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Mentoring in a Hybrid World: Tips for Starting and Maintaining Relationships

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It is undeniable that the practice of law is a challenging profession. This is true particularly for women who, according to the ABA's most recent National Lawyer Population Survey, represent approximately 38% of lawyers in this country. A recent National Association for Law Placement (NALP) survey found that women represent approximately 25% of the partnership ranks in U.S. firms, while women of color represent just 3.79% of those partners.

One way to help navigate the challenges of the practice of law is through developing strong relationships with mentors. Indeed, for many, good mentors can make or break their experience as a lawyer. I have found this to be true for me, personally, as throughout the course of my career, the relationships I have formed with my mentors have been fundamental to my advancement in the profession. And, perhaps more importantly, these relationships have had a direct impact on my happiness and desire to continue to practice law. It is for that reason, that I have always made mentoring those more junior to me a priority. These relationships that I have formed, particularly those with younger female attorneys of color, have allowed me to share not only my own experiences, but also those gleaned from my relationships with my mentors.

As we continue to navigate the world after the COVID-related lockdowns and transition to a hybrid world, the need for mentors, particularly for female attorneys, is even more acute. According to the Minority Corporate Counsel Association, in 2020—a year where COVID turned the world upside down—more than 47% of women associates left surveyed law firms. Yet, while it is clear that building and maintaining strong mentorship relationships is crucial, not only to success, but also to happiness as an attorney, doing so in the current hybrid working environment is neither easy nor intuitive.

The following are five tips to making mentorship relationships more meaningful and impactful.

When Possible (and Safe), Meet in Person. It goes without saying that building a strong relationship, whether as a mentor or a mentee, is easier in person. Yet, given the ongoing challenges of COVID—which are heightened for women, who disproportionately serve as caretakers to elderly family members or children—in-person interactions are not always feasible. However, when they are, lean in to these opportunities. As a mentee, offer to travel to your mentor to meet—this allows the mentor to be more generous with their time. Meeting a mentor in their office allows you to

observe the environment in which they work and clues about their personal interests. It may also allow for introductions to the mentor's colleagues, which only further expands your network—a key aspect of the mentorship relationship. Meals together are equally beneficial, as they allow for conversation to occur in a more informal environment.

Take Advantage of Virtual Methods of Connecting. One of the pleasant surprises from the pandemic was the ease with which we can connect with people, near and far, via Zoom and other platforms. These platforms allow for connections to be made with a few keystrokes; we no longer need to travel to an office or a restaurant to meet. As a result, even the busiest attorneys can build in more time for mentoring connections. Offer to meet with your mentor or mentee via videoconference to ensure that you are in regular communication. While perhaps you aim to meet quarterly in person—over a meal or in the office—scheduling more frequent 30-minute “check ins” allows a mentor and mentee to stay in touch. More frequent meetings provide the mentee with the opportunity to seek and receive guidance in real time. Video conferencing also permits the mentee to seek assistance from the mentor on an as-needed basis, often with less scheduling difficulties than in person.

Step Outside of Your Comfort Zone. Understandably, it is easier to seek guidance from someone who looks like you, has a similar background, or who works at the same organization. However, there are real benefits to stepping outside of your comfort zone to find mentors who have different backgrounds, or frankly, do not look like you. Mentors can do more than just provide advice; they can open doors by expanding your network. They can also serve as sponsors—individuals who have the political capital to advocate for you when you are not in the room. Additionally, those who do not share your background can often provide a necessary and different view on the experiences you face. Moreover, it is equally as important to find mentors from outside of your organization. Such individuals can provide not only candid feedback, but also guidance that may be difficult to find in your home organization. Take advantage of the fact that, in this current environment, people who may never have interacted with you in an all in-person world may be more willing to connect remotely. Utilize your alumni and other organizational networks to connect with people with the kind of career you want, too. You will be surprised by how many people are willing to connect over Zoom to help provide guidance and support.

Be Candid and Be a Sponge. When discussing your goals with your mentor, be candid about what you want to achieve with your career. Mentors want to provide candid feedback and guidance. However, to do so, they need to know what your goals are. Additionally, being candid with your mentor about your goals allows your mentor to best determine how they can be of help to you. Mentors should also be candid with their mentees—providing unvarnished feedback is a crucial role of a mentor. And, when receiving candid feedback, ensure that you are being receptive to your mentor's insights. Being combative or challenging the feedback in an inappropriate way can undermine the relationship. Facial expressions or reactions can also be perceived in an exaggerated manner over Zoom.

Come Prepared. We are all busy trying to navigate our careers and home lives. Come prepared to your meetings with your mentor. Know what you want to discuss, and if possible, give your mentor a preview before the meeting of what guidance you need. While it is certainly fine for conversations to be organic, having a list of things you want to learn is helpful to ensure that the meeting is as productive and meaningful as possible. It also shows the mentor that you are invested in the relationship.

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