

“Help”

Is Not a Four-Letter Word

How to Ask for Help in the Legal Profession

BY J. RYANN PEYTON

“Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping” is the sage advice Mr. Rogers so consistently provided to us as children seeking to understand a complex world. Now as adults we understand that seeking out helpers is a much more nuanced and challenging endeavor than our favorite TV neighbor would have us believe. For lawyers specifically, seeking help is simply not an innate skill that many of us possess. Whether due to perfectionism, high achievement, competitiveness, impatience, or some other trait, asking for help is just plain hard for lawyers, and in many legal organizations, “help” is just another four-letter word to be avoided.

Additionally, with the demands of the billable hour and the constant need for business development, it can be difficult for lawyers to prioritize time to create meaningful professional and personal relationships where help-seeking could be more easily incorporated. The legal profession has a propensity to create a heightened intrinsic motivation toward competition and outperforming colleagues. While this mindset largely delivers hungry lawyers driven to succeed, it doesn’t easily translate into bonds of friendship where driven lawyers feel accepted and connect easily to their peers. It’s no wonder that law continues to be one of the loneliest professions.¹

The good news is that help is just around the corner, and there are practical steps that every legal professional can take to build a village to help navigate the challenges and responsibilities of lawyering.

Rethinking Imposter Phenomenon

First described by psychologists Suzanne Imes and Pauline Rose Clance in the 1970s, imposter phenomenon occurs among high achievers who are unable to internalize and accept their success. They often attribute their accomplishments to luck rather than ability, and they fear that others will eventually unmask them as a fraud.² This very real and specific form of intellectual self-doubt accompanies feelings of anxiety, which can lead to an internalized aversion to seeking help.

In addition to the concern that asking for help might reveal the asker to be the imposter they

believe themselves to be, imposter phenomenon can also create a sense that one is not worthy or deserving of help in the first place. As a result, the perceived inadequacy becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in which any actual inadequacies remain in place without the benefit of resources and assistance to improve. Most concerning of all, the imposter phenomenon tends to impact women lawyers, first-generation lawyers, and lawyers of color more than any other demographic, keeping those who are already marginalized in our profession even more marginalized.³

Research consistently shows that people underestimate others’ willingness to help them by up to 50%. If it’s true that people’s willingness to help exceeds people’s willingness to ask for help, what keeps people from making the initial ask?

Although imposter phenomenon can produce very personal feelings of anxiety, perfectionism, and inferiority, the concept of imposter phenomenon has become so globally ubiquitous that it is now almost meaningless in its implications. If everyone suffers from imposter phenomenon, does it even exist at all? How does imposter phenomenon keep us focused on trying to fix a perceived pathology within ourselves, rather than the systemic, structural, and cultural forces at play that are creating these confidence gaps in the first place?

When we can understand the feelings of imposter phenomenon as feelings about the world, rather than about our own psyches, we can liberate ourselves from the professional limitations these feelings generate. Instead of simply accepting that our anxiety, perfectionism, and inferiority are due to a lack of worthiness, we should examine the ways in which bias in hiring, promotion, leadership, and compensation make us feel worthless. The delusion of our own inferiority is simply another way to keep us disempowered. Our power comes from interrogating the systems that seek to disenfranchise us and working collectively against those influences.

Courage and a willingness to ask for help actively dismantles professional systems and structures that are intended to exclude and diminish. When we ask for help, we bring to light those areas where access to information, resources, and tools may be limited for some. When we ask for help, we bring one another together in community. Help-seeking can only be authentic, and as such, those who seek help cannot be fraudulent imposters.

The Privilege in Help-Seeking

Research consistently shows that people underestimate others’ willingness to help them by up to 50%.⁴ If it’s true that people’s willingness to help exceeds people’s willingness to ask for help, what keeps people from making the initial ask? There’s evidence to support the notion that our professional reluctance to ask for help may stem from our cultural or familial upbringing.

A study by Indiana University sociologist Jessica McCrory Calarco found that working-class and middle-class parents often take very deliberate—but different—approaches to helping their children with their school experiences. Working-class parents, she found, coached their children on how to avoid problems, often through finding a solution on their own and by being polite and deferential to authority figures. Middle-class parents, on the other hand, were more likely to encourage their kids to ask questions or ask for help:

[S]tudents from families with higher incomes were more likely to be encouraged



by their parents to ask questions at school, whereas children from modest backgrounds were encouraged by their parents to be more deferential to authority—and to try to figure things out for themselves, instead of asking for help.⁵

Worried that they may be perceived as “less smart” or even get in trouble for asking questions, students in the latter group thought it safer not to ask. If social status can impact a person’s perception of the value of help-seeking, what other social identity factors might also be at issue—race, gender, language, disability?

When viewed through this lens, it becomes apparent that asking questions/seeking help and privilege are inherently related. Certain privileges (social class, race, gender, etc.) give you not only the predisposition to be comfortable with asking questions but also the ability to ask questions. The impact of this privilege is significant, as those with such privilege may be more able to access help and resources on their professional journey than those without this privilege.

However, the unwritten rules and hidden expectations of the legal profession require you to make yourself and your needs known in order to garner success. As a result, the actual or perceived privilege to seek help may come into tension

with the expectation of “professional hustle” to move yourself forward in the profession.

How do we resolve this tension? Remember, no one does anything all on their own. The myth of meritocracy in the legal profession is as pervasive as the Loch Ness monster. Asking questions and enlisting help are professional skills that must be honed just like any other. Embrace help-seeking as a mark of your strength. It tells others that you’re wise enough to know that you’re approaching a learning edge and to understand that you can more effectively navigate the professional unknown through community rather than alone. Embracing your power to both seek and obtain help can be professionally transformative.

Asking Someone to Be a Mentor

At some point we all garner the courage to ask a clarifying question or request feedback on an important piece of work product. The ultimate professional help-seeking, however, is asking someone to be your mentor. But how do you approach a colleague and ask them to be your mentor? How do you even bring up the topic without sounding ridiculous? And what if they say no?

It can be awkward and intimidating to ask someone to be your mentor, especially if

you’re a law student or a newer lawyer. But there are ways to go about this process to generate meaningful and valuable professional mentoring relationships.

Prioritize Relationship Development

The truth is that randomly asking someone “Will you be my mentor?” absent any significant preexisting relationship is a horrible way to find true mentorship. The best mentoring relationships arise organically with people who are already invested in our success for other reasons. But potential mentors don’t just show up at your front door. Even organic professional relationships need to start somewhere, and there are practical ways to go about cultivating them.

When you’ve identified someone who you would like to get to know or who could serve as a future mentor, begin building the connection with a light ask. When approaching a prospective mentor, make simple, time-limited requests that indicate you’ve done your homework and understand the specific expertise they bring to the table. For example, you might say: “I heard you speak at [a recent CLE] and what you said about [topic area] resonated with me—would you be willing to answer one question by email?” or “I read in your biography that you [faced X situation] when starting out. I have a similar situation and would welcome your advice. Can I have 30 minutes of your time to get your perspective?”

These initial meetings or interactions will not result in instant mentorship, but they begin a relationship that can eventually grow organically into a mentoring relationship. These light or simple asks show your respect for the other person’s time and your commitment to letting the connection grow into a more meaningful professional relationship. Asking for mentorship is really asking for a relationship. Prioritize relationship development and mentoring will come more naturally.

Ask for an Advocate or Sponsor

If you’re lucky enough to already have a developed professional relationship with someone you would like to ask to be your mentor, consider asking them to be an advo-

cate instead. Mentors generally serve in the role of guidance counselor, offering advice, perspective, and thought partnership. This type of support was likely already offered to you in the cultivation stage of your relationship. Once you're connected to someone who feels invested in your success and has influence and insight into opportunities for growth, ask them to be your advocate or sponsor.

Think of it as phase 2 of mentorship. The mentor is doing more than just sharing experience and knowledge. As an advocate, the mentor-now-sponsor expands your visibility within your organization or the legal community at large and directly involves you in opportunities for career advancement. The sponsor is putting their reputation and professional branding behind you. This type of relationship is more action oriented and capitalizes on the time and effort spent cultivating the relationship from light ask to mentor to advocate.

Plant Seeds, Grow Gardens


Despite what some might say, there's no fast lane to meaningful mentorship. In the Colorado Attorney Mentoring Program (CAMP), we help create the initial connection or spark to begin a professional mentoring relationship. The work of developing that introduction into a mentoring or sponsorship relationship falls to the mentoring pair. Even if you're successful in creating a valuable mentoring relationship

for yourself, that person is just one of the many relationships you'll need to cultivate to find success in practice. Planting relationship seeds as you navigate through the profession will ultimately help you grow a robust garden of people available to help you when you need it.

Be intentional and set aside time in your schedule to authentically connect with people you already know and with people you want to know. Use social media like LinkedIn to connect virtually with people you're interested in knowing, and use the platform to share your professional wins and to ask for crowdsourced help when you need it. Never dismiss anyone as unimportant. Figure out how you can be

useful to someone else and offer that support. Do what you say you're going to do. Be patient.

Conclusion

If you try hard enough, you'll always find a reason not to take risks and not to ask for help. A shift in mindset can help you see help-seeking as an opportunity rather than a threat. If this is an area of challenge for you, set small goals and practice with people you trust. Over time you'll develop a help-seeking muscle to support your professional growth, and you just might meet some really neat people along the way. Remember, there's no extra credit in this life for doing everything by yourself. 



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NOTES

1. "America's Loneliest Workers, According to Research," *Harv. Bus. Rev.* (Mar. 19, 2018), <https://hbr.org/2018/03/americas-loneliest-workers-according-to-research>.
2. Weir, "Feel like a fraud?," *Am. Psych. Ass'n* (Nov. 2013). <https://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud>.
3. Nance-Nash, "Why Imposter Syndrome Hits Women and Women of Colour Harder," BBC (July 27, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200724-why-imposter-syndrome-hits-women-and-women-of-colour-harder>.
4. Herrera, "How to Ask for Help and Actually Get It," *N.Y. Times* (Aug. 20, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/smarter-living/how-to-ask-for-help-and-actually-get-it.html>.
5. McCrory Calarco, "Middle-class children: Squeaky wheels in training," *Ind. Univ.* (Aug. 19, 2012), <https://www.eurekalert.org/news-releases/512738>.



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