

The Value of Mentorship

by *Hon. Jesse G. Reyes*

“Colleagues are a wonderful thing – but mentors, that’s where the real work gets done.” ~ Junot Diaz

This fall around the country a new class of lawyers will be joining the ranks of the legal profession. Their formal classroom education behind them, these newcomers will now have to contend with the challenges of a new career and a new way of life. Different lessons will have to be learned, but in life there are no books which contain all the right answers. The solution to this quandary is to search and find a mentor. Having a person with experience to serve as a guide will alleviate going it alone. A mentor can point out where the pitfalls are and how to avoid them. A mentor is an experienced lawyer who will pass along guidance and advice to another less experienced attorney. Through this collaborative effort, a mentee can develop new skills and abilities. The mentor can also assist the mentee in setting career goals and provide suggestions as to how to accomplish these initiatives. The ultimate goal of the mentorship partnership is to create a forum where both mentor and mentee can exchange ideas, thoughts, and suggestions in a confidential environment. The best lawyers are ones engaged in life-long learning and one means of accomplishing this feat is by entering into a mentorship relationship. Some of the most notable members of our profession have had the assistance of a mentor. Abraham Lincoln had John Todd Stuart; Louis Brandeis had Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.; and Barack Obama had Michelle Robinson. Thus, if you want to achieve a satisfactory level of success in your legal career, working with an experienced lawyer can be of an enormous benefit. The question then becomes how to find the right mentor.

Selecting the right mentor can take time, and this effort may also involve some trial and error until you discover the right one. As your career evolves, you may also find the need to have different mentors. While having a mentor from your own office may be convenient, in the long run it may be more beneficial to have a mentor who is not employed in the same office. The objectivity of someone from the outside may provide some insight which may not be apparent to someone from within, particularly, as to issues involving your colleagues and the inner workings of your office. In choosing a mentor, it is important to set forth your expectations. Equally important, for the mentorship to be effective, both mentor and mentee need to be intentional in their participation and hold each other accountable. Ultimately, select the mentor who will best suit your needs and will be able to address the concerns you may have, whether law related or not. The mentor you select should be someone who can advise you on both legal as well as non-legal activities.

One of the lessons rarely taught in law school is how to effectively navigate between a professional and personal life. In other words, prior to practicing law, we never really learn how to maintain balance between these two facets of our existence. In fact, as members of the bar, we are indoctrinated with the notion that fealty to the law requires we burn the candle at both ends. In the words of Justice Joseph Story, “[The law] is a jealous mistress, and requires a long and constant courtship. It is not to be won by trifling favors, but by lavish homage.” Upon entering the profession, we soon discover the demands of practicing law can be overwhelming at times, with the constant pressure of having to meet deadlines. The amount of work is seemingly never ending. The long and arduous hours can leave no time for a life outside the office. We often also experience a sense of no control over our choices and schedules which seem to be directed and dictated by clients, judges, and partners. In many instances, lawyers strive to address the needs of others, yet at the same time dismiss their own. How do we achieve balance in this scenario and at the same time fulfill our legal and ethical obligations as officers of the court and counselors of the law? How do we accomplish the heroic feat of saving the day for our client without ruining our day at home? One source which can provide direction and guidance is the mentor, particularly one who has dealt with the stress, anxiety, and depression which sometimes can result from engaging in the practice of law. A mentor may not have all the answers but through their past experiences and observations can at least provide the less experienced attorney with the necessary guidance to avoid the mistakes of others who have come before them.

Lastly, there are other intangible benefits to the profession in becoming involved in a legal mentorship relationship. While the newest members of our profession can derive an advantage from participating in a mentorship relationship, note that regardless of where you are in your legal career, you can always learn from someone with more experience

and a different perspective from your own. Furthermore, by being involved in a mentorship the mentor can also receive a sense of satisfaction from giving back to the profession. In this ever-evolving world the mentor can in some circumstances become the mentee. It should be noted that through her or his participation as a mentor, an attorney can also lend their voice to future generations of lawyers. The value of a mentorship is indeed priceless.

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