

Lost in a Big Place

What Some Large Law Firms Are Doing to Help New Associates Find Their Way

BY A. ROSS ROMMEL JR.





WHAT A GLORIOUS MONTH IT HAD BEEN FOR JASPER. FIRST, THE BAR RESULTS CAME IN—HE HAD DONE SO WELL.

Then the endless kudos from family and friends. Especially family. After all, he was the first member of his family to be licensed as an attorney. Then came the wonderful swearing-in ceremony in Austin with the inspiring message delivered by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Texas. And finally, the realization of his dream—the dividend for his three years of endless hours of study and self-sacrifice—the opportunity to work for a large law firm in a major metropolitan area.

Jasper and a number of his friends had excelled academically. They differed on the paths they wished to follow in their professional pursuits. Some desired the pursuit of careers with small firms or in sole practices in small communities. Others, like Jasper, aspired to pursue careers with large firms. All commendable choices and noble pursuits.

But now—after returning from the traditional “Welcome to the Firm” donut and coffee social function conducted each year for the new associates—Jasper found himself sitting in his new office. Alone. Thirty-four floors up in a large metropolitan skyscraper. Looking at his Outlook calendar and the research assignments staring back at him from his in-box. He found it curious how lonely he felt given the fact that he was now affiliated with a 500-lawyer firm with an equal number of staff personnel. Gone were the days of relentless entertainment and the attendant lunches and dinners so much a part of the summer clerkship program. It was now time to work. And yet there was that gnawing concern: Am I cut out for this? What do I do now? Feeling that chilling worry stemming from the realization that several months before he was at the top of his game as a leader in his third-year class, Jasper now found himself on the lowest rung on the ladder in his new firm. He has so many questions:

- How do I record my time?
- What should be my commitment to pro-bono matters? Is that type of work encouraged by the firm?
- Do I get credit for time spent entertaining clients? For client development?
- How do I maintain a balance between my professional pursuits and my personal life? Does the firm want me to maintain such a balance?
- How do I prioritize assignments? I do not want to offend a partner by having to emphasize an assignment of one partner over that of another.
- To whom do I turn with questions and issues such as these?

Jasper’s last question is the most important one of all. For in the answer to that question rests the key that will enable Jasper and other new attorneys like him to open

the door to a rewarding, fulfilling, and successful career. So, who counsels Jasper, and how do they do that?

WHAT SOME LAW FIRMS ARE DOING

Understanding that new associates often have concerns similar to those of our fictional character, Jasper, many firms have instituted integrated professional development programs and mentoring policies that focus principally on assisting new attorneys in transitioning from law student to lawyer and in developing their careers. Among other things, professional development programs are designed to facilitate professional growth, increase attorney retention, build culture, and enhance loyalty and morale. An important component of any professional development program is mentoring, which affords new attorneys—such as Jasper—access to the advice and resources necessary to answer the questions he raised and the issues he confronts.

We should assume that most experienced practitioners in Texas are aware of the professional obligations they have through § 5.01 of the Texas Disciplinary Rules of Professional Conduct and § 11 of the Restatement of the Law Third—The Law Governing Lawyers when they serve in a supervisory capacity. But, in a certain sense, isn't that just the minimum that should be required of us as practitioners? Beyond that, should not seasoned practitioners have a moral obligation to afford guidance, counsel, and direction to new attorneys with whom they are affiliated—that is—to be willing to mentor? A need for mentoring exists in all environments—be it large firms, small firms, government agencies, or with sole practitioners. Experienced attorneys should look at the opportunity to mentor new practitioners not only as a duty, but also as a privilege. We should each aspire to favorably influence and assist new practitioners in their efforts to develop their practices.

The crucial characteristics of an effective mentor are a willingness and ability to serve as a role model; a willingness to listen and to serve as a confidant; a desire to counsel and advise; and a sincere interest in helping new practitioners develop their professional practices. No question that the most important of these traits is a mentor's ability to serve as an example by conducting his professional and personal affairs with civility and in accordance with the highest ethical and legal standards. To quote Albert Schweitzer, "Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing."

As we practice, we must always remember that our conduct is constantly being scrutinized by young, impressionable eyes. As a consequence, we must ensure that at all times our conduct is characterized by honesty, candor, and fairness. Do those words sound familiar? They should. They

are straight from the Order of the Supreme Court of Texas and the Court of Criminal Appeals issued on Nov. 7, 1989, when the Texas Lawyer's Creed was promulgated. Almost 24 years ago. That pre-dates the birth of many of the new practitioners who will be licensed to practice law this year by the Supreme Court of Texas. As seasoned practitioners, are we striving to ensure that our methods of practice comport with the lofty standards described in the creed? Are we demonstrating to new practitioners our adherence to those standards by the way we deal with clients, other attorneys, and the judiciary? How we deal with court personnel? How we deal with our own staff personnel? Do we simply pay lip service to noble ideas or actually employ them in our practice?

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Certainly, a lot goes into the mix as new practitioners develop their styles and methods of practice. A key ingredient in that assortment will be lessons learned and perceptions they draw from the manner in which experienced attorneys with whom they practice conduct their affairs. Couple with one who can effectively serve as a role model a desire to listen, counsel, encourage, and show genuine interest in new practitioners, and you have the makings of an effective mentor.

To assist our new associates as they begin their careers at Andrews Kurth, L.L.P., our firm's professional development program commences with a rigorous 120-hour, three-week program that incoming associates attend during September, before the return of their bar grades, to build their communication, business, and interpersonal skills, as well as their confidence. Throughout this program, coaches and senior attorneys from the firm mentor and assist the new associates with respect to the issues they are required to address. The program concludes with group presentations to members of the firm.

The second component is a four-day new attorney orientation program that likewise occurs annually during the fall. This program includes, among other things, presentations by senior attorneys on issues such as professional ethics, client and professional development, the firm's policies and procedures, and proper billing practices. In connection with this program, a substantial amount of time is spent explaining to our new associates the resources that are available to assist them in addressing issues that may trouble them during the initial years of their practice. As a part of the program, mentors are formally assigned to each new associate to work with them during the early stages of their careers. Guidelines and suggestions are provided to both mentors and mentees to maximize the benefit that will stem from their advisory relationship.

A third component is our professional development wrap-up, which involves meetings between new and senior attorneys during which our new associates are requested to provide feedback concerning the training they received and to identify any uncertainties they may have about resources that are available to help them transition into professional life.

Finally, a new component in our professional development program this year is a monthly article our firm's general counsel publishes in the intra-firm newsletter. The articles chronicle the activities and practices of an imaginary pair of new associates as they wend their way through the rigors of their first year of professional practice. Our general counsel identifies issues these fictional characters confront (much like those described above that young Jasper confronted) and undertakes an analysis of how the issues should be addressed and resolved.

It is the hope that through training and mentoring programs, we will ensure that new attorneys have every opportunity to develop successful, enjoyable, and rewarding careers. **TBJ**



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