

Mentoring for success

Mentoring in law firms can bring lasting benefits for all those involved, including the firm, says **Rebecca Normand-Hochman**, but only if the process is set up appropriately and implemented effectively



Creating an effective mentoring culture is a powerful way to invest in talent. It is the best and most cost-effective form of professional development that law firms can put in place. It produces visible results in terms of lawyers' performance, satisfaction and retention.

Mentoring always informally existed in law firms. In the past, senior lawyers had proteges who they mentored and promoted. This is no longer prevalent, due

in particular to the growing number of lawyers in law firms. But the need is still there, and young lawyers expect to be guided and supported in their professional development.

As David Clutterbuck, an expert on mentoring, says: "No other developmental intervention has such a significant impact as mentoring does on retention, career success and talent management. It's hard to find a truly successful person who didn't

have the benefit of one or more mentors in their career."

Mentoring is about supporting and encouraging professional development and growth. It enables lawyers to take responsibility for their own development, as well as to feel engaged and included in the firm's development. Research shows that lawyers with mentors feel both closer to their firm's culture and values, and more nurtured and supported in their own career progression.

Most law firms have introduced some form of mentoring in the last decade, but there are key elements that every programme needs to have in order to produce the expected results, and many firms lack some of these elements, especially in terms of training and coordination.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

A mentoring programme has a variety of benefits for the firm, mentees and mentors.

The firm can:

- improve its performance;
- reinforce its values and culture;
- significantly reduce its turnover;
- build leadership skills;
- increase the number of women achieving partnership level; and
- achieve greater success in change management processes.

Mentees experience different benefits from mentoring depending on their career stage – although the process does have benefits for lawyers at every stage. It is especially valuable when lawyers are in a transitional period and facing new challenges. For example, mentoring helps trainees adapt to their firm and become efficient more quickly. It also supports the integration of lawyers joining firms at mid-level. And for senior associates wishing to be promoted to the partnership, it

Continued on page 10

Continued from page 9

increases the likelihood of their achieving career success.

The benefits to mentors are sometimes less well understood, but there are as many advantages of being a mentor as being a mentee. Mentors are able to develop their leadership, management and communication skills, and they can improve their productivity and performance. Being a mentor also gives lawyers the opportunity to expand their network and to achieve a sense of personal fulfilment from contributing to the advancement of the profession as a whole.

WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS?

Mentoring can be either formal or informal. Research shows that informal mentoring relationships tend to be more successful, but in large law firms it is not possible to rely on informal mentoring. Formal programmes, offered on a voluntary basis, with clear objectives, enable a large number of lawyers to be mentored, and therefore for the firm to align its people's development with its strategy.

Whatever the size of the firm, a mentoring programme always needs to have the following four key elements.

1. SENIOR MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

A mentoring programme in a law firm, probably more than in any other type of organisation, will only be successful if those in senior management roles – for law firms, this means managing and senior partners – promote and support the programme. By demonstrating commitment to the programme and participating in it, the firm's leaders become role models for the other lawyers, creating a consensus within the firm about the importance of mentoring.

Best practice is for all the partners who are involved in the supervision of lawyers and associate development to take part in the mentoring programme. It is also helpful to have a steering group within the firm to support the programme coordinator and oversee the programme.

Good mentors need to be valued and recognised, and this is often not the case. The ability to be a mentor and to help other lawyers grow in the firm needs to be prioritised across the firm. This can be achieved in a number of ways, including, but not limited to, through the

firm's performance management process, so all lawyers know they are expected to develop mentoring skills as part of their professional development. The scheme should also be publicised across the firm through inspiring posters and flyers, to encourage lawyers to become mentors and to emphasise the importance of mentoring to the firm.

2. CLEAR PROGRAMME PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

Another key success factor of a mentoring scheme is the clear definition of the purpose and objectives of the programme. A short and simple purpose statement is helpful to publicise the programme within the firm, recruit mentors, train mentors and mentees, and so on. Having clear objectives for the programme is also important to enable relevant success measures to be put in place.

Examples of clear programme objectives for a mentoring programme are:

- to support the professional development of everyone in the firm;
- to help lawyers transition from junior level to mid-level / from mid-level to senior level / from senior level to partner level;
- to increase the firm's diversity; and
- to improve networking and communication within the firm.

3. TRAINING

One of the major reasons why so many mentoring programmes in law firms fail or do not produce the expected results is the lack of training. Training should be compulsory for anyone taking part in the programme. Even senior partners and lawyers with years of supervision experience have to be trained and / or briefed in some way. The training should be aimed at both mentors and mentees together, and can either take the form of face-to-face training sessions / personalised briefings, or mentoring workshops.

Face-to-face training sessions or personalised briefings will be particularly appropriate for the senior-level members of the firm.

Mentoring workshops can apply across the firm, and should cover:

- what mentoring is and the objectives of the programme;
- process (including matching);
- skills (particularly for mentors);
- support available to participants; and

MENTORING WORKSHOP: SAMPLE PROGRAMME

9.30am-9.45am

Welcome and introduction

9.45am-10.30am

Mentoring in the context of the firm (definition, purpose, objectives, code of conduct), and overview of process

10.30am-10.45am

Presentation from a previous mentor and mentee on their experience

10.45am-11.30am

Break-out sessions: discussion in mixed groups of mentors and mentees on skills for mentors and preparing mentoring objectives for mentees

11.30am-12.15pm

The first mentor / mentee meeting (matching pre-agreed mentors and mentees in pairs)

12.15pm-12.45pm

Discussion of key programme dates and next steps

- experiences of previous participants. Such workshops should be concise, participative and engaging, and be aimed at both mentors and mentees, who should be brought together in different groupings to develop links across the firm. The box above shows an example of a programme for a mentoring workshop for a group of 10 new mentors and 10 new mentees. This example is for a half-day session, but workshops could run from anything from two hours up to several half-day sessions, depending on what the specific firm wants and needs.

It is also good practice to give every mentor and mentee a written guide covering both general points about mentoring, and the specifics of the firm's programme.

4. COORDINATION, SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION

A formal mentoring programme always requires a programme coordinator or manager whose responsibility it is to define and implement the process, facilitate the running of the programme, review and assess the process, and ensure continuous improvement. This individual is also responsible for promoting the concept of mentoring within the firm and ensuring

that people across the business, and at every level, are committed to mentoring.

In firms with a number of offices spread over a very wide geographical area or internationally, it is good practice for each office to have a mentoring coordinator who can inspire and lead the programme locally.

The programme coordinator is usually someone within the firm who is trained to take the role, and who also demonstrates the qualities of a good mentor. He or she will be supported by the steering group.

Mentoring programmes in law firms can be designed and developed internally by the coordinator and management team. It is, however, also advisable to ask an external expert to step in for some aspects, particularly training and the monitoring / evaluation of the programme.

HOW CAN IT HELP WITH WIDER TALENT MANAGEMENT ISSUES?

Mentoring can be of real help for law firms facing two of the major current challenges in talent management: increasing the number of women partners; and helping mid-level and senior associates gain business and leadership skills.

PROMOTING GENDER DIVERSITY

An increasing number of clients are prioritising gender diversity in their suppliers, so it is fast becoming a competitive advantage for law firms to have a cutting-edge approach towards, and policy for, achieving this. Gender diversity mentoring is now well-established, and is one of the most effective uses of mentoring programmes. Early programmes tended to focus on high-potential women only, but in the last decade, this has fortunately been expanded, and many law firms have introduced programmes aimed at all lawyers at any stage in their career.

Women are often not exposed to the same range of experiences and career opportunities as men. Formal barriers have been reduced through legislation, but invisible obstacles are still present, and these hinder women lawyers' progression and their ability to make it to partnership. Mentoring is a good tool for law firms to overcome some of these invisible barriers. By supporting individual professional development in the firm and / or being supported themselves, women can reflect on their progression, share some of the

obstacles that they face, discuss issues, and get the help that they would not otherwise have had.

There are two possible approaches to diversity mentoring. The first is to design the programme to focus on only one category of lawyers, such as women. This is a common approach, but some of the targeted participants may prefer to be integrated and take part in a wider programme, open to all lawyers. Obviously, issues such as work / life balance are not only a concern for women; younger lawyers expect flexible work arrangements to be part of their firm's policy, and available to all lawyers, not just to young mothers.

The second approach is to design mentoring programmes for all lawyers, with one of the objectives being to support a particular category of those lawyers, such as women. I would strongly advise adopting this approach, as it has a much better chance of producing good results, both for women and across the firm.

DEVELOPING BUSINESS AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Mentoring can provide invaluable support for junior associates to make the transition from doing the work, up to being a mid-level or a senior associate who generates the work. This is because mentoring has a tangible impact on the acquisition of leadership and management skills for lawyers. By being mentors and being mentored, lawyers learn from an early stage what it takes to support the development and growth of others.

Lawyers are difficult to manage, because they have high expectations of their careers, need constant challenges to thrive and a high degree of freedom in the way they work, and need to be motivated to perform well. All these characteristics, plus the fact that law firms are run by lawyers and not by professional managers, make law firms challenging places in which to manage talent.

Law firms are not naturally good at managing talent, because most of their efforts have understandably always been focused on managing clients. However, firms are increasingly realising that managing talent must become a priority just as important as managing clients.

Talent management mentoring is also a cyclical process: once it is up and running and has helped mentors and mentees to

become skilled and inspiring leaders, those individuals can pass on their skills to others in the firm.

Two forms of mentoring can be particularly relevant in the law firm talent management context.

The first is 'reverse mentoring' (or upward mentoring), where the more junior person takes on the primary mentoring role. This form of mentoring has been very successful in companies such as BT, General Electric, BP and Accenture. In diversity programmes, it enables top management to understand the issues specific to women lawyers and minorities. In talent management programmes, it enables senior management to reconnect to the reality of the needs of younger lawyers. Through years of practice, senior partners may forget what it is to be a young lawyer, and how rich and challenging the learning journey can be. In addition, the issues faced by younger lawyers now differ from the ones that senior partners encountered in their development, as firms have grown and client expectations have changed. Reverse mentoring is now common, and is an effective way to make the best use of all the firm's talent.

The second is 'peer mentoring', which is also an interesting option for law firms and which is increasingly common. It encourages lawyers to share their experiences and challenges with others at the same level, in order to provide one another with perspective and support. Peer mentoring is not exclusive, and mentors / mentees are advised to develop a number of relationships across the firm.

CONCLUSION

It is now common knowledge, supported by years of evidence, that mentoring is the best and cheapest form of professional development. I have, in this article, focused on lawyers' development, but I should add that firms which have also made mentoring available to their support staff have been rewarded in their efforts.

Developing people in a law firm is a very effective way to develop the firm itself: it is as simple and convincing as that. ■

Rebecca Normand-Hochman

(r.normand-hochman@talentmconsulting.com) is a former Allen & Overy lawyer and founder of Talent Management Consulting.