

MENTORSHIP/SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM: BEST PRACTICES FOR LAW FIRMS AND OTHER EMPLOYERS

**Saskatchewan Justicia Project
December 2016**

INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that young lawyers, especially young female lawyers, face one or more of the following challenges which may affect their decision to stay in private practice:

1. Gender bias (mostly females);
2. Lack of role models and sponsors; and
3. Exclusion from informal male dominated networks (mostly females).

The larger the law firm is, the easier it is to lose touch with the associates. The loss of associates is costly to a law firm. To address the challenges that a young associate may face, law firms could consider implementing a structured mentorship and professional development program, which may include some of the points described below, in order to help retain their young associates.

The following policy was created as a best practice recommendation for law firms, but can be applied in other types of legal workplaces as well.

STEP 1: CREATE A SUPPORT NETWORK

Research shows that young associates lack access to role models from whom they can emulate their careers, look up to, receive advice and/or who can provide the guidance needed to navigate through the associate's prospective career plan. Law firms can address this issue by providing a support network made up of partners and/or senior associates within the firm. This support network may be:

- (i) Assigned: firms can delegate certain partners and or senior associates to be responsible for/ available to particular young associates; or
- (ii) Practice Area Based – firms can provide that partners or senior associates in a given practice area are automatically responsible for the young associates in that same practice area.

The support network should be made up of both Mentors (advisors) and Sponsors (advocates). Ideally, law firms should strive to provide for at least one Mentor and Sponsor for each associate, keeping in mind that the Mentor and the Sponsor could be one in the same person.

MENTORS (ADVISORS)

1. Female Specific:

Statistics show that young female lawyers lack role models in the form of successful female partners who have succeeded in balancing family and partnership roles.

For this reason, senior female lawyers can play a mentorship role on a consistent and ongoing basis, to address the concerns of young female lawyers who undoubtedly have questions or concerns regarding their career goals, their future in the firm, their path to partnership, or their concerns about how to fit maternity leave/family planning around their career goals. These female lawyers will have worked through the partnership track, gender biases and/or parental leave issues, etc., and can share their insights.

2. Gender Neutral:

Senior lawyers can play a mentorship role on a consistent and ongoing basis to address the concerns of young lawyers who may have questions or concerns with their career goals, their future in the firm, their path to partnership, etc. These senior lawyers will have worked through the partnership path and practice challenges and can share their insights.

Mentors should make an effort to understand the generational differences that a young lawyer is currently facing, which may differ from the same issues faced by the Mentor in previous years/decades. This information can be gathered from the younger associates themselves.

The Mentor should encourage career planning and provide tools and resources to create a realistic and successful career plan given the young lawyer's goals and plans outside of the office. Mentors should encourage a young associate to:

- determine career and personal goals;
- outline a career plan;
- conduct a personal audit;
- take an inventory of skills, strength and weaknesses;
- identify road-blocks or hurdles to career plan and goals;
- be open to different suggestions and advice; and
- take charge of his or her own career.

An important factor in charting out a career plan is having all the information necessary to make informed decisions. To accomplish this, Mentors should be open and transparent with the associate regarding Information (both: formal and informal, written and unwritten) about the firm's partnership policy, partnership criteria, maternity or parental leave policies, flexible working arrangements, etc.

Mentors can provide information on their own experiences in the world of private practice, and share the unwritten rules of private practice law firm politics with the associate.

If possible, associates should be matched with senior lawyers with like interests, goals, personalities, etc.

SPONSORS

Unlike Mentors who provide information, support and guidance, a Sponsor provides opportunities for advancement in the workplace and the practice of law. The Sponsorship role should be played by a senior partner (either male or female) with knowledge of the inner workings of the firm, including how decisions are made.

The role of the Sponsor could include, but is not limited to:

- opening doors to career advancing opportunities;
- advocating for the associate; and
- helping to advance the associate to partnership or wherever his or her career plan may take them.

The Sponsor should work closely with the associate and establish a relationship of trust, honesty, confidence and commitment. The Sponsor should act as the associate's ally - one who will keep the associate on track and provide insights on how the associate is doing on his or her career/partnership path.

Sponsors could consider:

- inviting the associate into client meetings;
- introducing the associate to new clients;
- inviting the associate to lunches and/or networking events;
- providing the associate with work or projects that challenge and expand the associates' current practice;
- providing the associate with helpful tips and lessons where appropriate; and
- providing the associate with ongoing/consistent performance reviews as a supplement to a more formal annual/semi-annual review by letting them know what they are doing well and what could use improvement.

STEP 2: FACILITATE A RELATIONSHIP

Firms should encourage Mentors/Sponsors to meet with their associate on a regular basis to follow up on previous discussions, discuss progress or improvements needed, discuss difficulties or challenges the young associate is facing and any advice the Mentor/Sponsor has. As well as meeting during work hours, for convenience, these meetings could also be held during a coffee break, over lunch, or outside of office hours.

Associates should be encouraged to:

- take an active role in maintaining their relationship with their Mentor/Sponsor; and
- take initiative in establishing their own relationships both within and, if circumstances require, outside the firm. Caution should be taken with respect to maintaining confidentiality in relationships established outside the firm.

The relationship between a young associate and his or her Mentor/Sponsor has the ability to help set the tone for the future relationship between the associate and the firm, and help establish collegiality and team building, two factors which are important to retaining the associate in the firm.