

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

One Comment Makes All the Difference

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I was an English major in college. In my junior year, a professor wrote a note on an essay telling me I clearly understood how to do the assignment and to come talk to her about some independent study. I did and was given the opportunity to read several additional, wonderful books and discuss them with the professor. I never felt so special, and my love of 18th and 19th century English novels has never abated. To this day, I remain friends with that professor.

That one comment on an essay made all the difference in my college experience. That is what being a mentor is designed to do for a young colleague. Attorneys who join law firms with established mentorship programs have resources that many solo attorneys do not. They can ask the easy questions, such as “Where do I stand in the courtroom” or the hard questions, such as “What do I do if I think our client has lied in her deposition?” The same is true in many public sector jobs where a long-time public servant can show a newly hired attorney how the office or open meeting law works.

Not all attorneys have such a person, which is why the State Bar of Nevada has a mentorship program for attorneys who have just passed the bar: TIP (Transitioning into Practice). At its core, TIP helps guide new

attorneys with such basic information as how to caption a pleading or draft a deed, or where to park if you are going to the courthouse. It can also lead to long-lasting relationships between mentor and mentee, relationships that provide lifelong sounding boards, job opportunities, and reputation boosts. There are 375 attorneys serving as court-appointed TIP mentors, each spending approximately 25 hours every year with almost 250 newly admitted attorneys over a six-month period.

The state bar also has established “Handle|BAR,” a start-up program to help practitioners who are setting up their own law practice. Handle|BAR provides office space, continuing legal education, member benefit support, and connections to long-time members of the bar and bench. The program provides an experienced attorney as a practice advisor and approximately a dozen attorneys and judges who make presentations or are available to the group. In exchange, those participating in the program agree to provide pro bono services and participate in the Lawyer Referral Service to serve clients of modest means.

Each of these programs, the law firm and public sector mentorship, TIP and Handle|BAR help the state bar meet its mission: To serve our members, administer the profession, and protect the public. Studying the law and practicing law are not the same. We all know that most recent law school graduates are wicked smart about the current state of the law.

Nevertheless, an experienced attorney has an advantage even without knowing the black letter law, because the perspective of experience allows that attorney to quickly identify issues in a case and generally how a matter will ultimately be resolved. Being a mentor provides the opportunity to teach those practical skills required to be a good attorney and, thereby, protect the public. Being a mentor prevents a new colleague from making an ethical misstep from which they can never recover. Being a mentor models how ours is a profession with opportunities not only for a successful and satisfying career, but one that carries responsibilities to serve: service to those who cannot afford an attorney, and service to associations, sections, and committees seeking to better the profession.

You don't have to be a TIP mentor, a law firm or public sector mentor, or a mentor in the Handle|BAR program. You can be a mentor by shaking your young opposing counsel's hand at the end of a deposition and saying, “good job.” You can be a mentor by introducing yourself to opposing counsel at the beginning of a case and establishing a personal relationship. You can be a mentor by taking the opportunity to compliment a new attorney on a particular resolution to a problem or an interesting legal theory. You can be a mentor by introducing an attorney to a judge or a colleague. You can be a mentor by listening to an attorney who needs to vent. You can be a mentor by picking up the phone when you receive a nasty pleading rather than responding in kind.

If one comment can have a life-changing effect on my love of literature, think about the difference one comment can make in the success, personal satisfaction, and reputation of a new colleague. If you've been the recipient of such a comment by a colleague, send me an email to tell me about it. Better yet, send a thank you or place a phone call to the person who made that comment ... the one comment that made all the difference.