



# The Office

*How Informal Mentoring—Within a Company or Outside—Plays a Valuable Role in the Career Development of In-house Counsel*

BY **MARCIA STUART CEPLECHA**

**DICTIONARY.COM DEFINES “MENTOR” AS “A WISE AND TRUSTED COUNSELOR OR TEACHER,” OR “AN INFLUENTIAL SENIOR SPONSOR OR SUPPORTER.” THE WORD IS DERIVED FROM THE GREEK NAME MENTOR, “THE LOYAL ADVISOR OF ODYSSEUS ENTRUSTED WITH THE CARE AND EDUCATION OF TELEMACHUS.”** With this lofty beginning, it is no wonder effective mentoring has often been elusive for many in the in-house legal community. But it need not be so—and the ability to make it more fulfilling or worthwhile begins with the mentee. There are two primary options for mentoring—formal and informal—and they offer different styles and benefits.

First, many companies offer some type of formalized mentoring either as a stand-alone program or incorporated

into other development or leadership programs. As a starting point, I encourage everyone to familiarize themselves with the formal mentoring opportunities to determine whether this avenue is attractive. Dig into the details of the program and ask others at the company for their impressions of the program and its benefits (or lack thereof, as the case may be). One upside of formal mentoring is that many companies place a certain emphasis on mentoring as part of their talent management strategy, and even require the leaders to participate in the mentoring programs. So you may be able to tap into a mentoring network that would otherwise be unavailable, particularly with regard to the senior leaders in a company.

Less-structured mentoring may also be available through leadership or development conferences or luncheons, where mentoring sessions are included as an element. This often



takes the form of speed or round-table mentoring, a process in which senior leaders engage several mentees around a table over a short interval addressing hypothetical scenarios, and then move to other tables to begin another round of the quick mentoring. Such mentoring can be fun and informative, enabling interaction with leaders and co-workers alike, but cannot get too deep into any issues.

Unfortunately, because legal departments can be so flat organizationally when compared with the business side of a company, formal mentoring programs are sometimes more suited to business personnel than to attorneys, especially for those who desire a purely legal career rather than movement into non-legal positions within a company. Depending on their structure, formal mentoring programs may also be more intimidating or even cumbersome. Add to that the reality that many in-house legal departments essentially are managed as separate communities within their own corporations, with the paths for development and leadership distinct from those of their business peers. As a result, formal business mentoring programs may not adequately fill the need for many in-house counsel. A more preferred

method may be the second option—informal mentoring.

Informal mentoring provides a powerful tool for both development and advancement. But informal mentoring will not happen unless you seek it. The key is to actively engage in such mentoring—as either the mentor or the mentee, or both as you move throughout your career.

For in-house counsel, informal mentoring enables an attorney to focus on the unique aspects of legal career and skills development. In addition, because development for in-house counsel is often handled separately from the business personnel, it is worth pursuing mentoring relationships with other in-house attorneys to understand how best to navigate the system and identify the skills and traits to develop to better position yourself for success. This is true whether it involves movement into leadership or into other practice areas. Ideal mentoring relationships should

not only involve those whose careers you would like to emulate, but also people who are respected for their expertise and their care for others. Importantly, informal mentoring can be accomplished within your own company or outside. In my own career, I have developed these relationships as both a mentee and mentor within my company and through relationships with in-house counterparts at other companies so we can share ideas and tips. Such informal mentoring starts to look like networking (where the mentoring relationship may often begin in the first place), but it is based on a greater level of trust and commitment. Many of you are likely already engaged in this informal mentoring as a mentee. To take it to the next level, discuss with the mentor that you are seeking a mentoring-type relationship, even if wanting to keep it at the informal level. This enables the mentor the opportunity to dedicate more time as necessary to help fulfill the process.

Mentoring can be a rewarding element of your personal and career development as long as you are willing to seek it and participate. Look into the available options for formal mentoring, particularly if you are also interested in having your legal career cross over into a business or other leadership track. This will enable you to take advantage of your company's offerings and get dedicated office time with your mentor. Also look into developing those critical informal mentoring relationships. Because these mentoring relationships often happen in informal settings, they can bring a welcome social dynamic as well. Lastly, don't overlook the opportunity to be the mentor yourself. One of the great traditions of the legal profession is the tutelage of our junior advocates, much like the loyal advisor Mentor from Greek mythology. **TBJ**



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