

Articles

"Panel-Style Mentoring"

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Lawyers' Sage Advice

I've done a fair amount of speaking since I started doing this column, and one of the side benefits of these speaking gigs has been seeing just how active mentoring really is. I'm not necessarily talking about one-on-one, woman-to-woman mentoring, where a seasoned professional takes a wide-eyed associate under her wing and helps her avoid the pitfalls of being a woman in the legal profession. I'm sure that still goes on, and it's still very much needed. The mentoring I'm seeing is more en masse, and it's being brought to you by a surprising sponsor: academia.

Let me back up. One of the complaints I hear from younger women attorneys is that they don't feel like they're getting any guidance from those of us who have "made it" in the legal world. I disagree, because I think that my colleagues and I expend a fair amount of our energy guiding young lawyers, male and female. While we can always do better, I also think that these women who say they aren't getting enough mentoring may not always be looking in the right place.

In the last year, I've spoken at a handful of conferences dedicated to, if not women in the law specifically, then to subjects perceived as women's issues, such as the balance of work and family. Two of these conferences were co-sponsored by law schools, one by the University of Texas School of Law and the other by South Texas College of Law, the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University and the University of Houston Law Center.

Tapped Wisdom

At each of these conferences, I was heartened to see several seasoned lawyers, mostly women but a few men as well, as panelists. And they weren't just droning on about life in the trenches. It was as if their invitation to speak had touched a chord in them, like it had tapped all the wisdom they'd been storing up to share with their daughters and nieces and little sisters.

I'll never forget Justice Carolyn Dineen King of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals relating how she had been passed over for partner at one of Texas' largest law firms decades ago. That experience, so distant from her success today on the most powerful court in the South, still brought tears to her eyes.

Seeing her, and listening to the other panelists relate their experiences, hammered home to me just how important that kind of sharing is. Not just for the women in the audience, which included first-year law students to senior associates, but also for the panelists.

Fortunately, educators see their job as linking their students to as many people who can help them as possible. By taking the lead in providing a form of (and forum for) mentoring, these law schools are doing more than they know to advance women in this profession.

The Big Picture

Articles

I can hear the curmudgeons in the back of the room grouching that these kind of conferences don't do any good. And, in strictest terms, they probably don't. Very few people walk out of those meetings with a piece of new business, and they probably haven't advanced their technical skills a whit.

But there's something to be said for being reminded of the bigger picture. Like everyone else, women lawyers get caught up in the day-to-day survival act of closing deals, deposing witnesses, picking up laundry, going to par-ent/teacher night and squeezing in the occasional trip to the gym. When we step back, go into a room of like-minded souls, and just talk, it's almost like getting inoculated. We're reminded of our "quest," of the reason we're working so incredibly hard, and it gives us the energy to keep up the fight.

We still need individual mentoring, and every lawyer, not just women and not just big firm partners, should see it as their duty to help younger lawyers find their way.

But gatherings such as those I've attended in the last year (and I'm sure there have been several more that didn't invite me)domuchto remind women lawyers of how far we've come, and how very much further we have to go.