

OTLA GUIDE TO MENTORING

Introduction

The Ontario Trial Lawyers Association has established a mentorship program that offers mentoring support to law school students, students-at-law, new lawyers and those lawyers who may have questions from time to time with issues outside of their general area of expertise to help them succeed in the legal profession.

OTLA encourages mentoring as a practical way for members of the profession to enhance their professional and personal growth. Mentoring also provides excellent opportunities for individuals from diverse communities to learn more about the legal profession and be encouraged to pursue a career in law. In addition, it encourages the retention of young lawyers, women lawyers and lawyers from equity seeking groups in the practice.

This guide has been developed to support OTLA's mentoring initiatives. It is a practical resource for both mentors and mentees. The guide offers useful advice in developing a mentoring relationship and a framework how to make a mentoring relationship work.

What is Mentoring?

The word “mentor” comes from Greek mythology meaning “a wise and trusted teacher or advisor; someone on whom we can rely because they have travelled the journey on which we are about to embark and can, therefore, guide us and help us in our own quest”.¹

Another definition to describe mentoring is, “...at its most basic level mentoring is the passing on of skills, knowledge and wisdom from one person to another. Mentoring relationships can be informal and unstructured, more complex and procedure-based, or somewhere in between”.²

Types of Mentoring

Mentoring occurs in different ways. A mentoring relationship can form through a formal mentoring program that a firm or organization has put in place, or it can happen through a less formal structure.

There are various models for establishing mentoring relationships. The structure of a relationship can range from a mentee being fully involved in the mentor's practice and learning the mechanics and processes when dealing with a case, to a relationship that involves the designation of a mentor with whom a mentee can contact to get advice and guidance on specific topics on an as-needed basis.

¹ The Advocates' Society; An Advocate's Guide to Good Mentoring

² Lawyers' Professional Indemnity Company; practicePRO; Managing a Mentoring Relationship; 2002

GETTING STARTED

Define Roles

The role of mentors and mentees in a mentoring relationship will vary according to the terms set out by both participants in a relationship. The following are examples and suggestions of roles for mentors and mentees:

Role of the Mentor

Provide advice and guidance to lawyers

- Experienced lawyers in relevant areas of law can assist other lawyers in dealing with complex substantive legal issues or specific procedural issues.
- Mentors can also provide advice and guidance on practice management matters such as client service and communication, financial management, file management, personal management, etc.

Assist students studying law or who are interested in a career in law

- Mentors can share their experiences and perspectives as established professionals with students who seek advice on career development and options. For example, mentors can provide information about the job market for lawyers.
- Mentors can share experiences in becoming a lawyer with students who are interested in a career in law. Discussions may include advice about getting into law school, going through the bar admissions course, or articling.
- Provide advice and assistance to students-at-law in their search for articling positions.
- Introduce mentees to their professional contacts and expose them to networking opportunities.

Be an information source

- Mentors with expertise in a particular area of law can assist other lawyers who are dealing with substantive legal matters or specific procedural questions.
- Answer questions that can range from experiences at law school, to personal and work-life balance of lawyers, or other aspects about the legal profession.
- Impart knowledge to a mentee about the culture and environment of an organization or law firm.

Be a role model

- Demonstrate behaviours and attitudes that exemplify high standards of professional conduct.
- Display good leadership skills as well as effective ways to interact with people personally and on the job.
- Promote a rewarding and satisfying work environment and instill pride in being a member of the profession.

Give objective feedback

- Provide meaningful feedback to the mentee that includes talking about the mentee's strengths and weaknesses, and providing constructive criticism to help develop or improve the mentee's skills.
- Be someone in whom the mentee could confide in on personal and professional matters including issues, challenges and fears.

Be accessible

- Be available approximately 3 times per month for up to 20 minutes (unless a retainer agreement has been arranged). Establish ground rules with your mentee about how you can be contacted and when you are available.
- Be responsive. Respond to your mentee's questions and comments. Let your mentee know if you cannot offer a full response to a question and at the time, and indicate that you will be in contact when you have the opportunity.

Qualities of a good mentor

- Communicate effectively by setting an open communication tone in the relationship and maintaining regular contact
- Be a good listener
- Be prepared to give time to the relationship
- Be accessible
- Have patience

Disclaimer

- Shall not be required to do any legal research or accept professional responsibility for any advice given (unless expressly employed as co-counsel).

Role of the Mentee

Identify clear objectives

- Determine objectives and what you are looking for in a mentoring relationship. For example, what do you want to learn from your mentor? What are your career goals?
- Mentees should align objectives with career and personal goals.

Understand the role of mentors

- Recognize that mentors will not make decisions for the individual, nor will they find jobs for mentees. Mentors will, however, offer advice, give guidance and act as a sounding board.

- Be patient with your mentor's schedule. Times arranged to meet with your mentor may have to change from time to time due to your mentor's practice demands, client needs, court appointments, etc.
- Be cognizant and respectful of the fact that your mentor is giving up valuable time to provide you with advice and counsel. The mentor is providing an invaluable service that should not be taken for granted.

Initiate contact with your mentor

- Be assertive, initiate contact with your mentor and introduce yourself. Explain why you are calling and that you would like to arrange a meeting to discuss your objectives. Agree on a time and place to have your first meeting.

Communicate clearly

- Communicate objectives to mentors as clearly as possible. Mentees should also be prepared to be open with their mentors to discuss needs and personal goals.
- It is helpful for mentors when mentees establish a tone of frankness and openness in exploring professional and personal concerns.
- Being a good communicator also means being a good listener. Be willing to listen to advice. This does not mean following every suggestion the mentor offers. Mentees should consider a range of suggestions and make informed decisions by asking questions and having regular discussions with mentors.

Manage the relationship

- Respond to your mentor's calls in a timely way. For example, you should respond to e-mail within the timeframe you discussed with your mentor. Show up on time for any appointments scheduled with your mentor.
- Be responsible about any other contact activity (phone, in-person) you schedule. Feel comfortable initiating contact with your mentor if you have questions or need to discuss something. Maintain your agreed-upon boundaries and level of confidentiality.

Disclaimer

- Shall not request that the Mentor conduct any legal research and acknowledges that the Mentor shall not bear any professional responsibility for any advice given (unless expressly employed as co-counsel).

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THE MENTORS AND MENTEES ACKNOWLEDGE THAT OTLA SHALL NOT BEAR ANY LEGAL RESPONSIBILITY ARISING OUT OF ANY ASPECT OF THE MENTOR/MENTEE RELATIONSHIP