

MENTORING FOR WOMEN LAWYERS: The Impossible Dream?

By Lee Wallace

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In order to reach your potential as a lawyer, you will need mentors. The bad news for women lawyers is that mentors are in scarce supply. The good news is that there is a solution to the mentoring problem.

I. You will need mentoring

Good mentoring can do two things for you. First, mentoring can help you get an overview of your career. It is difficult to get a bird's eye view when you are down in the salt mines. A mentor can show you the big picture – where your career is spluttering, as well as where your career needs to be headed. Susan Black, Vice President of Catalyst in Canada says that: "Having a mentor is key." D. Graham,

Marketing for Women Lawyers. Black explains that: "A mentor can be the person who helps you figure out how to get what you want, whether that's a strategy to go after the right assignments that will lead to a promotion or negotiating a flexible schedule."

Second, mentoring can save you time. Sure, you could build a law practice from scratch. But it would take more time than you care to invest, or need to invest.

Marketing is a classic example of an area in which women desperately need more mentoring. According to a book on marketing for women lawyers, one of the reasons women are not very good at marketing is that they tend to miss the importance of marketing altogether. Women need mentors to give them the big picture, to help "in sensitizing them to the importance of marketing to their career development." *Id.* at 230. Women also need mentoring to save them time. Not only do women have less time to waste because of family commitments, Graham argues, but they also have more ground to cover to get up to speed on marketing, because they have not acquired the marketing and business skills that many male lawyers have.

II. You will have a problem getting mentoring.

Much as mentoring might help you, it seems to be in scarce supply for women lawyers. One disheartening study followed 1430 law graduates of Columbia, Harvard, Berkley, Michigan, and Yale. The women lawyers believed – even more than the men who were surveyed– that women lawyers had significant barriers to their careers because of family responsibilities, a lack of mentoring, and exclusion from informal networks within organizations.

Catalyst Study of Graduates of Ivy League Law Schools		
	Men	Women
Most significant barrier to women's advancement is commitment to family responsibilities	49%	67%
Women are excluded from informal networks within organizations	21%	53%
Women have a lack of mentoring opportunities	29%	52%
Balancing work and life is difficult	66%	68%

HRM Guide Human Resources, *US Women lawyers likely to leave employers 3 years earlier than men* (Jan. 2001), at martindale.com/xp/Martindale/Professional_Resources/LegalBiz_Online/Legal_Administration/01_05_3.xml. Although the women technically cited four problems, two really could be said to relate to issues of family and balancing, and two could be said to relate to mentoring. On the mentoring issue, women felt they lacked mentoring opportunities, and they felt excluded from the informal

networks within organizations that might have provided them with the mentoring they needed.

A. In large part due to the Lack of Balance and Mentoring, the Statistics for Women Lawyers are Grim.

In large part due to the lack of balance and mentoring, studies show a grim set of statistics for women lawyers. Women are not making partner, they are not being paid as much as men, and they are deeply unhappy in their legal careers.

Women are not making partner. The percentage of women in law is increasing, but the percentage of women partners lags far behind. 85% of all partners in law firms are men.

Overall Statistics About Women Lawyers		
	Men	Women
Percent of all U.S. lawyers	71.10%	28.90%
Percent who are partners in law firms	84.37%	15.63%
Percent in managerial and professional specialties other than law	51.50%	49.50%

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (1999).

Women outside law are doing better than women in the legal profession. Outside the legal profession, a full 50% of managers and professionals are women. These numbers hold even though many more women work part time in these other professions.

Percent presently working part-time

Lawyers	3.20%	
Other professionals	15%	

Id.

According to a University of Colorado study, women lawyers are less likely to be promoted to partner, both and at their first firms and at firms they join later in their careers:

University of Denver Study of Lawyers in Practice 9 Years		
	Men	Women
Promoted to Partner in first firm they entered	25%	18%
Moved to another firm and became partner	42%	24%
Stayed at first firm they entered without being promoted	0%	18%
Left law or became inactive in the profession	0%	18%

Jan Thomas, *Gender Matters*, U. of Denver Mag. (Spring 2005), at www.du.edu/dumagazine/feature_GenderMatters.html.

Women lawyers are not being paid as much. The University of Colorado study showed that even in the year 2000, women attorneys still made 59% of what their male peers did. Thomas, *supra*.

Women lawyers are not happy. A full 49% of women lawyers are not satisfied with their present employers. L. Bodine, *Law firms are losing women lawyers: Lack of mentors and networks cause workplace dissatisfaction* (May 2001), at www.martindale.com/xp/

Martindale/Professional_Resources/LegalBiz_Online/
Legal_Administration/01_05_3.xml.

"[M]en overall were 20 percent more likely to be highly satisfied with their compensation, 36 percent more likely to be highly satisfied with opportunities for advancement and compensation, and 18 percent more likely to be highly satisfied with their relationships at work. Women, on the other hand, were 32 percent more likely to have changed firms by their second year of practice and 19 percent less likely to cite new law career opportunities as the reason for their last move." Thomas, *supra*.

B. A Lack of Mentoring Makes Women Lawyers More Likely to be Dissatisfied with their Careers.

According to Bodine's study, the chief reasons women leave their firms on average three years before men do, is that: "they lack mentors, feel excluded from informal networks within firms, and find it difficult to balance work and personal life." Bodine, *supra*.

Women recognize the problem, too. 52% say women do not have the mentoring opportunities they need.

III. There is a solution to the problem of getting mentoring.

While finding mentors may be as difficult as it is essential, the good news is that the mentoring problem can be solved. In order to find good mentors, women must (1) lower their expectations of what mentoring is; (2) realize they are in charge of their own careers; and (3) go out and get mentoring, and go out and give mentoring.

(1) Women must lower their expectations of what mentoring is.

Women need advice, but the people best able to give great advice tend to be the busiest people, with the least time to spare. In order to get advice from these people, women need to lower their expectations.

The 5-minute mentor

Even busy people will typically give you five minutes of their time. If you lower your requirements, you can get tremendous help from a "5-Minute Mentor" who will give you some quick advice when you need it.

The now and then mentor

Some mentors will be willing to give you a healthy chunk of their time, but due to travel schedules or other pressing work they cannot meet with you frequently. These mentors can be invaluable in helping you see the big-picture overview of your career, precisely because they do not meet with you as frequently.

The legal skills mentor

Especially in your early years of practice, you need a lawyer who will mentor you as you develop your legal skills. This type of mentor does not have to be a close friend or someone who knows you on a personal level, but it does need to be someone who is good at what they do.

(2) Realize you are in charge of your own career.

You are your own career manager. Mentors may help smooth the path for you, but ultimately you are the person who will have to choose the path, and take it.

(3) Go out and get the mentoring, go out and give the mentoring.

In the end, the only solution is to go out and get the mentoring that you need. Take the bull by the horns and call someone who can help you, even if you do not know the person well. If you have trouble getting the help you need, take charge of your career by hiring a consultant who can teach you what you need to know.

Even while you are getting mentoring in certain areas, you will have plenty of areas in which you can give mentoring to someone else. Seek out women lawyers who need mentoring, and give them five minutes of your time. Their success will reflect well on you, and on women lawyers in general.

CONCLUSION

You can have the great mentors you need if you will redefine the word "mentor." A mentor is just someone who gives you good advice. When you change your way of thinking about mentors, you fortunately will come across many great mentors in your career.

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