

YOUNG LAWYERS

Shannon P. Smith

Chairperson
Young Lawyers Section
The West Virginia State Bar



THE CASE FOR MENTORS

Have you ever been tested by someone asking you to say the first thing that comes to mind when they say ... ? Let's try it now.

Who inspires you?

I know, I know. It sounds interview question, but think about it. There is no right or wrong answer. It could be your mom, a friend, God, etc., but chances are, you had an answer, and you probably came up with it pretty quick. Now, it's time for a more specific question.

Who inspires you at work?

I'm guessing this question is, for most, a little more difficult to answer. For some, the answer may be the same as that of the first question. To all of us in this profession, no matter how young or how experienced, this is a question to which the answer should be anyone but "no one."

We often refer to those who inspire us at work as "mentors." But,

let's not confuse someone who gets to be called a mentor because he or she was assigned to do so with someone who actually makes you want to do and be better. Hopefully, they are one and the same.

There are innumerable benefits to having that person. In fact, if you Google it, you will find millions of results and articles that span decades — from *Forbes'* "Seven Reasons Most People Need a Mentor" to the small start-up site's "25 Reasons Why ..."

It does not matter if you are working solo or in a large firm; mentors matter in the practice, and business, of law. There is a misconception that mentors are only for young lawyers, but the questions that arise as your practice changes, as the law changes and as your life changes do not end. They just become different questions. There is also a misconception that

seeking out help makes you weak or people think that you're not up to the task. I have been out of law school for 11 years now, and I have needed a mentor every step of the way. My mentor may have changed over time, but my needs have also changed. Now, each of my partners inspires me in some way, all of which are different.

In our age of instant gratification, it is, at times, enticing to just jump right in. Our new age of thinking is linked to posts and feeds that can be filtered based upon on our own views, rather than being forced to confront different opinions, and in some cases, facts. That attitude has garnered millennials an impulsive reputation — jumping in, experience be damned. How many of you millennials think you are doing just fine without a mentor? Millennials, on the other hand, tend to think that baby boomers

Let's not confuse someone who gets to be called a mentor because he or she was assigned to do so with someone who actually makes you want to do and be better.

ignore “the facts” that they need help with managing aging and long-term planning. How many of you baby boomers can identify a mentor? And if you ask my mom, Gen X-ers (which includes me) just need help.

Out of all of the possible reasons why you need to find “your person,” I’d like to share my top five reasons as to why everyone should have a mentor:

1. You do not want to commit malpractice. What if that mistake could have been avoided had you been able to talk the issue over with someone? What if that court appearance could have been covered when you suddenly fell ill? Mentors can provide you with knowledge and assistance where you may not otherwise have it and with hands-on experience. Benjamin Franklin purportedly said, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” Teachers call it experiential learning. We call it practice.
2. Having a mentor may help you feel more involved at work. Although our profession is one that attracts extroverts, many of us are actually not. A mentor can encourage interaction in the workplace and give you someone on whom to latch when the introvert in you reaches the surface. Find your cheerleader.
3. A mentor can help you wade through meetings

and events and help open doors. Perhaps this is the opening to meet the newly elected judge or to get a new client or two. Also, if your mentor cannot answer a question or help solve a problem with you, maybe someone he or she knows can.

4. Your mentor will know what skills will help you get better and can tell you, without hesitation, how to get them. Having someone to help you realize what you are capable of achieving regardless of your challenges will help empower, engage and enable you.
5. Having mentors, and being mentors, are beneficial to business. With individuals turning to mentors for all of the above, they may make fewer mistakes and have overall greater confidence and job satisfaction. Who doesn’t want to have a happier environment?

If you still need a mentor, go to your local Bar event. Go to a State Bar event. Join a practice-specific organization. Your mentor could be your next supervisor, or your next partner, or even your next friend. If you are matched with a mentor at work, take advantage of that opportunity. Find and match with your mentor’s goals, and make the time to try. Find someone who has leadership experience and, most importantly, someone with a passion for the law. **WVL**