Law Firm and Legal Department Toolkit

Best Practices for Mentoring and Sponsorship
Mentoring and sponsorship are critical to the retention and advancement of underrepresented groups. While organizations have generally made great strides in attracting diverse talent, the challenge facing many is the retention and ongoing development of this talent. Both mentoring and sponsorship involve organizations taking proactive steps to understand diverse talent, helping this group navigate the organization’s culture, and allowing them to achieve their full potential. Often, these results can be achieved through informal relationships between individuals, but studies have shown that, generally, underrepresented groups are less likely to have mentors and sponsors through organic relationships.

1 Mentoring is a relationship in which one person with experience and perspective (the mentor) acts as a role model and close advisor to encourage the development of another person with less experience or a different perspective (the mentee).

2 Sponsorship is a relationship where a more senior employee (sponsor) helps a more junior employee (their protégé) advance their career. Sponsors can advocate for an employee by using their influence to identify opportunities for junior employees, elevate their visibility within the organization and help position them for success.

3 Research shows that unconscious bias may explain why underrepresented groups do not have sponsors. “The Sponsor Dividend,” Center for Talent Innovation.

4 There are many possible reasons for this trend, including unconscious bias on the part of mentors and sponsors towards individuals who remind them of themselves and a fear of a lack of common interests when reaching out to those who are different.
Successful mentoring and sponsorship programs contributing to retention and advancement efforts have clear benchmarks

A formal program should aim to create diverse mentor-mentee/sponsor-protégé pairings across categories such as race, culture, and gender.

1. Formal programs are more likely to expose mentors and mentees to different perspectives.
2. Sponsorship programs can be positioned in a way similar to the mentoring program, but instead of a focus on coaching and advice, there should be greater opportunities to develop leadership skills and relationships with senior leaders.

Stated goals — some goals might include:

1. A focus on the professional development of the mentee and a means to provide valuable insights into the organization’s culture.
2. Target increases in cross-department employee integration.
3. Talent development and promote retention.

By contrast, in informal programs where mentoring and sponsorship relationships are allowed to develop organically, people often choose others “like” them.
Successful mentoring and sponsorship programs contributing to retention and advancement efforts have clear benchmarks

Clear program design and timeline

1. Pre-program design should begin at least six months before the launch to allow for preparation of program materials and to ensure HR and senior management engagement (see [vi] below). To the extent the organization has D&I professionals, consult with them throughout all aspects of the planning and execution of the program.

2. The recommended length of the program is approximately nine to twelve months with a minimum of an hour commitment per month – long enough for a genuine relationship to develop between mentor and mentee. Mentors and mentees can continue their relationship if they choose after the program ends. The program could be offered on a recurring basis (roughly every year), to allow for additional participants or for previous program participants to be re-matched.

3. Use of a mentor/mentee questionnaire is useful for facilitating the pairing process and should include simple logistical details (e.g., practice area/manager, office location, generally best times to meet, years of experience), as well as extracurricular interests (e.g., favorite hobbies) to allow for connection points.
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**Thoughtful mentor-mentee selection and pairing**
1. Mentors should be selected based on professional performance, conduct, and interest, while all interested mentees should be eligible to participate.
2. Organize a project team for reviewing applications and selecting pairings (note: mentees should not be in a direct reporting line to his/her mentor). The team may consider requests for a mentor of the same background or shared values, but there are benefits to matching mentees with mentors who differ from them across categories such as race, culture, or gender.

**Training designed to cover key program information and to provide access to available resources**
1. Among the information to cover during training, consider: defining the program goals, listing key features of a successful mentoring relationship, identifying the respective roles and responsibilities in a mentor relationship, explaining confidentiality, and providing a list of mentoring ‘dos and don’ts.’
2. Mentor and mentee trainings should be held separately to encourage honest dialogue among each group.
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Both human resources (HR) and senior management should be involved to ensure success

1. HR should play a part in designing the program, vetting the mentors and mentees, assisting with the pairing process, conducting training, and acting as a resource for participant questions or concerns.
2. Senior management involvement is mission critical.
   a. Ideally, all significant messaging (e.g., regarding the launch of the program) should come from senior management.
   b. It ensures that participation is viewed as a commitment to the organization by both mentors and mentees.

Metrics and accountability will drive results

1. Feedback can be gathered formally or informally. Suggested methods include:
   a. Short term:
      i. Quarterly check-ins with mentees and mentors.
      ii. Surveys at mid-point and end of the program.
      iii. Internal HR system to log monthly meetings.
   b. Post-completion:
      i. HR tracking career progress and engagement.
      ii. Focus groups.
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Benefits from mentoring and sponsorship programs can be experienced on many levels

1. Expected key benefits for the organization:
   a. Develop talent in a cost-effective manner and develop a culture of professional growth
   b. Foster diversity and inclusion throughout the organization.
   c. Increase overall employee engagement and increase workplace performance.

2. Expected key benefits to the mentee/protégé:
   a. Opportunity to develop new skills and knowledge.
   b. Opportunity to develop a relationship with someone who is more senior or who has been at the company longer.

3. Expected key benefits to the mentor/sponsor:
   a. Personal satisfaction and relationship building.
   b. Reciprocal benefits from exposure to new perspectives.

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6 Data shows that sponsors are more likely than non-sponsors to be satisfied with their ability to deliver on “mission-impossible” projects and be in touch with the concerns of junior employees. “The Sponsor Dividend,” Center for Talent Innovation.
Drafted by the In-House Counsel Engagement Subcommittee for the New York City Bar Association's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee

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