

- The Complete Lawyer - <http://www.thecompletelawyer.com> -

Today's Economic Pressures Work Against Natural Mentoring

By [Marian Lee](#) on March 2, 2009 @ 9:20 am in [March 2009](#) | [No Comments](#)

Young lawyers are often surprised to arrive at their first law firm job and learn they have no "boss." In a typical business environment, a new employee is assigned to a supervisor to whom he reports. The supervisor assigns him work, provides feedback on his performance, and is accountable for his productivity and growth within the company. In contrast, law firms rarely follow a vertical management structure; instead, they maintain a horizontal pattern resembling a collection of small law practices. Associates may receive a variety of work assignments from different partners, each of whom has no idea what other projects the associate is working on or for whom. When the project is done, the associate may or may not receive feedback on his work. In many cases, no single partner is accountable for a particular associate's success and development. In this environment, an associate can get lost in the shuffle.

To navigate the complexities inherent in developing as a lawyer and succeeding in a particular law firm, an associate needs support, guidance, and a human connection with the firm's leadership. When firms were smaller and partners faced fewer economic and billable hour pressures, mentoring relationships formed naturally. Senior lawyers took younger lawyers under their wing, gave them advice and encouragement, and allowed them to watch how experienced lawyers handled court appearances, meetings with opposing counsel, and client interactions. These relationships helped an associate feel that the firm was supporting her, and was "on her side" in her pursuit of success. Support like this breeds loyalty to the firm and makes the journey through the early years of law practice, with all its challenges and insecurities, infinitely more enjoyable.

Today's Economic Pressures Work Against Natural Mentoring

As law firms have grown larger, economic pressures have increased. Partners are now called upon not only to bill more hours, but to develop more clients, become active in their communities, and assist in the increasing number of activities required to manage the firm. Inevitably, it becomes more difficult to find time for mentoring young lawyers. This can leave associates feeling unsupported in their pursuit of success. At best, they may feel as if the firm doesn't care about their individual success; at worst, they may feel that instead of supporting them, it is waiting for them to fail.

Though some mentoring relationships still form naturally, without a structured program it's often a hit-or-miss proposition as to whether a particular associate will find a mentor. But the advantages this relationship confers are too vital to leave mentoring to chance.

No amount of training, orientation, or department meetings can substitute for the one-on-one contact a mentoring relationship provides. In order to be truly engaged and at their most productive, all workers need at least one human representative of their company's management who cares about them. Through extensive research, the Gallup organization has identified twelve factors that measure employee engagement and link powerfully to retention, productivity, profitability and customer engagement. These factors in the form of questions—often referred to as "the Q 12"—measure dimensions that leaders, managers, and employees can influence.

Twelve Factors Measure An Employee's Engagement At Work

In workplaces where employees are the most actively engaged, they answer the following questions affirmatively:

1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work correctly.
3. I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone else at work, seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission/purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. In the last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.^{1 [1]}

Keeping employees engaged has taken on even greater importance in the recent economic crisis, as engagement is "directly linked to the performance metrics that matter most" in the current business environment. (Ibid.)

Although they may be more highly motivated and independent than average workers, associates need the same kind of support in order to be fully engaged and working at their highest level. In law firms in which no formal supervisor is responsible for a particular associate's success, mentors provide the crucial link between the young attorney and the firm.

For example, mentors:

- communicate the firm's expectations
- help associates get the work assignments that allow them to use their best skills
- provide recognition and praise
- show associates that someone in the firm cares about them as a person
- encourage the associate's development
- listen to the associate's opinions
- share the firm's mission and purpose and demonstrate commitment to doing quality work
- talk to the associate about his or her progress
- help the associate obtain opportunities to learn and grow

Those who oppose structured mentoring programs argue that "forced" relationships often don't work, that the best associates will find mentors on their own, and that associates who can't find mentors are not desirable in any event. It is true that partners at law firms, like other professional service firms, tend to focus their mentoring efforts on the "A" players.^{2 [2]} However, on average, A players constitute only 20% of the professional staff of PSF's, C players constitute another 10%, and B players make up the remaining 70%. (Ibid.) Even at top-tier firms, B players (also referred to as "solid citizens") are critical to the success of the organization: if they are mediocre, the firm will be mediocre; if they are high performers, the firm will follow suit. (Ibid.) Given the vital role that B players fill, a firm is wasting talent and its own investment if it neglects to provide the mentoring associates need in order to develop.

Law firm veterans often forget how chaotic the environment feels to a new associate, and how easy it is to become lost in the shuffle. By committing to serve as mentors and provide a personal link between associates and the firm, partners further their own interests in keeping associates engaged, productive, and profitable.

1.J. Robi nson, *Building Engagement in This Economic Crisis* [3], Gallup Management Journal (Feb. 19, 2009) □ [4]

2.T. DeLo ng, J. Gabarro and R. Lees, *Why Mentoring Matters in a Hypercompetitive World*, Harvard Business Review at 6 (online version). □ [5]

About the Author(s):

Marian Lee - Marian Lee is the Director of Professional Development and Risk Management at the Denver-based firm of Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck. Ms. Lee directs the firm's professional development programs for attorneys in all offices.

Article printed from The Complete Lawyer: <http://www.thecompletelawyer.com>

URL to article: <http://www.thecompletelawyer.com/focus-on/march-2009/today%e2%80%99s-economic-pressures-work-against-natural-mentoring-3173.html>

URLs in this post:

[1] 1: [#1fn-3173-1](#)

[2] 2: [#1fn-3173-2](#)

[3] *Building Engagement in This Economic Crisis*: <http://gmj.gallup.com/content/115213/Building-Engagement-Economic-Crisis.aspx#2>

[4] [#fnref-3173-1](#)

[5] [#fnref-3173-2](#)

Copyright © 2008 The Complete Lawyer. All rights reserved.