

Practical Success

Cordell M. Parvin

Some Real-Life Practical Tips on Mentoring

In March, I visited the Bennett Jones Calgary and Edmonton offices to give presentations. While in Calgary, I spent time with Greg Liakopoulos a real estate partner I coached in 2010, and Christie Conway, a young real estate associate he is mentoring.

I was impressed with the effort each put into the mentoring and the results they were achieving. I asked Greg and Christie to write about their perspectives on mentoring. (What follows is in their words.)



THE MENTOR'S PERSPECTIVE • What has made our mentoring relationship work so effectively? Here are a few important things:

The Ideal Mentee: Christie wants to have a mentor and wants to learn, and she chose her mentor wisely, if I may say so.... Seriously, she wanted to learn, not just about the law, but also about the process and career development to become the best lawyer she can become. I welcomed mentoring her because of her desire to learn each and every day.

An Open and Personal Relationship: We are different people and are in different stages in our life, but we get along really well and understand each other. We communicate openly and seek to be candid with each other. Christie knows my family and I know her family. That has made our bond even stronger. I hear the saying sometimes that “It’s not personal—its business.” In my world everything is personal. That’s how I roll and I don’t separate the two.

Think Long Term and Pursue Excellence: Mentoring takes time. Building a successful career is a long-term process. To use a phrase I have heard from Cordell, we are each pursuing excellence and in that pursuit, we hope to find success.

Celebrate the Mentoring Relationship with Others: We celebrate our mentoring relationship. We want our real estate colleagues to join us on this journey. We strive to model what great teamwork is all about and encourage others to participate.

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Leave a Legacy: My clients know and trust Christie, in part because I have included her in client meetings. Clients feel comfortable calling her directly. I feel strongly that as partners, we are stewards of our practice for the next generation. That will be our legacy. I don't want to be remembered by my time sheet. If we can build an even better team, I will be proud when I am no longer able to hold the pen (or BlackBerry).

A MENTEE'S PERSPECTIVE •

Making time: While it helps that Greg and I genuinely enjoy each other's company and get along well, we also make mentoring a priority.

For Greg, that has meant involving me on files and maintaining an open door policy for any and all questions. He also stops by my office to ask how I'm doing, or if I want to grab a coffee. Those little visits don't take up much of our time, but are a big part of how we maintain communication and ultimately build trust.

For me, being active about making time to cultivate our mentoring relationship means supporting Greg with his non-billable projects and business development opportunities, as well as his billable matters. It also means not allowing myself to become complacent about acknowledging and thanking Greg for the time he takes to mentor me.

Building Trust. The mentoring relationship Greg and I have would not work without trust. We built that trust by being candid with each other, sharing our success, owning our failures, and respecting each another.

The most important thing Greg did as a mentor early on was to make clear that "a draft is a draft." He let me know that the work I did for him was always going to be judged first on my effort. That gave me the room to learn. He took time to focus on whether I found the right answer, how I got to the answer and what alternative answers might exist.

Instead of the sink-or-swim philosophy adopted by some senior lawyers, Greg always made

it clear that it was okay to make mistakes, so long as I learned from them. I think those other senior lawyers often forget just how paralyzing it can be to be faced with an unfamiliar task and feel as though there is simply no room for failure.

For me, Greg's policy ultimately offered a safe place to ask questions, seek advice, work through legal issues and learn about the law in a pressure and judgment-free environment, and I know I am a better lawyer today because of it.

A team mentality: One of the things Greg touched on was the fact that we view ourselves as a team. That is a great feeling. As an associate, knowing that I have someone like Greg, a leader in his field, invested in my career, is incredibly motivating. It makes me want to learn more, work harder and become a better and more valuable lawyer. Because I am accountable to our "team," I hold myself to a higher standard.

Greg publicly recognizes my contribution. When he is congratulated for a successful project we worked on together, he makes sure the client or firm leaders know about my contribution. So, as a team, when we're successful, we share that success, and when we're facing challenges, we resolve them together.

Thanks to Greg and Christy for sharing an example of a successful mentoring relationship. I think there are some very important takeaways for you:

1. Thinking long term and pursuing excellence. As Greg points out, when we pursue excellence in our work, we often find success;
2. "A draft is a draft." As a young lawyer seeking to learn this is really important;
3. Giving recognition to a young lawyer's contribution. What a great way to inspire that lawyer.