



Building Your Personal Board of Directors

Why Mentorship Is a Strategic Advantage for Law Students and Associates on the Rise

BY NYSSA P. CHOPRA

Welcome to the first installment of my new series for *Colorado Lawyer*, *Mentor in Law*, designed for law students and associates at all levels navigating the formative stages of their legal careers. Each article in the series will focus on a new professional development topic—offering practical advice, reflections, and real-world strategies to help you

build a strong, sustainable legal career. My goal is simple: to equip you with the tools, frameworks, and support systems that enable you to thrive.

As a first-generation lawyer myself, I know firsthand how transformative this type of practical guidance can be. It's not just a "nice to have"—it's a lifeline for growth, clarity, and long-term success. This first article provides an overview of mentorship.

The Power of Mentorship

You've probably heard that mentorship is important. But what does that *actually* mean in practice? How do you find a mentor? And how do you build a relationship that goes beyond surface-level advice?

Legal education emphasizes doctrine, analysis, and technical expertise, but often skips over the day-to-day realities of succeeding in the profession. Skills like asking for feedback, working across generations, or understanding firm culture are rarely taught in classrooms. Instead, they're passed along informally—usually through mentorship.

If you didn't grow up around lawyers, you may arrive at law school a few steps behind—not because of ability, but because of access. You might not know what practice areas exist, how firms operate, or how to ask questions without feeling like you're exposing a weakness. That lack of exposure can quietly become a barrier.

The right mentor changes that. They help normalize uncertainty. They offer answers without judgment. They reveal what's around corners you don't even know exist. In that way, mentorship is more than supportive—it's strategic.

Mentorship Defined

Mentorship is often depicted as a top-down relationship: a senior lawyer dispensing wisdom to a junior associate. But the best mentorships are dynamic, reciprocal, and built on trust.

Great mentors listen as much as they guide. They open doors—and hold up mirrors. They help clarify not just your goals, but also the kind of professional you want to become.

Mentorship can come from many sources: formal bar association programs, peer mentors, supervising attorneys, professors, or even social media connections. Some mentors are with you for a season, others, for a lifetime.

The key is to stop thinking of mentorship as a singular relationship and start thinking of it as a network. You need a mix of advisors, advocates, sounding boards, and champions. Think of them as your personal board of directors.

The Evolving Role of Mentors

Mentorship evolves as your career does:

- **For law students:** Mentors help you translate legal theory into real-world decisions. They offer clarity on practice areas, share résumé and interviewing strategies, and help you define your goals.
- **For junior associates:** Mentors become essential sounding boards. They help you navigate client dynamics, firm politics, and imposter syndrome. They teach you how to manage up, protect your time, and build professional confidence.
- **For mid-level and senior lawyers:** Mentorship becomes more strategic. At this stage, mentors help you prepare for partnership, build a book of business, and explore new paths.

No matter your level, mentorship remains invaluable. We never outgrow the need for perspective and guidance.

How to Find a Mentor

You don't need a formal mentorship program or a perfect pitch to get started. Mentorship often begins with curiosity, humility, and a little courage.

Here are a few ways to build authentic connections:

- **Be specific and respectful of time:** Instead of asking someone to "be your mentor," ask a thoughtful question related to their expertise. For example, "Are you available for a quick chat about how you transitioned from litigation to policy work?" Specificity shows respect.
- **Look sideways, not just up:** Don't underestimate the power of peer mentors. Some of the best advice and support comes from those just a few steps ahead—or walking beside you.
- **Engage with intention:** Whether it's a CLE, alumni event, panel, or LinkedIn comment thread, show up with curiosity and follow up with gratitude. Offer value where you can, whether it's sharing a resource, amplifying their work, or simply sending a thoughtful thank-you note.
- **Use tech as a bridge:** Digital tools like LinkedIn, Slack communities, and bar association platforms can help you expand beyond your immediate circle

through virtual coffee chats, check-ins, or collaborative opportunities.

- **Create a network:** You don't need one perfect mentor. You need a network of guidance—someone who knows your work style, someone who can give substantive feedback, and someone who cheers you on. Everyone has different strengths, so look for relationships that help you grow in different ways.

Mentors Versus Sponsors: Know the Difference

Mentors advise; sponsors advocate.

A mentor helps you think through challenges; a sponsor puts your name forward when you're not in the room. Sponsors use their influence to create opportunities for you, secure promotions, and increase your visibility.

You need both.

Too often, women and lawyers of color are over-mentored and under-sponsored. They receive advice—but not advocacy. That's


why it's important to build different types of relationships: some for feedback, others for forward momentum.

Make your value visible. Build trust through consistent excellence. And remember: relationships that lead to sponsorship often begin with mentorship—but they grow through impact and reliability.

Final Thoughts: Start Where You Are

Whether you're a 1L learning how to brief your first case, a junior associate navigating firm politics, or a senior associate planning your next chapter, mentorship and sponsorship are not extras; they are essentials.

This series will continue to explore what meaningful professional support looks like in real time. In future issues, we'll tackle how to build authentic relationships, lead from wherever you sit, and navigate your career with purpose and clarity.

Every lawyer deserves the support to build a purposeful career—no matter where they started or where they're headed. 



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