



DIVERSITY SENSITIVITY COMMITTEE

MENTORING PROGRAMS: Building Bridges that Increase the Vitality of our Legal Community

The Importance of Mentoring

By Attorney Shahar Pasch

Many people credit a relationship with a mentor as a key component of their professional success. Women and minority lawyers often find themselves in the situation of being the first in their family to become an attorney. They graduate from law school and enter the professional world with a limited network of legal contacts. Once in the workplace, they may find themselves to be one of the few, if not the only, women or minorities in the firm. Even when there are other minorities or women attorneys, they may not be partners in the firm. As a consequence, the new associate may not know who to turn to when confronted with professional dilemmas.

Mentoring programs within a firm can provide a safe place for these new associates to ask questions about office politics or find answers to questions they may have trouble asking their assigned partner. Mentors can provide an avenue for associates to develop important interpersonal relationships. Many firms provide a mentor within their practice area to new associates. A mentor does not necessarily have to be from the same gender

or ethnic group as the associate. In fact, cross-cultural and cross-gendered mentor/mentee relationships can be extremely successful.⁴

In addition to enhancing a new associate's comfort level within the firm, a mentor can be critical to the associate's professional success. A common complaint of women associates in large firms is that they do not receive assignments that allow them to gain experience and prove their ability to handle significant professional responsibility.⁵ Mentors can provide access to challenging assignments and can highlight their mentees' work to other influential attorneys in the firm. Mentors can also provide their mentees with access to firm clients and other networking opportunities. The opportunities provided by a mentoring relationship "can greatly assist a woman [or minority associate] in her quest for partnership. Mentors can provide assignments that may lead to client relationships, instruct associates in rainmaking skills, and include the ... associate in firm functions at which business deals are being discussed."⁶

Mentors can be equally as important to the professional success of women and minority attorneys in solo practice or small firms. Many local bar associations, including the Palm Beach County Bar Association, offer mentoring programs. Mentors outside a

⁴ See The ABA Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession, A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Cross-Cultural Mentoring, Goal IX, Volume 6, Number 3, Summer 2000.

⁵Elizabeth K. Ziewacz, Can the Glass Ceiling be Shattered?: The Decline of Women Partners in Large Law Firms, 57 Ohio St. L.J.971 (1996).

⁶ Id. at 986

firm can help their mentee build a network, solve professional problems, and create business opportunities.

The keys to a successful mentor/mentee relationship are commitment and mutual respect. Both mentor and mentee should take the time to cultivate the relationship. Mentors should be available to their mentee, both for pre-arranged meetings as well as impromptu questions. Mentees should be respectful of their mentors' time. Confidentiality is an important component of the mentor/mentee relationship. Both mentor and mentee should be aware that their styles might differ. Thus, advice should be offered without judgment and accepted with respect and gratitude. Some mentors may be willing to provide emotional support to their mentee, while others may not be comfortable dealing with personal issues. Either way, the goals and boundaries of the mentoring relationship should be mutually understood from the outset. While a mentor need not necessarily provide friendship, he or she should ultimately assist with career development.