

How a well-mentored subordinate becomes a superior mentor

Expert Opinion

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Expert Opinion offers the insights of law-firm management specialists on a variety of topics related to the administration of a law office.

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Can you name one attribute shared by Jesus Christ, James Dean, Miles Davis, Athene and Drew Bledsoe? If a second column were added listing the Disciples, Dennis Hopper, Shirley Horn, Telemachus and Tom Brady, would it be easier to recognize mentors and their respective protégés?

No doubt, law school taught you many valuable things. It's unlikely, however, you learned how to develop a relationship with attorneys who could mentor you or how to manage support staff or how to provide guidance to a newer associate. But these are critical tools to help you advance professionally and contribute to the success of your practice and your firm.

As a starting point, a real-life example witnessed years ago may help. A first-year associate spent the weekend writing a legal memorandum for a senior partner. The partner reviewed it and returned it with a terse note: "Tighten this up." The associate brought it to a third-year associate, explaining that he didn't know where to begin. That third-year associate pointed to examples where the writing and analysis needed more work and provided guidance on how to proceed.

The story ends with a first-year associate writing better memos, a satisfied senior partner, a happy client and, above all, a third-year associate who earned a great deal of loyalty and respect because she took the time to share what she knew with someone who needed to learn.

The makings of a mentor/manager

So, how do you identify the qualities that make for a strong mentor/manager? Luckily, there is no shortage of resources on this topic, and a Google search will provide a plethora of articles, ideas and suggestions to consider. It's also worthwhile to reflect on the attributes of your own greatest mentors. Your list of qualities to emulate may differ from others', based on your own experiences, but will likely contain most or all of the traits described below.

Taking the time - Much of what goes into being a great mentor, illustrated in the above example, centers around simply taking the necessary time to provide clear, constructive instructions and feedback. When giving an assignment, for example, make sure the subordinate fully understands the scope of the project, the approach you want, how much time should be spent, pitfalls to avoid and other advance information.

Be sure to describe how the project fits into the bigger picture of the client's work, and ask the subordinate to summarize your instructions to ensure comprehension.

Encourage him or her to return with questions after reviewing the assignment in more detail and, again, while working on it.

In providing feedback, be open to different, acceptable ways that tasks can be successfully done. Consider beginning with questions about how the subordinate approached the assignment.

Take the time to understand how and where things may have gone off course and offer examples of better

approaches. Be sure to communicate the positive aspects of the work along with any criticism.

Active listening - The best mentors recognize the importance of being good, attentive and observant listeners. Make sure your subordinate has your undivided attention when communicating about a project or responding to feedback.

Be aware, as well, of body language suggesting that the subordinate may not be "getting it."

And it goes without saying that a mentoring relationship will quickly deteriorate if confidences are not maintained.

Instilling confidence - You are probably familiar with the allegory: "If you give a man a fish versus if you teach a man to fish." The concept contained therein is essential in a mentoring relationship.

Effective mentors allow their protégés to build confidence by continually offering them ways to gradually improve skills and knowledge.

Identifying goals - Regularly setting and tracking goals for your subordinate will necessitate a dialog that will flush out differences in expectations and identify other resources that can augment the mentor's involvement. This approach also implies scheduling regular meetings with protégés, with prepared agendas, for delivering ongoing feedback.

Lastly, great mentors realize that effective mentoring relationships respect - and evolve from - the differing needs, abilities and personalities of each protégé. And the best result is that well-mentored protégés usually become future great mentors themselves.

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