

Want to Be a Good Mentor? Listen Up!

Mentoring may be an age-old process, but that doesn't mean that everyone does it well. Most partners enjoy mentoring junior lawyers and fancy themselves good at it. They like to think they can have a positive influence on a younger lawyer's career by giving advice, sharing insights about how they became successful, and telling stories about their experiences. After all, they have the wisdom that comes with years of practice and professional success, and they have inside knowledge about how the firm works and what its expectations are for associates. Because they are expected to advise and they have so much to share, mentors traditionally talk much more than they listen. And that's where they go wrong.

Being an effective mentor requires far more listening and a special kind of listening. Most lawyers appreciate the importance of careful, active listening when communicating with clients, cross-examining witnesses or negotiating with adversaries, but they don't always think about applying those listening principles to mentorship. Mentors need to be attentive, empathetic listeners. They must understand what is said, what is tacit and what is intended. Listening is a profound communication skill that is essential to effective mentoring. The reasons are many:

- Time is short. Mentoring is a learning and career development process premised on a personal relationship between mentor and mentee. It requires mutual trust, respect and responsibility. But a strong relationship takes time to develop and lawyers today have little time to devote to relationship building. So you have to find out quickly about your mentee's personal background, experience, talents, needs, attitudes, expectations, interests and aspirations. In all of these areas, you cannot assume that theirs are the same as yours. The only way you can find out is by inquiring and listening.
- You need to gain the mentee's trust and respect. Young lawyers may admire you and give you credit for your success, but likely not as much as you respected or trusted the lawyers who mentored you. To young lawyers today, seniority and status alone do not mean your wisdom is undisputable or your advice unquestionable. They believe there is no one right answer or explanation; each person's opinion – especially their own – is as valid as the next. Listening to their thoughts and ideas shows that you have faith in their abilities and helps gain their trust.
- You have a lot to learn. Mentoring should be a learning partnership in which each of you teaches and learns. Yes, you are wiser and more experienced and they have far more to learn than you do. But there is much that your mentees can teach you – if you are willing to listen and learn.

The profession young lawyers inhabit today is different than it was when you were new to practice, and given the rapid pace of change, they may be better equipped for it than you are. Technology and social media are obvious examples. You may have learned to use them, but young lawyers are native users. You can also learn a lot from mentees about people. Some of your mentees will be from privileged backgrounds; others may be the first in their families to go to law school, college or even high school. Learning from both can make you a more empathetic lawyer, give you deeper understanding of your clients, colleagues and community, and enable you to serve them better as a lawyer and member of society.

- You need to stay relevant. Mentees may find your experience and advice suspect. What worked for you in pursuing your career will not necessarily work for them. Before, the past was a good indicator of the future. You could count on the linearity and stability of career tracks and the clear norms of practice. That is no longer true. Today everything is up for grabs.

This does not mean mentees cannot benefit from your advice. But in order to give them guidance that is relevant and meaningful, you need to understand how they see and experience the world. You need to appreciate the challenges they face – which may be very different from those you faced. You need to hear what motivates, interests and concerns them.

- Fresh thinking improves your firm. Young lawyers bring new eyes to long-held customs, processes and beliefs. Listen to their questions and challenges; they force you to examine the assumptions and practices you take for granted. Although your first impulse may be to hurry mentees' acculturation and conformity, there may be greater benefit in encouraging them to generate new ideas and approaches. You want to harness, not squelch, their creativity both for yourself and for the clients you serve. Clients don't want lawyers to tell them no; they want lawyers to find creative ways to solve their problems. Similarly, young lawyers don't want to hear something won't work because it hasn't been done before or because "we've always done it this way." Maybe their way is better, or contains the germ of an innovation that could lead to something better.

How can you be a good listener? Here are some suggestions:

- *Be curious.* Ask questions. Inquisitiveness isn't the same as prying; it is being genuinely interested in your mentee. As Studs Terkel once admonished, "Don't be an examiner, be an interested inquirer."
- *Model good listening behavior.* Treat conversations as learning dialogues, where both parties speak freely and listen closely. Be willing to learn and open to change.
- *Be present.* Pay attention. Try to determine what's going on inside the mentee's mind; discern the mentee's feelings and needs at that moment.
- *Show that you are paying attention.* As key points are made, summarize themes and points of agreement and disagreement. Acknowledge the mentee's ideas. Clarify ambiguous statements and correct misconceptions by paraphrasing what you heard and asking questions that increase the mentee's self-awareness and produce new insights.
- *Invite and accept disagreement.* If a mentee rejects your advice, ask why. Be respectful of their reasoning, even if it sounds foolish or wrong to you. The goals and paths they seek may be different than what you would choose but legitimate for them. If you want to press your point, don't lecture; ask questions that will make them reflect and think more deeply.
- *Challenge your preconceptions.* Search for what you and your mentee have in common. Especially with mentees of a different gender, race or background, look at what you share rather than what divides you.
- *Make yourself vulnerable.* Reveal your own feelings and needs. This demonstrates the mutual openness and understanding required for a strong relationship. It helps build trust and encourages the mentee to be more forthcoming with you.

Conclusion

As a mentor, you can have an enormous impact on young lawyer's careers. Use that power wisely by showing your mentees that you care about them, value them, and want to be as helpful to them as you can be. Do it by listening attentively, empathically and supportively.