

The Case for Mentorship: **ONE FIRM'S SUCCESSFUL MENTORING MODEL**

BY KRISTY WEATHERS, ESQ.

Career guidelines, career plans and mentors. These are familiar terms to most lawyers, especially law students and laterals looking for the right "fit," and many, if not most, large law firms highlight one or more of these career planning tools on their websites and in their recruiting materials.

But the inside story of the effectiveness of these tools might not be as rosy. Several recent articles in legal journals and newspapers have bemoaned the state of mentoring programs at larger firms, saying that they are boilerplate, empty promises designed to recruit, and that they are usually unsuccessful due to lack of follow-up.

However, at Sutherland Asbill & Brennan, our mentorship program has never been stronger. How do we know it is a success? It has a 100% participation rate, with 170 partner/associate pairs communicating at least quarterly. A successful program is important to the firm and its people, and effective organization and administration can make the difference between a program that is meaningful versus one that is merely an empty promise.

SUTHERLAND'S CAREER PLANNING PROGRAM

Mentoring is the foundation of Sutherland's Career Planning Program. Through this program, we provide associates with a unique, structured approach to career planning through career guidelines, individualized career plans, and partner plan advisors. The guidelines (developed with input from partners and associates

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and designed for each practice group) outline the firm's expectations of associates, and the career plans allow each associate, based on his or her individual interests, to identify specific annual goals and action items for reaching those goals. Associates are asked to name their top three preferences for a partner plan advisor, and communicate quarterly with their assigned partner to discuss their plans and overall development.

Taken individually, these tools are nothing new to most firms. But where the program at Sutherland differs is that it is one of the few, perhaps even one of the first, to offer all of these tools in one comprehensive program with administrative oversight. And, as the participation rate demonstrates, it works.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

A well-run program not only can be an invaluable recruiting and retention tool, it can make practicing law more rewarding and less stressful. It also provides a meaningful vehicle for regular feedback and guidance as part of and prior to the associate review process.

Many of our senior partners praise our Career Planning Program as helping to bring back the one-on-one mentoring they experienced during their days as young lawyers – an experience they felt had been lost as firms grew larger.

Explains senior litigation partner John Bonds: "When I was an associate, I was able to roll up my sleeves and work on a case or a project with

every partner in our Atlanta office. That experience for me and others provided a sort of institutional glue that has made my professional life considerably more rewarding than it otherwise might have been. I think of our Career Planning Program as sort of a more concentrated dose of the same medicine – a way of making sure that we are all part of the same whole."

Steve Boehm, a senior corporate partner, emphasizes that "giving associates clear guidance and helping them succeed is not only enjoyable to the mentor, it reduces the uncertainty and stress an associate may feel if he/she is not engaging in regular career development discussions. As a firm, we want to do everything possible to put associates in positions where they can excel if they are willing to do their part."

Associate Molley Clarkson agrees, noting, "The program has made me think about my career in a big-picture way. It's very easy to get caught up in the specifics of your current workload and forget to think about your long-term goals and priorities. My partner-mentor helps me create and stick to my plan, while giving me practical advice and insight about how to reach my goals."

HOW CAN A MENTORING PROGRAM BE STRENGTHENED?

Allow associates to have a say in picking their mentor. As noted above, Sutherland associates are asked to name their three top preferences for a partner plan advisor. We do not guarantee that

an associate will get one of his or her preferences (although most, if not all, do). However, allowing the associate to name his or her preferences not only assures that the associate is comfortable with the partner, but that the partner feels a sense of personal responsibility for the associate.

Provide meeting topics and deadlines. Attorneys appreciate clear, concise directions and deadlines so they can use their time efficiently. We make it as simple as possible for our lawyers by providing topics, deadlines for meeting, reminders, clear examples of action items, and so on. The less work required of the attorney, the more likely the program is to succeed.

Provide administrative oversight. We follow up with each pairing to ensure that they communicate on a quarterly basis. Busy schedules for both partners and associates can make it difficult to find a mutually convenient time to meet, but reminder e-mails and phone calls work.

Build support from firm leadership. Structure and oversight are key, but, as always, it's a firm's culture that will play a large part in the success or failure of a mentoring program. At Sutherland, the emphasis on training and mentoring comes from the top, and the support of our managing partner, governing committee, and all of the practice group leaders is unwavering. If partners are busy with billable work, the first thing that can get lost is the responsibility for training and providing feedback to younger lawyers. But if the importance of mentoring is conveyed to partners, they will consider it an integral part of their job.

CONCLUSION

Is a good program worth the effort? A quote from one of our associates best sums up the value of a mentoring program that works: "The greatest benefit of our Career Planning Program is that it institutionalizes the mentoring process and

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makes you really think about your career and how you are progressing, as well as giving you the opportunity to discuss these issues on a regular basis with your partner advisor. Most large firms have something about mentoring on their websites, but I appreciate that Sutherland provides the structure and support it takes to make it work. They actually take the time to make sure that everyone is meeting. To me, that makes the difference between a program that works versus an empty promise." ■