

# One-on-One Professional Development

Mentoring and Coaching in the Legal Profession

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Good mentoring relationships are important from the very beginning of a legal career. Effective mentors can help new lawyers decide which type of law might suit them and how they can tailor their career paths to align with their aspirations and values. Mentors provide practical knowledge and expertise to assist new lawyers in developing practice competencies and navigating the unwritten rules of the legal profession. Additionally, mentors can help new lawyers expand their professional networks so they can land a promising position or put themselves on a pathway to leadership opportunities.

It used to be that in the legal profession, experienced lawyers were expected to provide mentoring and professional development to new lawyers as their professional obligation, whether through apprenticeships, clerkships, or informal mentoring relationships within firms. In today's legal profession, many new lawyers lack opportunities for face time with seasoned attorneys and the notion of legal apprenticeships has all but disappeared entirely. For some new lawyers, personal relationships with veteran lawyers who model competency and professionalism may be inaccessible or unfeasible. Nevertheless, it is paramount that every attorney obtains meaningful mentorship to serve as a compass, a refuge, and a role model for successfully navigating the practice of law.

## The Evolution of Legal Mentorships

Lawyers and the profession within which they operate are becoming increasingly diverse, multi-jurisdictional, and nimble. As a result, the

need for legal mentoring extends beyond the traditional "new" lawyer and includes mid-career and senior lawyers experiencing career transition or career completion. Additionally, while mentoring is critical in a lawyer's early years, the need for mentorship doesn't end simply because a lawyer is no longer "new" to practice. To the contrary, the best mentoring relationships are long-term.

A great deal of mentoring still occurs informally within legal organizations, within bar associations, and between solo and small firm practitioners. Additionally, structured law firm mentoring programs have become increasingly common, to help equalize access to mentoring and avoid leaving to chance the likelihood that a particular new lawyer will receive the mentoring they need. Through these internal programs, legal mentoring has become more organized, supported, and purposeful. In an effort to meet the needs of lawyers without access to meaningful mentoring or seeking to supplement their informal mentoring relationships, states throughout the country began creating mentoring programs available to all lawyers, regardless of firm affiliation and in many cases, regardless of years of experience. The Colorado Attorney Mentoring Program (CAMP), created in 2013, has evolved into one of the leading such programs in the nation.

## The Emerging Role of Professional Coaching

In recent years, lawyers and law firms have increasingly begun to hire professional coaches as an additional career development resource.

Professional coaching is for individuals who want to elevate their performance, increase their career satisfaction, or develop particular skills that are necessary for success. Similar to personal training, an individual hires a coach to help clarify professional goals, create an action plan for reaching them, and be held accountable for taking action. During the relationship, the coach provides support and serves as a sounding board and resource.

Although the use of coaching by corporations has grown steadily over the past 30 years, it is only within the past 10 or so years that law firms have begun providing professional coaching to their lawyers with some regularity. Coaches typically work with a given client for three to 12 months, focusing on particular skills or development goals rather than a lawyer's overall professional development. While some firms have hired full-time in-house coaches to work with their attorneys, firms more commonly engage outside coaches on an as-needed basis for particular individuals.

When firms hire coaches for their attorneys, the coachees are typically high-potential lawyers who want to improve their business development, communication, practice management, or leadership skills. Many firms are finding that professional coaching is a valuable tool for boosting their recruitment, retention, and leadership development efforts.

## Defining the Relationship

As professional coaching has become more common among lawyers, and given the overlap between mentoring and coaching, there is understandable confusion about the difference between mentoring and coaching.

## Mentoring Relationships

While professional relationships among lawyers come in many forms, the act of "mentoring" is not present in every relationship. True mentoring happens when mentees learn something they would otherwise learn less thoroughly, more slowly, or not at all.

One type of relationship that doesn't quite rise to the level of mentorship is that of a "buddy." This is typically a peer or a slightly more experienced lawyer who may work in your office or

## DO I NEED A MENTOR, A COACH, OR BOTH?

Below are some examples of when you might use a mentor or a coach. Keep in mind these are general guidelines; there are no hard and fast rules about when to use which resource. In many cases, a professional can benefit from either one.

	MENTOR	COACH
I'm new to the practice of law and want to fill in skills and knowledge not taught in law school.	X	
I'm learning a new practice area.	X	
I'm just starting out in a new jurisdiction or joining a new legal community.	X	
I've just started working at a law firm or other organization.	X	
I'm transitioning from one practice setting to another (e.g., private practice, government agency, corporate counsel).	X	
I'm a midlevel lawyer who would like to identify my practice goals and create a plan for building my practice.	X	X
I'd like to strengthen the skills necessary to successfully transition from an associate role to a partnership role.	X	X
I'm a new partner adjusting to a new set of responsibilities and expectations.	X	X
I'm experiencing burnout in my career.	X	X
I'm supervising teams of lawyers and paralegals and having difficulty eliciting the performance I'm seeking.		X
I'm challenged with prioritizing and juggling my time between practicing law, supervising others, managing clients, and generating new work.		X
I'd like to build my client development skills.		X
I'd like to increase my level of influence within the firm or community.		X
I'd like to get better at having difficult conversations or giving feedback to my team members.		X

be a general colleague in the legal community. This type of relationship often provides informal navigation through the profession, helps new lawyers learn some of the fundamentals, and provides mutual support.

A true “mentor,” on the other hand, is similar to a guidance counselor—offering the wisdom of experience, a connection to resources, and practical information about the practice of law. Mentors may provide a mix of advising, teaching, and coaching, but their expertise is limited to their own experiences and professional know-how.

Mentoring relationships can be initiated by a mentee or a mentor, or assigned, usually based on input from both parties. Often, mentoring relationships develop between professionals and

their supervisors. But mentoring relationships can also develop between attorneys in different practice groups and even between attorneys in different firms. Mentoring relationships can be short term or span a long period of time. Generally, however, a mentor has already had the experience of meeting the goal the mentee wants to obtain.

Another type of professional relationship, which sometimes arises out of a long-term and highly successful mentoring relationship, is sponsorship. Sponsors are individuals who, over time, have grown to trust and respect their mentee so highly that they are willing to put their own reputation on the line to advance the mentee's career. Sponsors can open doors, share important relationships, advocate, and create

opportunities for the more junior lawyer using the relationship and professional capital they have developed over the course of their career.

### *Coaching Relationships*

A professional coach is someone with training and expertise in adult learning, human development, organizational dynamics, and aspects of the psychology of changing behaviors. The coaching relationship is more focused on particular goals than on general professional development, and as such, is often of shorter duration. Although some firms hire full-time in-house professional coaches, more often a coach does not work in the same firm as the coachee, and may not even have the same professional background.

Professional coaching techniques differ from mentoring in that the coach works in partnership with the client and is postured as an equal, rather than a more experienced or knowledgeable professional in the client's field. Coaches do not typically instruct or advise their clients, but rather, ask thought-provoking questions to elicit the client's best thinking. They also provide feedback reflecting their observations of the client, challenge the client's assumptions, and help the client identify concrete action steps to achieve their objectives. Through these techniques, they support their clients in identifying goals and potential obstacles, trying new behaviors, gathering new information, and processing these experiences in coaching sessions.

While mentors may focus on a combination of substantive practice skills and interpersonal skills, coaches more often focus on interpersonal, emotional intelligence, and leadership skills, which become increasingly important as the lawyer gains practice experience. They also create structure and accountability by helping the client identify goals, create a plan, practice new behaviors, and evaluate progress toward the established goals.

### Finding a Mentor

If your firm has a mentor program, take advantage of it. Take the initiative to set meetings and prepare questions to make the best use of the mentor's time. Recognize that you are the one receiving most of the benefit from the relationship, though certainly over the long term, most mentors find the relationships rewarding as well.

Whether or not your organization has a structured program, be prepared to seek out your own mentors. Most often, you'll have the most success building a relationship with someone for whom you do work, but don't ignore less obvious connections such as opposing counsel, the bench, bar association leaders, and so on. Know that a mentoring relationship will take time to develop. Be patient and authentic in developing professional connections within your community. Remember that organic mentoring relationships can be some of the most meaningful mentoring relationships.

If you need assistance in finding a mentor or are seeking resources for maximizing your current mentoring relationships, look to CAMP. CAMP'S innovative matching techniques include a comprehensive mentee profile and a pre-match interview to determine your professional goals and objectives and to identify the type of lawyer best suited to meet your mentoring needs. CAMP's holistic, one-on-one approach will connect you with a vetted, expert mentor. CAMP also offers informal coffee mentoring, group mentoring programs, and co-counseling mentoring opportunities.

### Finding a Coach

There are many coaches who focus on coaching lawyers. Most can be found through a relatively straightforward Google search. If you're not looking for a coach who specifically focuses on lawyers, consider using the directory on the website of the International Coach Federation, which maintains professionalism in the coaching industry and provides credentialing programs for coaches at specific levels. If you're a firm considering hiring coaches for your attorneys, interview several and create a list of five to 10 you feel comfortable working with. From that list, offer two or three to each attorney who has been selected for coaching. Coaching is a very personal choice, so the coachee should be able to speak with the prospective coaches and decide which one is the best fit for him or her.

In creating your list of eligible coaches, factors to consider include:

**Price.** Because they are trained professionals with a specific skill-set for developing others, coaches typically charge a fee for their services. Fees among professional coaches vary widely depending on the coach's background, specialization, credentials, and experience. Compare several before making a final decision.

**Location.** While hiring a coach locally can be beneficial, more and more, coaching takes place via telephone or videoconference. If the firm is providing group coaching, for example to senior associates or new partners, it's typically best to have them meet in person. But for individual coaching, remote sessions can be just as effective as in-person sessions and save considerable time for both coach and client.

**References.** Obtain references regarding the coach's past work from other firms whenever possible to confirm that the coach was effective, professional, and communicated well with both the client and the retaining law firm. If you are an individual considering hiring a coach, be prepared to interview several until you find a good fit. This is a common practice. In fact, most professional coaches will recommend it as a way of ensuring the kind of positive chemistry that is conducive to an effective coaching relationship.

### Conclusion

In today's legal profession, there are more professional development resources available to attorneys than ever before. Attorneys who are new to practicing law, who are new to a particular legal community, or who want a broader and longer-term development experience can benefit from mentoring, whether provided organically or through a structured program.

Attorneys who are more experienced or want to focus on developing specific skills or meeting particular career goals may benefit more from working with a professional coach. Neither option excludes the other—in fact, the processes often complement each other, with the mentor providing more expertise-specific advice and guidance, and the coach providing more intensive work on specific skills or goals. Regardless of which you choose, you will benefit from taking charge of your professional development and seeking out the resources you need to thrive. 



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