

Make the Most of Your Partners' Potential: Foster a Culture to Support Senior-level Mentoring

by Heidi K. Gardner and Rebecca Normand-Hochman

Heavily formalized mentoring programs don't work for getting partners to mentor partners. What does work is to foster a culture of mentoring, with just the right amount of necessary supports to undergird the culture.

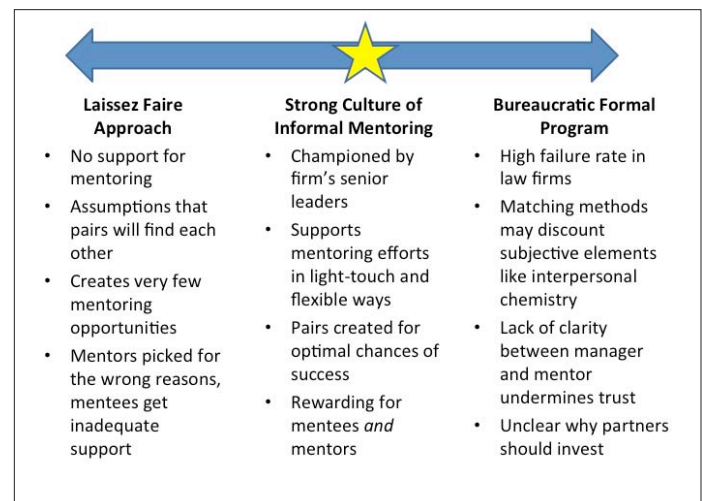
At one time, talent development in the legal profession was based on a classic apprenticeship model. Even after that approach waned, an ethos of mentorship solidly remained in many firms. However, growing commercial pressures have re-focused partners' priorities in many firms, directing their attention more narrowly to activities with a direct link to revenues. Mentoring efforts have declined in many firms — and we find that newly elected partners are often the most neglected group.

Because the partner selection process has become increasingly rigorous and based on business development metrics, many senior partners seem to have adopted the attitude that “if the new partners made it this far, they will be just fine.” But new partners say that even after a decade of experience as associates, they feel unprepared to tackle sticky client issues, balance conflicting responsibilities, negotiate fees, and perform the myriad other tasks that come with their elevated positions. Given that partners are a firm's most valuable asset, why would firms leave their development to chance?

Based on “The Partner as Mentor” research project undertaken by Harvard Law School and the Institute of Mentoring, this article focuses on senior-level mentoring in law firms and examines ways to make it more effective. We find that although informal mentoring relationships are usually more successful than formal ones, if a firm relies on a completely unstructured, hands-off process with the hope of relationships forming naturally, then a number of significant difficulties arise. We're not

suggesting an overly structured mentoring program that relies on standardized processes and metrics: senior lawyers would see those as bureaucratic and unhelpful, and such programs would not get off the ground. Instead, we suggest that the right approach to creating successful senior-level mentoring in law firms is to foster a culture of mentoring, with just the right amount of necessary supports to undergird the culture.

Figure 1: Continuum of Mentoring Approaches



What Is Senior-level Mentoring?

Senior-level mentoring involves a highly experienced lawyer providing ongoing support, guidance, and feedback to a partner-level colleague. True mentoring involves a two-way

learning relationship that is built over time. The purpose of the relationship is not only to overcome specific problems or challenges that arise, but also to consider the mentee's holistic development and to work toward his or her longer-term learning, career, and personal objectives. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that professionals succeed — across a whole range of personal and professional dimensions — when they have effective mentors.

Research Method

We used a two-pronged approach to study senior-level mentoring in law firms. First, to date we have embarked on a large-scale interview project involving 11 firms. Across these firms we have interviewed numerous partners of varying tenure, including some mentor-mentee pairs, to understand “both sides” of the story. We also interviewed senior executives, learning and development, and other professional development staff in order to use a comparative approach to draw out insights and new perspectives.

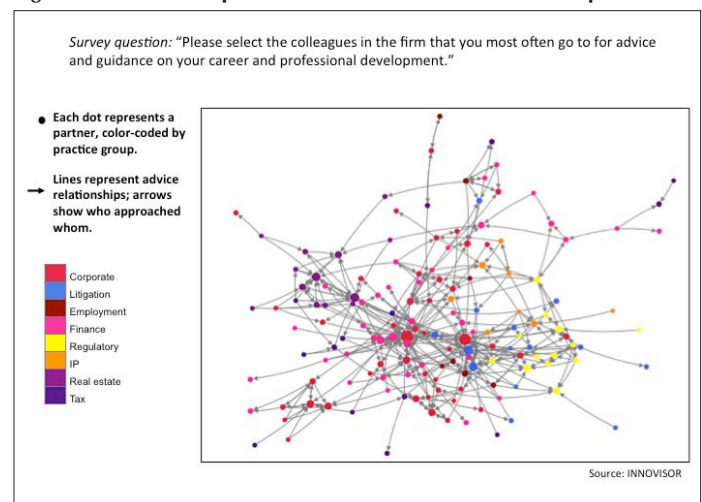
Second, to get detailed, objective data to undertake rigorous empirical research, we conducted a network survey of partners' mentoring behaviors inside a prominent international law firm. We teamed up with Innovisor, an elite consulting boutique that specializes in gathering and analyzing this type of data. [Readers interested in learning more about an organization network analytical approach are encouraged to contact one of us or Paul Flatin (Paul.Flatin@innovisor.com), US Managing Director of Innovisor.]

Remarkably, 80% of the law partners answered the network survey. Because interviews revealed that no formal mentoring program existed — and, indeed, that the term “mentoring” was somewhat confusing to partners who held widely differing views about what it means — we sought to understand other concrete actions that would indicate senior-level learning relationships in this firm. Four short questions with drop-down answers (e.g., “Please select the colleagues in the firm that you most often go to for advice and guidance on your career and

professional development”) allowed us to develop fine-grained insights about senior-level relationships at the firm.

For example, mapping the data onto a network diagram like the one shown in Figure 2 provides an easily discernable first step to understand different types of working relationships in the firm. This one specifically shows which partners are approaching others for career-related and similar advice.

Figure 2: Network Map of Career-Related Advice Relationships



Pitfalls of an Entirely Informal Approach

The findings from our network analyses show clear patterns that might surprise many lawyers (but not necessarily professional development professionals!). What is helpful about using and visually mapping evidence from this data-driven approach is that it allows us to see configurations that are challenging for the human mind to detect from mere observation, even if our intuition might seem to lead us there. Further, an empirical approach removes the subjectivity of relying merely on anecdotes.

The law firm we studied had an informal approach to senior-level mentoring: some individuals had strong mentors, but those pairings had emerged organically. Without any structures to support a mentoring program, other partners not only lacked formal mentors but also suffered from a dearth of even

informal advice on both professional and career-related issues. This finding is corroborated by data from other firms in our research project, showing that very low numbers of informal senior-level mentoring pairs form and work effectively together when firms take a hands-off approach. Following are some of our other core findings from the network survey.

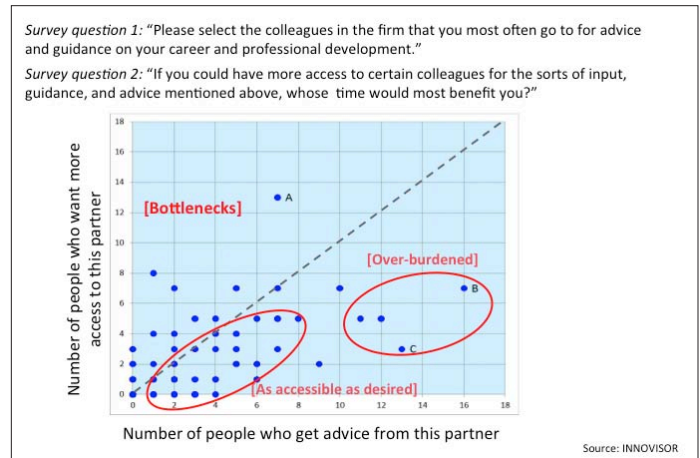
Bottlenecks Versus the Over-Burdened

Without any program to appropriately match mentors with mentees, partners seeking support will use proxies such as seniority or formal titles for deciding whom to approach for professional or career-related advice. They may also use political strategies — for example, “I ought to seek this person’s advice so that they know I value them” — that fail to get them the ongoing, unbiased inputs they need. Our research shows how people with formal leadership roles become bottlenecks, with far more people than they can handle seeking their input. In the firm we studied, one leader is a clear bottleneck: he gives advice to only five partners, but 42 partners would like more access to him. Our analyses revealed that practice leaders are also swamped by requests for advice: partners are nearly three times more likely to seek client advice from a practice leader than from partners who don’t hold a formal role. We all know that there are extremely capable lawyers who don’t have an official title who would be equally capable of dispensing high-quality mentoring.

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Bottlenecks abound in the domain of career advice, too. As shown in Figure 3, well over a dozen partners are in the zone where more people want their advice than they can manage. Partner A, for instance, mentors seven people, but nearly twice that number want more access to him. The firm’s top leaders (not shown on the diagram — they were literally “off the chart”

Figure 3: Severe Mismatch Between Availability and Desired Access for Career-Related Advice



— provide career advice to more than two dozen people each, but nearly double that number want even more access to them. Meanwhile, partners like those labeled B and C on the diagram are shouldering a disproportionate load.

Untapped Potential

The flip side of this problem is that there were many capable lawyers whose talents weren’t deployed effectively for mentoring their peers. In particular, women lawyers and lateral hires were significantly under-utilized for both professional and career advice. Our data show that partners were only half as likely, on average, to seek career advice from female partners versus male partners. And, while it is perhaps normal that people turned more to “homegrown” partners for mentoring on career issues, we found that lateral hires were significantly under-used for professional advice, which is surprising given that they had presumably been hired for their client skills.

“Mini-Me” Matching

When people don’t have help matching with a mentor, pairs naturally form that are highly homogenous: data show that people seek advice from others who are in the same practice, same office, a similar tenure band, and so on. The implica-

tion is that some people turn to the “wrong” mentor for the wrong reason, which means they’re not getting the best advice they deserve. Research by academic network scholars such as Rob Cross and Jonathan Cummings shows how this form of “biased networking” carries risks such as limited access to new information and opportunities and less on-the-job learning. As they note, personal effectiveness is undermined when people continually mistake trust or friendship for true expertise.

More troublesome, perhaps, is that when mentoring is left to chance, some people who don’t fit the mold of a “typical” partner are unlikely to find a mentor at all. Researchers such as Herminia Ibarra and David Thomas have shown the disadvantages in networking opportunities for both women and other under-represented groups of professionals. Likewise, our data revealed a number of “isolates” in the law firm — people who reported having nobody to turn to in the firm for advice. These are precisely the kind of partners who are most likely to need advice on navigating in the firm, and a formal mentoring program could have helped to foster those matches.

Confusion and Ambiguity

Finally, our data suggest that the firm’s *laissez faire* approach to senior-level mentoring left some partners scratching their heads about what mentoring should even look like and whether it existed at their firm. In response to the question about seeking colleagues’ career-related advice, one partner wrote, “With whom should I discuss advice on my career? — with my wife? I turn to my colleagues for BD and client-related issues but not for advice on my career.” Furthermore, the lawyers were confused about what constituted valued inputs: our analysis showed that, on average, each partner reported giving advice to twice as many people as the number of lawyers who reported getting advice from him or her.

In another organization we know, such a discrepancy was explained this way: senior professionals believed that they were dispensing valued guidance, but the recipients perceived the inputs not as mentoring but rather as scrutiny, evaluation,

and unwelcome interference. These issues can be at least partly addressed by a firm mentoring initiative that provides (1) clear guidelines for what mentees can expect and (2) training to make mentors more effective.

Why Most Structured Senior-level Mentoring Programs in Law Firms Fail

In our research, we found that relatively few firms have a formal program aimed at mentoring senior-level professionals, and those programs that do exist are rarely structured in a way that fosters good mentoring. Overall, senior-level mentoring programs in law firms have a low success rate.

The reasons why structured programs for lawyers tend to fail are numerous and sometimes complex. They include:

- Lawyers do not like to follow procedures and tend to prefer high levels of independence and autonomy in the way they work. A highly structured program, especially one driven from “the center” without communicating a clear purpose that lawyers relate to, feels to them like a bureaucratic intrusion.
- Rigid matching systems — for example, assignments based solely on the more senior lawyer’s involvement in the partner election process — may fail to consider personal preferences and interpersonal chemistry; mismatches reinforce skeptics’ beliefs that a structured program is a waste of time.
- A high number of law firm partners believe that either someone is naturally a good mentor or never will be. The reality, however, is that most partners simply lack the crucial skills to mentor.
- The confidentiality rules of mentoring are often not openly discussed and communicated, leading to ambiguity and lack of trust. For example, if the mentee shows serious signs of depression or anxiety, can/should the mentor inform HR and request that appropriate support from the firm be offered to the mentee?

- Relationships are problematic when mentees are the mentors' direct reports (e.g., the mentor is the newly elected partner's practice group head). If mentors have substantial influence on their performance reviews, mentees strongly hesitate to discuss challenges, doubts, or problems openly.
- The performance pressure is particularly high in today's law firm context and makes people turn away from collaborative types of work because it feels risky, inefficient, or unlikely to pay off.

Fostering a Culture of Senior-level Mentoring

If too little structure leads to pitfalls but the law firm context makes a highly formalized mentoring program impossible, what's the answer? Culture. Fostering a culture of senior-level mentoring is crucial.

But culture-building needs to be supported by the right stakeholders and reinforced by appropriate organizational efforts. Mentoring relies on a two-way relationship, which means that both mentors and mentees need to fully buy into the ideas. This section proposes four concrete ways to ensure that mentoring is fully embedded in the culture.

Get Senior Management Champions on Board

Senior management needs to support and champion mentoring in the firm, whether as part of formal mentoring programs or by way of introducing and cultivating a mentoring culture for informal mentoring to develop. In addition, the most committed and convincing champions are likely to be those partners who are already engaged in productive mentoring relationships; use them to champion the culture of mentoring even if they don't have time for individually mentoring everyone who wants it. As with any change initiative, finding the "hidden influencers" is essential for building commitment. Some partners are clearly sought after and carry a lot of weight but they may not necessarily be the best mentors. Professional development professionals can help to make sure that every potential good

mentor in the firm is encouraged to come forward to mentor others and given the support that is required to mentor well.

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Match Mentoring Pairs or Keep a List of Mentors

If a firm prefers to encourage and support informal mentoring relationships rather than design and coordinate a formal program, then it should keep an up-to-date list of mentors available in the firm and encourage all partners to engage in mentoring relationships. If a mentoring program is in place, the firm should play a large role in helping to match newly elected or lateral partners with mentors. Whatever the matching method used, all mentees should have a voice in the decisions because successful mentoring requires interpersonal chemistry. That said, mentees need counsel on choosing the "right" mentor, rather than using proxies such as formal titles or rainmaking prowess.

Train Mentors and Mentees

Many lawyers think that they can mentor well because they are experts in what they do: what more could they possibly learn through mentoring training? We propose that effective mentors need not only enough experience, but also sufficient skills, capabilities, and motivation to handle situations that are ambiguous or that challenge their own ways of working. Whether the firm has a formal mentoring program in place or whether it is looking to build a mentoring culture, training is probably the most critical key success factor.

Primarily, mentors need to be competent in taking an approach based more on inquiry than advocacy. The ability to ask questions and listen is not inherent in most lawyers who are trained to give advice and tell. The core element of mentoring training is designed not only to enable partners to master the various

stages of the mentoring relationship (from building the relationship to dealing with roadblocks to managing and ending the relationship) but more fundamentally to enable them to ask questions and listen in a way that raises awareness and leads to breakthroughs in their mentee's thinking process. Mentors also need to learn other mentoring-related skills such as how to hold difficult conversations or how to use virtual communication tools (if their mentees are located in a different office).

The risk with mentoring training is that the partners who need it most may fail to sign up. Make sure that all partners receive the appropriate mentoring training — whether by way of individual briefing, coaching and supervision, or by attending regular mentoring events enabling them to share their experience with other mentors and to up-skill their abilities to mentor. According to our research interviews, lawyers clearly prefer to receive mentoring training from experienced and skilled mentors rather than from trainers.

Whatever the method and format used, the core skills that need to be covered in the training include:

- **Clarifying objectives** and agreeing what “success” looks like;
- **Planning** the number, frequency, location, goals, and structure of meetings;
- **Reflecting** to determine when to advise, question, probe, challenge, or simply listen;
- **Handling tricky topics** that make the mentor uncomfortable;
- **Exploring options** and providing advice based on experience and expertise; and
- **Agreeing on next steps**, what to achieve, and how the mentor can be supportive in the meantime.

It is crucial to provide mentees with the appropriate skills to be mentored effectively, a step which is often overlooked. Mentees should commit to standards that make the relationship mutually productive: professionalism in setting and communicating an agenda for mentor meetings, sufficient reflection before meetings to be able to discuss issues deeply, openness to feedback, reciprocity in helping their mentor to grow and develop,

and so on. They should also have a clear understanding of what they can, and cannot, expect from mentors.

While it is true that some people will never be good mentors, a large majority of partners in law firms would be good at mentoring if they had the relevant mentoring skills. Our research reveals that a large number of partners are untapped as mentors, while many newly elected partners miss out on sufficient mentoring; we propose that training both (potential) mentors and mentees could help to close this gap.

Set Standards, and Gauge and Reward Good Mentoring

Firms must take a number of steps to support a culture that values high-quality mentoring. First, the confidentiality rules need to be clearly set and widely communicated. Mentors and mentees need to discuss how they relate to these rules and especially to the exceptional circumstances when information may be fed back to HR or to any other third party. Our research reveals a high correlation between the level of trust between partners and the number of mentoring successful relationships, and open communication helps to establish that foundation. Additionally, our findings suggest that there tends to be less shared understanding around the confidentiality rules and therefore less trust in relation to mentoring in law firms that have grown with a large proportion of laterally hired partners.

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Further, firms must reinforce a mentoring culture by setting and helping to maintain appropriate standards for mentors and mentees. Standards that promote ongoing, supportive relationships as an outcome are more helpful than prescriptive standards about inputs. The best practice we've seen is a firm that uses peer feedback for those who are paired up; both the

mentor and mentee rate each other's effectiveness using the firm's annual evaluation system.

Firms that measure mentoring against agreed metrics can include it in their compensation system — typically adjusting a partner's bonus upward to reward his or her discretionary efforts. The real benefit of this action is primarily symbolic: a bonus signals the importance of mentoring inside the firm, which further reinforces the culture.

Another way to achieve this signaling effect, possibly less fraught with challenges than compensation, is to include mentoring as a core component of the overall performance ranking. This is a powerful way to demonstrate the firm's commitment to mentoring and therefore reinforce the culture. At one firm, for example, partners cannot be designated in the "highest performer" category unless they make a substantive contribution to developing others. Leaders need to hold developmental conversations with any partners who are underperforming and refer them to resources offered by the firm's professional development group.

Additional non-financial, symbolic rewards for genuinely excellent mentoring are likely to carry significant weight, especially when they are publicly celebrated. For example, some firms celebrate great mentors by publicly awarding them small but meaningful tokens at their partner retreats. Others recognize mentors in ways that signal their value to the firm, for instance by inviting them to a Chairman's dinner. One of the biggest risks, however, is rewarding the wrong partners; firms must seek mentees' views of excellent mentors or run the risk of creating deep cynicism by praising partners who are less than ideal mentors.

Conclusion

A fine balance exists between overly informal and excessively structured approaches to mentoring. From the data we've collected so far, it appears that very few law firms get that balance right. None of the firms interviewed as part of this large research project expressed satisfaction in the way mentoring was done in their firm. Taking into account the legal profession's specific challenges, the Institute of Mentoring has developed specific mentoring research tools to help law firms —

- get a clear picture of the amount and quality of formal/informal mentoring that goes on in their organizations;
- benchmark their progress with some of the most successful approaches developed in some of the most advanced firms — including both law firms and other professional service firms; and
- design new mentoring briefings, workshops, and frameworks that allow the senior leadership and most partners to take a role in building and shaping a strong mentoring culture.

In today's high-pressure legal environment, finding ways to fully leverage the strength of a firm's partners and professional staff is a crucial source of competitive advantage. Fostering a culture where partners mentor partners will help to ensure that senior-level talent is best developed and utilized. Firms that make the most of their partners' potential in this way will be best armed to face the competition and succeed.

About the Authors



Heidi K. Gardner, Ph.D., is a Distinguished Fellow at Harvard Law School's Program on the Legal Profession and a Harvard Lecturer on Law. Her research focuses on leadership, collaboration, and management in knowledge-based organizations, especially professional service firms, and she is currently writing a book

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Rebecca Normand-Hochman is the founder and director of the Institute of Mentoring, which provides insight, research, and advice to advance mentoring best practices in the legal profession. As a Franco-British former lawyer, Rebecca Normand-Hochman practiced international finance law in London and in Paris.

Her experiences as a lawyer with Allen & Overy in Paris laid the foundation for her present work in talent management. She has carried out extensive research on law firm talent management, and her work draws on best practices and collaboration with leading experts in leadership, change management, coaching, and mentoring.

Since 2012, she has been leading the main talent management initiatives of the International Bar Association Law Firm Management Committee, including the coordination of the books *Managing Talent for Success* (2013) and *Mentoring and Coaching for Lawyers* (2014) and leading the IBA Law Firm Mentoring Programme. She is an advisory board member and co-chair of the talent and leadership working group of the Law Firm Management Committee. Rebecca can be reached at rebecca.normand-hochman@instituteofmentoring.org.