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Mentors—Getting By With a Little Help From Your Friends

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Mentors

*Getting By
With a Little
Help From Your
Friends*

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In today's fast-changing business world, practically every law firm and corporation benefits from having a few wise and trusted teachers to guide newcomers safely around potential hazards that might otherwise impede their road to success. "When it comes to developing a legal career, a supportive mentor is an indispensable aid," says Dean David B. Filvaroff.

The best of the lot typically share certain personality traits, according to experts at the International Association for Mentoring, located in Vancouver, B.C. The most helpful feel secure about themselves and sincerely care about others. They are flexible and can tolerate ambiguities.

Such mentors value their company and their work. Their attitude toward subordinates is respectful, and they show sensitivity to their proteges' needs. Trustful of others, they, too, are trustworthy.

But just what do mentors do that makes their contribution to individual careers so valuable?

To further explore the question, we talked to several UB Law School graduates about the role of mentors. Some cited a person who had a significant effect on their professional life; others pointed with pride to



Dianne Bennett '75 reviews a brief with her senior partner, Donald C. Lubick, of Hodgson, Russ, Andrews, Woods & Goodyear.

younger people whom they had been able to advise in the ways of the working life.

All spoke to the underlying idea that a good mentor is in many ways a good friend. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Before him, I may think aloud."

C George Niebank Jr., Class of 1950, has the distinction of having taught the ropes of the Supreme Court to the man who now serves as chief justice of the United States — William H. Rehnquist.

Niebank was clerking for Justice Robert M. Jackson when Rehnquist, fresh from Stanford Law School, arrived early in 1952 to begin his service as a fellow clerk. "It seemed to me that first day that George and I were both operating on pretty much the same wavelength," Rehnquist wrote in his book *The Supreme Court: How It Was, How It Is* (Morrow, 1987).

And a minor inadequacy on the part of his office-mate served to calm the future chief justice's nerves. It was a matter of typing. Rehnquist, it seems, was a hunt-and-peck man, and prone to make mistakes.

"I listened briefly to the clatter of George's typewriter across the room," he recounts. "I was sure from the sound of it that he must be an expert typist, but then I remembered the appearance of the memos he had given me to read. They contained a number of strikeouts and erasures with which I felt I could compete on even terms."

Such a self-effacing reminiscence brings a laugh from Niebank, now retired and living on Hilton Head Island, S.C., after a long career as senior vice president of law for Santa Fe Industries. "He's an extremely bright guy," Niebank said of

Rehnquist. "He didn't need anybody to lead him by the hand." But it's good to have a friend who knows his way around the office, and Niebank helped to acclimate the new clerk rapidly. "He and I got along personally very well, from the first minute," Niebank said. "We were both essentially conservatives in a sea of liberals."

"It's often a matter of chemistry. If the chemistry is good, the relationship will work out well." And if the success of a mentor relationship can be measured by the success of the mentee, Niebank has made a niche for himself in U.S. judicial history.

Their friendship has continued, Niebank says. "I see him every year or two," he says. "But I'm a little reticent about just picking up the phone and calling the chief justice of the United States, although he has assured me that I can."

For Ward G. Smith, Class of 1955, finding the right mentor made it easier to take on the challenges of life in a small New York City law firm after a hitch as a line officer aboard the Navy aircraft carrier U.S.S. Princeton. Smith says his boss at the firm, Bill Rockwood, became his mentor there.

"I was just another associate," Smith says. "And Bill brought me into such things as client relations, the care and feeding of a client's problems. He taught me that there was something different in practicing law than learning it in law school."

From there, Smith joined a small manufacturing firm in Massachusetts that was subsequently taken over by White Consolidated Industries. White's leader, Edward G. Rettig, became Smith's next mentor.

"He didn't believe in single disciplines," Smith says. "He believed that everybody got involved in

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everything. We were doing acquisitions all the time, and he took me and converted me from being a single-purpose corporate lawyer to becoming a financial officer."

The lessons took. Smith, 60, now is chairman of NACCO Industries Inc. in Cleveland, a Fortune 500 company. And he has made it a point to pass on his knowledge to the next generation.

"It's an interesting and instructive experience to broaden the consciousness of young people as they come along," he says. "Anybody who is in some kind of leadership role has something to teach. It's important to pass on the accumulated lore you get over the years to the people who are coming along behind you. That's the function of any senior manager."

"The mentoring notion may not be articulated in any formal way here, but any time you walk into somebody's office or travel around the world with them, you in effect are introducing them to customs and practices they might not have known."

As well, Smith has demonstrated that setting an example can be one of the most effective forms of mentoring. As president of the Cleveland Orchestra and a board member of Case Western Reserve University, he has established a degree of community involvement that NACCO's senior managers strive to match. "One of the things this society demands of you is a substantial component of your energy," he says. "If you want to be comfortable in the community, to belong in any meaningful sense to the community, you're going to have to give of yourself."

Dianne Bennett, Class of 1975, sees the need for good mentoring as a women's issue as well as an overall professional benefit. But Bennett, a partner in the Buffalo law firm of Hodgson, Russ, Andrews, Woods & Goodyear, says it hasn't always been easy to find female lawyers to learn from.

"I do think women need to mentor women," Bennett says. "It's been very tough for women. When I was five or six years out of law school, there was another woman who was fairly senior at a law firm here in town, and we would get together and talk about our firms."

"You just need to touch base a little. There was no woman here with whom I could do that."

In fact, Bennett says, there were no other women at all at Hodgson, Russ when she joined the firm in 1975. Her own mentors were two men: Donald Lubick, a senior partner, and David Manch, an expert in tax.

"David was very helpful to me in explaining the ways the law firm really worked, the real nitty-gritty stuff," she says.

"There was no question too stupid, no question too many," she says of her learning curve under their tutelage.

Bennett took time out from the firm to serve in key tax policy positions at the federal level, for the congressional Joint Committee on Taxation and the Treasury Department's Office of Tax Policy. She credits Lubick, who served in similar positions in the Kennedy and Carter administrations, with bringing her to the attention of those bodies. "I still operate on a national level because of the doors Don was able to open for me," she says.

"That in itself was an incredible avenue for me."



A Multiplicity of Mentors

Just what is it that a mentor does? The question is more complex than you might think.

Marilyn Moats Kennedy, a nationally known management and career counselor, points to five types of mentors in her book *Office Politics: Seizing Power. Wielding Clout* (Warner Books). To an employee, she says, the five are of varying importance, depending on what stage of career he or she is in and the structure of the organization. But they're worth reviewing to survey the rich "people resource" that mentors can be.

*** The information mentor** can be a secretary or other support person — someone who knows the quirks of the organization through its broad range of people. This mentor provides the survival information a new hire needs — when not to bother the boss, advice on what tactics have produced results in the past. This is a good source for determining the "flavor" of the organization.

*** The peer mentor** is a person on the same level as oneself — a fellow associate in a large law firm, for example. Kennedy says this kind of organizational "buddy system" fosters teamwork and can help to establish an employee as a team player. The peer



C. George Niebank Jr. '50, right, mentored Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist, left, in 1952, when they both served as clerks at the Supreme Court.

mentor can serve as a sounding board, a person with whom to compare notes.

*** The retiree mentor,** Kennedy says, often is overlooked but can be an invaluable source of guidance about how the company handles such issues as advancement. Because retirees know that firm's history, and have no personal agenda within the firm, they can provide a perspective often lacking in those who are spending all their time at the office.

*** The competitive mentor** is someone who has a similar job at a competing firm. Hers is another good perspective: that of someone outside the organization. Also, she most likely is dealing with a similar work situation, and can let you know "how the other guys are doing it" — ideas that you can learn from.

*** The godfather mentor** is the one most commonly thought of when people talk about mentoring. This is an older colleague, higher up in the organization, who chooses a mentee for his enthusiasm or his brains. Providing guidance and information, and pulling strings, the godfather mentor can make things happen for his protegee. More than any other type of mentor relationship, Kennedy says, this one hinges on that most quixotic of emotions: the right chemistry.

Craftsmanship — "the legal arts that are rarely taught anymore" — is what the Hon. Michael A. Telesca, Class of 1955, values from his relationship with his mentors.

Telesca, U.S. district judge for the Western District of New York, said his first teacher in the profession was Francis W. Gruene, head of the legal department of Sportservice Corp., where Telesca worked for two years as a law clerk while still in school.

"It was a great experience," Telesca says. "He knew how to craft legal documents, and that's an art form."

In school, "you never really learn anything about authoring documents, what to put in them. You become absolutely a slave to a form or a form book. How to breathe life into it is important.

"And there's little instruction on legal writing. Writing a letter is legal writing — how to convey a thought in a letter to a court, to a client, to another attorney. There's a way to do it and a way not to do it.

"A poorly drafted letter is a window on an attorney's lack of capability. A well-worded letter sets the tone for the legal transaction. I would say that 90 percent of the practice of law is done in writing or on the telephone. It's not in the courtroom."

Telesca's second mentor was his law partner in Rochester, Luther Ira Webster. "He taught me the skills of crafting legal memoranda," Telesca says, "and he did it in the days when you just had erasers on your pencil. So you had to write with a measure of precision. You couldn't ask the secretary to make a change in 15 copies.

"He taught me the value of writing for impact. One thing he told

me is that appellate judges are all very busy, and they don't like to read long briefs. You've got to make your point in the first 15 or 20 words of the headnote or you've lost them."

As well, Telesca says, Webster taught him the "habits of civility" that seem to have become a lost art today. The judge lists them: "How to be decent to each other. How to accord each other a sense of decency rather than lying in the bushes and trying to beat your opponent by default.

"And you have to learn how to negotiate. We keep trying to dream up alternative dispute resolution procedures today, but these are things the old-fashioned attorney/counselor did as part of his profession."

For his part, Telesca impresses those lessons on the student law clerks who come to work for a semester in his court. "Today there's a greater need for mentoring, and it's not always readily available," he says. "Back when I entered practice in 1955, it was not unusual for a recent law school graduate to go right into practice with two or three other attorneys. You located your office in a building where other lawyers were located, near the offices of older lawyers, and you learned from them. By and large, attorneys went out into the workplace and relied heavily on other attorneys in practice for advice and direction.

"I don't think I would have been in the fortunate position I found myself in if I had gone into a large firm right after school. I am absolutely grateful to those people who have mentored me." ■

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Law School Encourages Mentoring Programs

Soon after Crystal Burden '91 graduated from the Law School, she decided some career guidance from seasoned alumni/ae might be useful. So before returning home to Flushing, N.Y., she stopped by the Career Development Office (CDO) to learn about the Buffalo Alumni Mentoring Program (BAMP), a joint program of the Law Alumni Association and the CDO.

The program enables students and recent graduates to confer with experienced attorneys about a wide range of career issues — from advice on interviews and resumes, to information about geographic locations, to the pros and cons of specific types of environments and practice.

Here's how it works:

Lawyers sign up for the program by completing a detailed reply form and practice profile sent to them in the mail. These are returned to the Career Development Office (CDO). Law students such as Burden are encouraged to browse through the

The Perfect Protege

What kind of personality is best suited for the protege experience? That's difficult to pin down, but here are some characteristics from the International Association for Mentoring that can help students or employees decide if they're interested in a mentoring program — and can help mentors spot someone with protege potential.

- * Interacts well with others — Has good interpersonal communication skills, knows how to ask the right questions, listens and clarifies understanding, has an accurate sense of timing, and is sensitive to others.
- * Interested in new experiences



— Looks for challenges, tests self, not afraid to take risks and discover own resources.

* Observes carefully —

Watches others and learns from their successes and failures, picks up knowledge and insights into organizational culture, political environment, work or leadership styles.

* Tutors self — Acts as own teacher, figures things out, reflects on learning and makes logical connections, works through problems.



replies and select whom they want to meet. The CDO then writes to the attorney, introducing the student, and sends a copy of the letter to the student. Students then follow up.

Attorneys are asked to spend at least one-half hour with an individual, either in person or on the telephone. "Hopefully, a relationship will develop that both mentor and protege will find rewarding," says Audrey Koscielniak, coordinator of the CDO.

For Burden, the program proved to be "very helpful, much more than I ever thought it would be. There are a lot of strong Buffalo alumni/ae out there."

She selected seven alumni/ae and has so far met with four. "They were great," she says, "very accommodating, very encouraging and very wise."

Burden most appreciated "the invaluable bar tips, advice on non-traditional careers, and the chance to discuss what it's really like to make the transition between law school and practice."

According to Koscielniak, "The BAMP is not designed to be a placement or employment service." Unless you specifically request it, students will not call you to apply for jobs or send you their resumes.

The BAMP program was begun in New York City in January, where 135 attorneys have signed up so far. This summer, letters were sent to alumni/ae in Washington, D.C., Albany and Rochester. Buffalo and the rest of the country will soon follow.

"All the students really want to do is pick your brain," Koscielniak says. ■

In Buffalo, the sometimes arcane workings of the appeals court system are the focus of another new intern-mentor program in the office of the Hon. Samuel L. Green '67, a justice of the New York State Supreme Court, Appellate Division, Fourth Department.

This program, in which law students spend a semester working and observing, is overseen by Stephen Lacher '73, Judge Green's confidential law assistant.

"They're coming here mostly for just the feeling of getting behind the scenes of the court system, especially the appellate court system," Lacher says. "We're putting them in an appellate environment that they wouldn't get in law school. They see things that the normal law student wouldn't be exposed to."

The second- and third-year students who participate are allowed full access to the court's briefs and appeals, Lacher says, with the understanding that court matters are to be kept confidential.

In addition, students are asked to do some research and writing — mostly memos in review of cases they have read.

"We understand how important it is for students to get exposure to this," Lacher says. "It's important to have a knowledge of appellate practice, even though they may not work at the appellate level for many years."

"I wish there had been something like this when I was in law school." ■

Student intern LaVinia G. Hairston '91 gets advice from State Supreme Court Justice Samuel L. Green '67.

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