

YOUNG LAWYERS

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TO BE YOUNG AND IN THE LAW

Five tips on how to be an effective mentor to young professionals entering the practice of law

Milestones tend to make us reflect on the beginning. When I was recently sworn in as Chairperson of the Young Lawyer Board on April 10, 2022, I couldn't help but reflect on the incredible mentors and colleagues who encouraged me and cheered me on during my six years of practice.

For me, having mentors to help me navigate the legal field in my early days of practice allowed me to “get my feet wet,” and their support remains invaluable to my professional development. Not only did the people around me want me to succeed — they took a personal interest in my success. They grabbed me by the hand and immersed me in networking and volunteer opportunities. I know for certain that I would not be the lawyer or leader that I am today had it not been for my mentors encouraging me along the way.

My primary goal as Chairperson of the Young Lawyer Board is to pay it forward. To me, that means being a mentor to those who come after me by ensuring they have someone to learn from, to trust, to be their friend and, most importantly, to help guide them through the stressful first years of entering the legal profession.

Here are my five tips, cultivated through my progression from budding attorney to senior associate, that I believe have been critical to my personal and professional development in the practice of law in West Virginia. I hope they inspire others to step up to the plate of mentorship.

1. Be the type of mentor you wish you had.

New law school graduates quickly realize that although they might know the basics of law well

enough to pass the bar exam, they know very little about the *practice* of law. Some seasoned attorneys reminisce about their first years in the practice of law where they received an additional degree from “the school of hard knocks.” However, I question whether the “fend for yourself” approach is beneficial for the individual lawyer or the practice of law.

You never forget the first big mistake you make as a new lawyer. And more notably, you never forget how you were treated after making it. Were you yelled at by a senior attorney? Did you question why you entered the legal profession? Did opposing counsel make you feel so incompetent that you cried in the elevator leaving the courthouse? Maybe you received a scathing email from a partner that remains forever burned in your memory? Remember those experiences when

impressionable young lawyers join your firm or stand as opposing counsel.

Maya Angelou said, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” The same applies to new lawyers. Young lawyers do not mess up intentionally. Rather than saying something you may regret, consider using the opportunity to mentor and teach. New lawyers will remain forever grateful that you took the opportunity to educate rather than chastise them.

2. Give grace.

It is easy to forget that young associates are typically in their 20s or 30s and learning to navigate a new career while also trying to balance financial planning, new home ownership, wedding planning, starting a family or, in some cases, all of the above.

The banal tasks you mastered years ago might feel like huge obstacles to a lawyer fresh out of law school. A simple “nice job” email goes a long way to the new associate who just filed her first notice of appearance.

Further, while it might seem inconsequential, giving them a few days out of the office to enjoy their honeymoon or being understanding when they are running late because their newborn didn’t sleep the night before can go a long way with a young, impressionable lawyer who is likely trying their best. Keep in mind that they will never get these life milestones back. Give them some grace and remember that you, too, were in their shoes trying to balance many plates not too long ago.

3. Bring them along.

One of the most valuable things my mentor and boss did for me when I began the practice of family law was *include* me. A routine preliminary hearing for you might be an exciting first courtroom experience for your new associate.

You know those networking events or mandatory CLE hours that might make you sigh and think to yourself, “*another one?*” Well, young lawyers live for these events and benefit enormously from them — both personally and professionally. Remember that these events are exciting for young lawyers! Exchanging business cards and meeting opposing counsel outside of the office is a big

deal. Shaking hands with a judge outside of a courtroom is a rush for young lawyers. These types of events are perfect opportunities for young associates. You might even surprise yourself at how nice it feels to get out of the office and see colleagues you haven’t seen in a while.

4. Lead by example.

I am convinced that young lawyers make two mental lists when beginning practice: 1) attorneys I aspire to be, and 2) attorneys I never want to be like. You don’t want to be on the latter list.

You’ve probably heard the quote, “Watch what you say and do because little eyes are watching you.” This rings especially true regarding young, impressionable lawyers modeling their practice techniques after those of their senior colleagues. The first year or two of practice involves an extremely steep learning curve.

It is important to remember that new lawyers are eager to imitate and pick up the smallest of habits they observe. I know from personal experience that I still carry with me practice habits I learned in the first few years of my legal career. If you have new lawyers practicing under you, be aware that they are like sponges, purposefully trying to absorb how you practice in the process of developing their own style. Hold up a mirror and consider whether you would be satisfied watching someone mimic how you dress, how you treat your staff and how you speak to opposing counsel.

Ask yourself, “What will be *my* legacy?”

5. Lastly, and most importantly, be a friend.

Not all associates graduate with a slew of local friends. I, for example, graduated from an out-of-state law school and am not a Charleston native. Therefore, when I started working at a firm immediately following graduation, I could count on one hand my local contacts.

Had it not been for my boss encouraging me to get involved in the Young Lawyer Section of the West Virginia State Bar, taking me to networking events and introducing me to the Junior League of Charleston, my experience working in Charleston would have looked very different. Graduating from law school and starting

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DEAN'S COLUMN

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resentment and distrust. We hope that our imaginary 1L seeks the help that they need; but when they do so, they could fail to develop a foundation in writing, research or doctrinal subjects and end up positioned poorly for jobs and bar passage down the line.

These are versions of the same questions we've all been asking ourselves during the pandemic and beyond — how do we heed health and well-being boundaries

set by the people we respect and still achieve the pressing goals of our organization? As the leader of an organization with these same challenges, I don't have any good answers. But I hope that all of you consider this the first of many conversations about how we will — *together* — address some of these problems in our profession — with humanity, compassion and meaning.

Let's go. **WVL**

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a new job (sometimes in a new city where you know few people) can be isolating, to say the least. Therefore, many times you will find new associates not only need a mentor, but oftentimes, a friend. Take them to lunch. Invite them to dinner. Everyone can use a friend, and you might just be the only friend they have.

If the past six years have taught me anything, seeking and cultivating a mentor relationship with lawyers who

have gone through similar experiences is invaluable. For example, while becoming a mother has been my biggest blessing, it has also posed my hardest challenges as a professional. Surrounding myself with mentors who have fought (and still fight) the good parenthood fight while succeeding in their legal careers has been such an inspiration; and I rely on their guidance and support daily for my personal success. **WVL**