

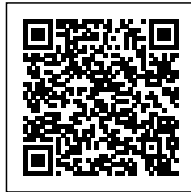
# ON THE IMPORTANCE OF MENTORING IN THE LEGAL FIELD

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**by Ricardo Cortés-Monroy**



« Amicitiae tam superiores quam minores » (Pliny the Younger, Letter 7.3). When a couple of weeks ago I was deepening my study of the Roman institution of patronage, I encountered this revealing phrase of Pliny the Younger. Patronage (i.e. friendship in Pliny), as is so abundantly attested in primary sources, was a key social feature that glued together important parts of the ancient Roman society. I could not resist comparing and contrasting it with our modern “*mentoring*” phenomena in modern

institutions, namely corporations, law firms, academia, and public organizations. And, of course, it led me to reflect about mentoring. Some ideas follow.

For the sake of clarity (and to avoid confusing it with *coaching* or similar activities) one of the best definitions I have encountered is the following: “Mentoring is a supportive learning relationship between a caring individual who shares knowledge, experience and wisdom with another individual

who is ready and willing to benefit from this exchange, to enrich their professional journey". I am referring to lawyer-to-lawyer mentoring here.

Mentoring emerging talent was, without a doubt, the activity I enjoyed the most during my 20 years as a General Counsel (I have mentored more than 60 lawyers; still am mentoring two newly appointed GCs). This, for several reasons. Firstly, whether through structured "official" corporate programs or (my preferred) through a natural and informal process, mentoring talent has a direct and fast perceivable impact in your organization's activities. A motivated younger colleague, thriving professionally, will always bring more to your unit. Not only enhanced professional output, but that contagious driven and "can-do" attitude that will benefit most.

Secondly, more on a personal note, it is immensely rewarding to see your experience, your previous mistakes and successes, getting a new life through the formation of younger colleagues. As the mentoring relationship grows, mentor and mentee tend to open to each other. The depth of the discussions will only increase the impact of the previous experiences shared. Warning: this takes quality time and there are no shortcuts.

Thirdly, if you, like me, are older than fifty, you will benefit immensely from one of the most overlooked aspects of mentoring: you will be "reversed-mentored" without noticing it. Just think, for a minute, how much you can learn from a recently graduated lawyer. Technology, ways of researching and networking, better understanding of the culture of the generation of your own children, new networks, and a long etcetera.

Fourth. Usually a solid mentoring plan has milestones and goals. The benefit of your mentee achieving those will be, trust me, as if you had achieved them. The growth is for both!

There are some seasoned professionals who can advise you (including former mentors) on how to be a successful mentor for the benefit of your mentees. Use them! Maybe they are in your own organization (rarely at the HR departments, sorry ...) or outside. This help might prove to be quite necessary in case the mentoring relationship is struggling, or you need a second opinion. Not all mentoring relationships work. Some will disappoint, yet both will always learn something.

My final word of caution: if you happen to be the senior partner of a law firm or the group's general counsel, mentoring some of your colleagues will require extra caution regarding the avoidance of unconscious biases and the perception of any sort of favoritism. My advice? Get your leadership team to become mentors as well and have HR involved.

Once the mentoring ends, believe me: you will have made friends for life.

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