lawyering facility, and keeping up with the 1950+ billable hours required of them. It is not until they reach at least their sixth year that they are encouraged to start writing blogs and articles, to work on their pitching skills, and to identify a market niche so that they can attend the appropriate conferences and trade associations.

But the senior associates I speak with tell me that they feel underprepared to step into their role as business developers. They do not have enough confidence to prospect and pitch legal work to a business. They do not have meaningful relationships with decision-makers. And whatever business plan they have put together is too generic to give them a meaningful edge over their competition. They wish they had started planting the seeds of opportunity earlier. At the same time they recognize that, as junior associates, they did not have the expertise or network that would have made traditional marketing activities fruitful.

This conundrum necessitates a unique solution that extends beyond traditional law firm resources and yields early-career leverage: The External Mentor. This is someone outside your firm (preferably a non-lawyer) who is willing and able to shepherd a smart, ambitious young lawyer through career advancement. Follow these four steps to establish and maintain a productive relationship with an External Mentor.

Identify

About The Young Lawyer

The Young Lawyer (TYL), published ten times a year, is the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division's practice-oriented publication focusing on matters of interest to young lawyers. TYL circulates nationally and internationally to about 150,000 Division members, institutions, and other subscribers. **All ABA members can view TYL here. The public can view "Online Only" articles.**

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Your External Mentor may be a business leader who happens to be a relative or a friend of the family. She may be a classmate's parent or a former employer. A good candidate will have the following characteristics:

- Your mentor is in a position to help you. Look for people who run their own company, sit on a board of directors, or are noted connectors in your business community.
- Your mentor shares your background. Perhaps she grew up in your hometown or attended your alma mater. Look for a connecting point that maximizes her ability to relate to you.
- Your mentor should have at least fifteen years of experience more than you. Your external mentor must have sufficient life experience to contribute meaningful advice and resources. Her seniority should be significant enough to step comfortably into the role of mentor.
- Your mentor is someone you respect. Whether it is her perspective or accomplishments, it is critical that you genuinely admire your mentor.

Approach

Once you have identified your candidate, let her know in writing that she is someone you respect. Ask her to share a meal with you so you can ask for advice on a topic you feel she is uniquely qualified. Most people will agree to such a flattering request, especially because the scope of it is so reasonable.

Agenda

When you meet with your prospective mentor, explain that while you have access to senior lawyers at your firm, you wanted a successful businessperson's perspective on career advancement. Ask about the principles and strategies employed to achieve her accomplishments. Then, ask what he or she would do in your shoes. Assuming the meeting goes well, tell her that you will follow up.

Maintain

Whenever you run into a situation in which you employed the advice of your prospective mentor, let her know how it was helpful, what you learned as a result, and thank her for the guidance. Share your successes with your prospective mentor so that she experiences the pride and personal satisfaction that comes with mentoring a rising star. Then, suggest that the two of you get together again in a few months to continue the dialogue.

If you select the right External Mentor, you will find this strategy to be immediately instructive as you seek to round out your professional development and business acumen. As your relationship matures, your External Mentor will become invested in your advancement and will begin to facilitate powerful introductions that would otherwise take at least a decade to access through your own network. Your External Mentor will invite you to functions that most of the junior partners at your firm cannot get into, and, in time, she will likely become a key component to the initial files that make up your book of business.

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