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Mentor as “Career Coach”

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Mentoring often means being a teacher. A mentor could teach legal skills such as taking a deposition or writing a brief. A mentor could teach professional skills such as delegation skills or rainmaking skills. But there is another role for a mentor that brings great value to the mentee as well as the firm – a career coach. A career coach mentor helps a mentee navigate the road to partnership. This mentoring process supervises the mentee’s entire experience at the firm. Well-executed, it maximizes the quality of the relationship between the mentee and the firm. We believe it increases loyalty and productivity and produces the best partners. But creating an effective relationship is often a challenge. And, the key to success is creating clear responsibilities for both.

The Job of mentor as career coach is to help the mentee through a process of self discovery. The goal is to help the mentee take responsibility for the development of his or her career. This is important for the growth of the mentee as a professional. In much of their experience prior to joining a firm, a young lawyer had their path laid out for them: get into good schools and get good grades. In the law firm, they are accustomed to taking direction, rather than taking control. So the mentor as career coach must learn how to communicate in a way that promotes the shifting of responsibility to the mentee.

In order for this to occur, the mentor as career coach needs to use communication skills that are different from their normal daily requirements. And, this kind of communication may be new for a seasoned lawyer. Normally, seasoned lawyers are accustomed to taking control. They give direction to their subordinates. They are the boss.

But in the role of mentor as career coach, it is a mistake to constantly tell mentees what to do. Certainly some advice is warranted, but real success happens when the mentee is engaged in a way that helps them come up with their own ideas. Studies using electrodes attached to the brain show that when a people are given direction, approximately 3% of their brains are activated. But when people are engaged in a process where they are motivated to take ownership of a problem, over 90% of their brains are engaged. So, rather than telling mentees what to do, mentors as career coaches should ask questions.

The questions mentors should ask depend on the guidelines the firm has established for the path to partnership. A mentor could ask, “What are the skills that you need to develop? Or, ‘How are you doing in your effort to get to know the partners?’” This approach is very important because if a mentor tells a mentee that they should do something that has already been accomplished, the mentee can easily interpret the comment as criticism, or a real lack of awareness of the progress of the mentee.

Of course, the mentees will have questions of their own and the mentor as career coach may decide to give a direct answer. But it's always a good idea to follow with an engaging question. For example a mentee might ask, "How can I meet more partners in the firm?" And the mentor could ask, "What have you tried so far?" Only when the mentor is certain that the mentee has exhausted their own ideas, and really are blocked, should the mentor express their views. This approach really helps to shift the burden of responsibility to the mentee.

One important responsibility of the mentor as career coach is to explain the responsibilities of each party to the relationship. The mentor's responsibility is to establish the minimum number of meetings. We suggest a monthly, in-person meeting if possible. Telephone meetings are a valid substitute on occasion. We also recommend a quarterly meeting over lunch or dinner. It is very important for the mentor to live up to their commitment in the relationship and go to great lengths to make the meetings happen. Failure to do so sends a strong message that the meetings (and possibly the mentee) are not important. Even if the mentee thinks that not enough has changed since the prior meeting, the meeting should happen. The process of meeting has value as well as the issues discussed.

Another responsibility of the mentor as career coach is to maintain confidentiality. Building a trusting relationship will help the mentee feel safe to express themselves honestly. If they learn that their issues are being discussed with others, there will be no trust and the relationship is unlikely to produce the desired outcome. The mentor should clearly state at the inception of the relationship that it is confidential and then live up to that commitment.

There is one exception which the mentor should state at the outset of the relationship. That is if the mentee reports that someone is engaging in conduct that is unethical, is illegal or presents physical danger. Then, the mentor would have to take action and report the behavior to the appropriate parties.

An interesting activity the mentor as career coach can pursue is to attend their mentee's employment evaluation. After the review, the mentor can meet with the mentee to discuss the evaluation and help the mentee integrate what she/he heard. It is common for the mentee to focus only on the negative and the mentor can remind the mentee about the positives. The mentor can also ask the mentee to express their views and motivate the mentee to identify an action plan to improve where necessary.

It is the responsibility of the mentee to be prepared for the meeting. Mentees should come prepared with an update regarding their progress. The mentees should be prepared with questions. And, mentees should be informed that no question is too trivial. This is very important because without this clarification, the risk exists that the mentee will self-censor and avoid asking questions that may appear sophomoric. As a result, important issues may get buried, creating confusion and alienation. Also, every issue can be a gateway to other significant issues. Of course, the responses from the mentor for all

issues must be respectful. A mentor must never demonstrate impatience or surprise – just support.

With clear roles and consistent meetings, the relationship between the mentor and mentee can produce a safe and effective environment for the mentee to grow and prosper. An often unexpected benefit is that the process can be enjoyable as well. Studies show that when mentors learn how to shift responsibility to the mentee, the process is actually stress-reducing. And when it works, everyone benefits.

Jill R. Kohn and Lawrence M. Kohn are principles of Kohn Communications. The firm provides training in mentoring, rainmaking, leadership and productivity. For dozens of articles, visit www.kohncommunications.com