



Mentorship is a Secret Weapon for Solo Practitioners and Small Firms

BY JAY KAMLET, JORDAN DEIFIK
AND J. RYANN PEYTON

New attorneys often begin their legal careers in law firms¹ and government law offices.² This is an excellent way to gain experience and start building a network. But if you're like many attorneys, your ultimate goal is to start your own firm and work for yourself. While entrepreneurship has its upsides, the journey to a successful and profitable small or solo law firm is often long, bumpy, and lonely. The right kind of support is crucial for making it through these times so you can ultimately enjoy the fruits of your labor.

Participating in mentorship programs is one way to smooth the road ahead and build fruitful professional relationships along the way.³

Mistakes are part of the learning process, but with a mentor, you can make fewer mistakes while still benefiting from those learning opportunities.

Moreover, once your practice is established, mentorship can help you stay successfully engaged in business ownership and take your firm to the next level.

Mentorship Benefits

Becoming a lawyer is a significant accomplishment, as is owning a business. Doing both simultaneously is on another level of difficulty. When you open your own firm, you lose the safety net of working in Big Law or being employed in someone else's firm. The financial challenges of owning a business come down squarely on your shoulders.

This can be not only scary, but also isolating. Long after you have finished your casework for the day, you could be up looking at tax bills, balancing your payroll, and trying to figure out how much you need to make to get through the next quarter. The long hours and isolation can drain a new solo practitioner's motivation quickly. Some will consider giving up.

As any business owner will tell you, running your own business is messy. Some days you will work 18 hours without remembering to eat. Some weeks you will wonder why you even took this route. And some months you will not be sure whether you can pull ahead financially. An effective mentor can help you overcome these challenges. Research indicates that while only half of all small businesses survive five or more years, 70% of small business owners who are mentored stay in business for five years or more.⁴

Flattening the Learning Curve

Law school teaches you how to be a lawyer, but not necessarily how to be a business owner—and it provides even less insight about how to wear both hats simultaneously. In the early stages of creating and launching a small law firm, owners can find the support they need in mentors.

Laying the proper groundwork ensures easier operations down the road, but without previous business ownership experience, it is unlikely that a new firm owner will know what this groundwork entails. A mentor who provides in-depth business advice and insight can flatten the learning curve and help you avoid common errors.

When questions arise regarding the day-to-day management of your law firm, a mentor is essential. Mistakes are part of the learning process, but with a mentor, you can make fewer mistakes while still benefiting from those learning opportunities. This reduces the amount of money and time lost to simple errors.

As a new business owner, you will experience problems that demand fast solutions. Brainstorming works, but for best results, you need a sounding board. Your mentor can work with you through these brainstorming sessions, providing feedback for your proposed ideas and helping you fine-tune those that best fit your needs. This type of relationship is also valuable when you are trying to create relationships with vendors and service providers. A local mentor can point you toward reputable vendors and caution you against unreliable or overpriced ones.

Leveling Up

After navigating the early days of business ownership, you begin to settle into a rhythm and hit your stride. Of course, this comes with its own set of challenges and growing pains. During this time, you may find yourself calling up your mentor more frequently.

Expansion is a big step for any law firm owner, but navigating this transition on your own is unlikely to yield the best results. Whether your firm's growth calls for new staff members, technological equipment upgrades, new client management systems, or a new office space, your mentor can help you determine where to save money and which services and upgrades are worth every penny.

The goal of growth is to boost revenue, but investing in the wrong services or wasting money on unreliable service providers eats away at profits. One study found that mentored founders increased their startup revenue by 83%, compared to 16% for non-mentored founders.⁵

When navigated with care and proper planning, periods of growth can take your law firm to the next level of success. When guided by uninformed decisions and guesswork, however, these periods can leave your business in a state of financial uncertainty. This is when the assistance of a mentor is so important. In addition to providing insight on the challenges of growth

and how to overcome them, your mentor can answer the day-to-day questions you have about changes in your firm's operations.

The Colorado Attorney Mentoring Program

Solo practitioners and small law firm owners may not know where to find a mentor or how to get as much as possible from the relationship. The Colorado Attorney Mentoring Program (CAMP) is an excellent local resource for those in search of legal industry mentorship. Through its various programs, CAMP encourages pride in the legal profession and establishes strong relationships between those in different areas of practice and professional roles. To meet the diverse needs of its participants, CAMP offers both one-on-one and group mentoring programs.

One-on-One Mentoring

CAMP's one-on-one mentoring program connects participants with an individual with substantial experience in the areas where they want to grow. If you choose this route, it is important to establish a schedule of meetings early. Otherwise, you may hesitate to reach out to your mentor when you need help for fear of overstepping your bounds or being intrusive. Regular meetings give you an open forum to bring up issues, ask questions, and discuss your law firm's growth. While face-to-face meetings are always most impactful, during this time of social distancing, mentoring partners are easy connecting and sustaining relationships virtually.

To get the most out of your mentoring experience, you must be comfortable reaching out when you need help. You may have questions that seem too minor or unimportant to broach with your mentor. Instead of ignoring them, jot them down and save them for your next meeting. This means you do not have to reach out for each individual question while still getting the answers you need. Also, be sure to take notes for maximum information retention, and look beyond the direct answers to your question. The way your mentor answers questions and solves problems will give you additional insight into the thought patterns that create a successful leader and the problem-solving strategies you may need to get to the next level.

Group Mentoring

If one-on-one mentoring does not fit your schedule or learning style, you might consider CAMP mentoring circles. These circles bring together professionals with similar learning objectives at different levels of practice. Rather than learning from a singular source of experience and information, everyone shares their experiences and learns from one another. Mentoring circles typically follow a set structure and address specific topics throughout the duration of the circle.

Mentoring Best Practices

Whether you're working with a mentoring partner through a formal program like CAMP or organically on your own, the practices below can help you maximize your mentoring relationship.

Commit to a High Level of Professionalism

Your mentoring relationship will shape the future of your legal career. At all times, you should respect professional ethics and boundaries. Acting unethically in a mentoring relationship can destroy your reputation in legal circles, causing you to lose far more than you could ever gain from unethical behavior. Make full use of the resources your mentor provides to you, but avoid acting in a way that causes them unnecessary challenges. If you are invited to attend meetings with clients or vendors, view these meetings as a learning experience rather than an opportunity to siphon a client or otherwise benefit from your mentor's loss.

At your initial meeting with your mentor, set clear goals, professional boundaries, and expectations. This promotes trust, open communication, and growth throughout the duration of your mentoring relationship. Remember that you are an active participant in the relationship, not a passive listener. Your mentor does not want to talk at you; they want to talk with you.

Establish and Respect Communication Boundaries

Everyone communicates differently and has preferred methods of communication. Ask your mentoring partner early in the relationship how they prefer to communicate: face to face, or by email, phone, text, or otherwise.

Limit your use of email to setting up meetings, clarifying plans or goals, posing non-time-urgent questions, reviewing plans, and maintaining contact. Email should never be used to give critical or complex feedback, provide impressions of others' behavior, provide impressions of third parties, or exchange sensitive information.

Agreements regarding communication can and should include boundaries around communication. The goal is to define effective and appropriate interaction to maintain a high level of professionalism at all times. Setting communication boundaries includes

- establishing when mentoring partners are not available for communication (e.g., evenings, weekends, vacation);
- setting limits and expectations for the mentoring relationship;
- maintaining consistent contact; and
- treating the relationship as a mentorship rather than as a co-counsel or partnership relationship.

Professional boundaries protect both mentoring partners, and each partner is responsible for maintaining the boundaries set within the relationship.

Capitalize on the First Meetings

The initial meetings of a new mentoring relationship are critical for building a strong foundation. Many mentoring partners make the mistake of going into these meetings unprepared and, as a result, miss opportunities to effectively launch the relationship.

The first meeting is a time to begin building rapport. Come prepared to talk about who you are, why you are engaging in mentoring, and what you hope to gain from the experience. The first meeting is also a prime opportunity to discuss and set expectations for the relationship, including meeting logistics (locations, duration, frequency, etc.), communication preferences, relationship structure (formal or informal), mentoring goals and objectives, and how you like to give and receive feedback. Finally, you should never leave the first meeting (or any future meeting) without agreeing on the next meeting or mentoring activity you will complete with your mentoring partner.

The work continues after the meeting. After each meeting, especially the first meetings, consider the following questions:

- What commitments have you made to your mentoring partner? Yourself?
- What steps do you need to take to fulfil commitments? By when?
- What information should you share with your social and professional network to assist you in maximizing the mentoring experience?
- What support do you need from the people in your personal and professional life to assist you in maximizing the mentoring experience?

Reflecting in this way will help you incorporate and synthesize the information gained from conversations with your mentoring partner.

Ask for Exactly What You Need

Many times, we believe we are clearly articulating our professional development needs or goals. In many cases, however, we haven't been explicit in seeking support from a mentoring partner. While many senior attorneys may already use mentoring principles, they still need (and want) explicit guidance on the actions that make a truly good mentor. It's important for you to detail the activities and learning objectives you'd like to undertake together and celebrate when those tasks are accomplished. A meaningful mentoring relationship includes granularity as to how to approach your mentoring partner, the types of goals you seek to achieve, and your expectations from the relationship.

Conclusion

Today, because of a tight legal market and competition for knowledgeable and experienced practitioners, lawyers have to take the time and effort to develop themselves as expert attorneys and business professionals. Leadership as a lawyer requires the desire and ability to seek out wise and knowledgeable guides from elsewhere in the legal and business professions.⁶ It is through relationships, observation, and discussion with good role models that lawyers discover more about who they are and who they want to be professionally.

When you start your new law firm, you will want to set your sights high. With the assistance of a mentor, you can explore new opportunities and achieve new levels of success. Whether you choose a one-on-one mentoring relationship or a group mentoring option, mentoring is an important component of your professional growth. 

Jay F. Kamlet has maintained an award-winning real estate law practice in Colorado for over 30 years. **Jordan Deifik** is a veteran of the commercial real estate industry with over a decade of experience consulting and advising on all phases of the real estate development cycle. Kamlet and Deifik are founders and owners of LawBank, the oldest and largest community of independent lawyers in the Mountain West. **J. Ryann Peyton** is the director of the Colorado Attorney Mentoring Program and a seasoned consultant and advocate on diversity and inclusivity in the legal field. Before joining CAMP, Peyton focused her law practice on civil litigation with an emphasis on LGBT civil rights.

Coordinating Editor: J. Ryann Peyton, r.peyton@csc.state.co.us

NOTES

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