

■ To Learn More . . .

The author of this booklet, Ida O. Abbott, Esq., is also author of a book entitled *The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring*, which was sponsored by the New York Women's Bar Association Foundation, Inc., and published by NALP. The *Guide* offers a wealth of in-depth advice for finding mentors and getting the most from a mentoring relationship, addressing such topics as:

- The value of multiple mentors for different aspects of your professional and personal life.
- The benefits of mentoring at every stage of a legal career — from entry into the profession to assuming new responsibilities to exploring ways to achieve work/life balance.
- Potential mentoring problems and how to overcome them.
- Ways to find a mentor and establish a mentoring relationship.

Also available from NALP is a booklet by Ida Abbott designed to be a companion to this brochure entitled *Being an Effective Mentor: 101 Practical Strategies for Success*. Both the booklet and *The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring* can be ordered by contacting NALP at the address, phone number, or Web site listed below.

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Working with a Mentor:

50 Practical Suggestions for Success

by Ida O. Abbott, Esq.



NALP

- 6. Include your mentor in your personal network.** Strong personal relationships are essential to your professional success. Build a network of such relationships and make your relationship with your mentor an integral part of it. Even if your mentoring relationship is brief in duration or narrow in scope, make the most of it. Draw from it what you can and let each mentor expand and enhance your personal network.

■ **Get Set: Preparing for Your First Mentoring Meeting**

- 7. Take a personal inventory.** The better you understand yourself, the more you will be able to learn from your mentor. Take stock of your professional strengths, learning and development needs, values, and career goals. Some of the questions to ask yourself are:

- Why have you chosen your profession? Your firm?
- What excites you about your work? What motivates you?
- What is most important to you about your work? About your life outside of work? What are your priorities?
- What do you want your practice to look like in two years? In five years?

- 8. Learn about your mentor.** Find out what you can about your mentor (e.g., the mentor's practice, clients, reputation, strengths, talents) before you meet. Sources of information include firm biographies and people who know the mentor.

- 9. Be prepared to tell your mentor about yourself.** Consider what your mentor might want to know about you, and prepare to tell the mentor some things that might help get your relationship going, e.g., your experience before coming to the firm and in the firm, your professional and personal interests, what inspired you to enter your professional field.

- 10. Review mentoring program expectations.** If you are participating in a mentoring program, be sure you are familiar with the program objectives and guidelines. Concentrate on the program's expectations for both mentors and mentees. Keep your expectations aligned with the program objectives. If you have any questions about these expectations, ask the program coordinator or your mentor for clarification.

➡ ***"Mentoring is largely the art of making the most of a given situation."***

— Gordon Shea

■ **Get Started: The First Session**

- 11. Be clear about parameters.** In concert with your mentor, go over the details of how you will work together, including:
- When, where, and how often you will meet.
 - How much initiative your mentor expects you to take (e.g., how often you can call, who should set up meetings, who will set the meeting agenda, whether you can drop in on your mentor unannounced).
 - How you will communicate (e.g., by phone, email, face to face).
 - The duration of the mentoring relationship.
 - The scope of possible learning objectives and topics for discussion.
 - How sensitive or confidential information will be treated.
 - Any personal idiosyncrasies in work habits or styles.

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12. Ask about boundaries. Be clear about any limits your mentor wants to place on subject matter, time, or confidentiality. Assume your mentoring relationship will focus on professional, not personal, issues. If you want to address personal issues with your mentor, ask if the mentor would be comfortable with that. Once those boundaries are established, respect them.

13. Limit your long-term expectations. When you begin a mentoring relationship, keep your expectations short-term and reasonable. In most mentoring programs, mentors are assigned for a prescribed period of time. Although an assigned mentoring relationship may grow, deepen, and continue beyond the program period, you should assume — at least at the start — that it will last only as long as the time stated in the program guidelines. Informal mentoring relationships (i.e., those that arise naturally) have no time limits. Some last for a few days, others for months or years.

14. Let your mentor know the kind of help you would like. It will be easier to establish your relationship and set mentoring goals if you are clear about how your mentor can help you. Prepare to set realistic mentoring goals by taking into account your mentoring needs and desires, and your mentor's talents and skills.

■ Setting Goals

15. Identify some preliminary goals. Once you have a general sense of the kind of help you want, you can identify specific goals to work on with your mentor. Most goals focus on development or learning. *Development goals* are broad and long-term, and deal with career advancement. *Learning goals* are narrower, concentrating on increasing knowledge, developing skills, or improving performance. *Becoming a rainmaker* may be a development goal, while *building stronger client relationships* would be a learning goal.

Sources of input that can help you identify mentoring goals include:

- Your observations about yourself.
- Your mentor's observations about you.
- Comments made to you in performance evaluations.
- Feedback received from supervisors about your work.
- The firm's professional development performance standards (e.g., work experience checklists, professional development benchmarks, lists of core competencies).
- Your need or desire for "stretch" assignments or new kinds of professional experiences.

16. Agree on a few clearly articulated goals. Discuss your preliminary goals with your mentor. Be ready to explain your goals and the reasons you selected them. This may seem clear to you, but your mentor may see them differently. Come to an agreement with your mentor on a few specific goals you will try to achieve with the mentor's support. To be effective, goals must be concrete, achievable, and measurable. Once articulated, they should be put in writing.

17. Develop a plan for achieving your goals. Discuss with your mentor how goals will be achieved, what kind of support your mentor will provide, and how success will be measured.

18. Take charge of your plan. You, not your mentor, are the one responsible for achieving your goals. Show initiative. Seek information and find resources useful in pursuit of your goals. Keep your mentor informed of your progress.

➡ ***"If you don't set goals, you can't regret not reaching them."***

— Yogi Berra

■ Facilitating Your Own Learning and Development

- 19.** Stay alert for learning experiences. Every professional encounter is a potential learning experience. The advantage of having a mentor is that you can ask questions about and discuss these encounters. This is an important way you can benefit from your mentor's wisdom and insight.
- 20.** Be a keen observer. Mentors are often excellent role models. Observe how your mentor handles clients, colleagues, work challenges, and ethical issues. Follow up on your observations with questions, pointing out the action or behavior you observed and asking specific questions that will help you learn from it.
- 21.** "Try on" different styles. Your mentor is only one of many role models available to you as you develop your professional identity. If it feels comfortable for you, you might want to emulate your mentor's behavior or style. If your mentor's style is not one you can emulate, try to understand why. Compare your mentor's style to that of other role models. Learn from this process and develop a style that is your own.
- 22.** Be tolerant of differences between you and your mentor. You and your mentor may differ in many obvious aspects, such as age, gender, race, or ethnicity. You may also have different world views and opinions. Rather than seeing these differences as obstacles to mentoring, use them as opportunities to expand your learning and understanding.
- 23.** Invite yourself along. Ask if you can accompany your mentor to conferences, client meetings, business development lunches, and other activities where you can observe your mentor in aspects of practice you might not normally see. Volunteer to help your mentor prepare for the activity or to take notes at the event. Afterward, talk with your mentor about your observations and questions.

➡ *"One can say, 'Teach me what you know,' but the better request is, 'Teach me about what teaches you.'"*

— Malidoma Patrice Somé,
The Healing Wisdom of Africa

- 24.** Solicit your mentor's advice. If you want advice or guidance, be as specific as possible. State the facts, the dilemmas or issues you face, and the kind of advice you want. This makes it easier for your mentor to respond meaningfully.
- 25.** Ask for helpful practice tips. Ask about techniques and suggestions to help you practice more efficiently or learn more quickly. Areas might include time management, client relationships, business development, or strategies to help you advance in the organization. Ask not just what the pointers are, but also how your mentor learned them.
- 26.** Reflect on your experiences with your mentor. Ask your mentor to help you examine and learn from your performance and experiences. Discuss together how you handled a problem, achieved a success, dealt with a mistake, or came to a decision. Talk about what went well and why; what went badly and why; and what the situation taught you about yourself.
- 27.** Ask for feedback. Make it easy for your mentor to give you feedback. When your mentor observes you in practice, and especially when it relates to the goals you have set, ask for candid comments about your performance. You might also tell your mentor about an idea you have and ask for the mentor's assessment of it, or practice an upcoming presentation and ask your mentor to suggest ways you can improve it.

28. Be receptive to constructive feedback. Constructive feedback, even after you have asked for it, may be upsetting. Try not to react defensively. Instead, thank the mentor for being honest with you. If the mentor's perception or understanding of a situation is incorrect, explain the real facts diplomatically. Whether or not you agree with the mentor, be sure you understand what the mentor is criticizing; if you aren't sure, ask both for clarification of the behavior being criticized and for specific suggestions to improve or correct it.

29. Take sensible risks. Think about risk-taking in a strategic way. Be willing to stretch beyond your comfort zone in order to tackle new challenges, acquire new knowledge, and practice new skills. Before you accept a risk, think through its potential benefits and consequences; assess the probability of success and the cost of failure; and consider whether and how the outcome can further your learning, development, and advancement. After you have thought it over carefully, do a reality check by talking about it with your mentor. Ask your mentor if the risk seems to be worth taking. If you decide to take the risk, solicit your mentor's support.

30. Ask for help in building your network. Your mentor may be a rich source of information about people who would be valuable for you to know and organizations that would be good for you to join. Ask your mentor for recommendations and personal introductions.

■ Staying on Track: Enriching the Mentoring Process

31. Build a trusting relationship. Establish your credibility in everything you do with your mentor. Be trustworthy — keep agreements and follow through on promises. Complete tasks on time. Explain in advance if you have to make a change in an agreement or promise or won't be able to meet a deadline.

32. Listen attentively. Pay close attention to what your mentor tells you. Ask intelligent questions that demonstrate you are listening carefully, and seek clarification if needed. Make eye contact. Take notes when appropriate.

33. Be patient. Mentoring is based on a relationship, and like all relationships, it takes persistence and time. Don't expect immediate results.

34. Handle confidential disclosures appropriately. Typically, mentoring programs try to promote open communication by providing that mentoring discussions remain confidential. Review what your mentoring guidelines provide regarding confidentiality (including any restrictions due to legal requirements or the firm's policies). In addition, reach an agreement with your mentor about how you both will handle confidential disclosures. Confirm this agreement with your mentor before disclosing anything highly sensitive or personal. If your mentor confides in you, honor that confidence within the boundaries of your agreement.

35. Be supportive of your mentor. Mentoring is a two-way relationship. Although the mentoring process focuses primarily on your development, sometimes the mentor's needs will take precedence. Your mentor may need your assistance, advice, or emotional support. At such times, be sensitive and supportive.

- 36. Use time efficiently.** Be mindful of the constraints on your time, on your mentor's time, and on the time you have together. Appreciate the time commitments you have both made and do not abuse them. Keep appointments and be on time for meetings. During mentoring sessions, be succinct and get to the point quickly.
- 37. Stay in touch by phone or email.** When you cannot meet in person, keep in touch electronically. Check in from time to time, leave a brief progress report, or just say hello.
- 38. Be responsive.** Promptly answer phone calls, emails, and requests from your mentor.
- 39. Disagree respectfully.** Your mentor's advice may not always present the wisest course of action for you. Give serious consideration to whatever advice your mentor gives you, but think independently. If you disagree with your mentor, explain your disagreement tactfully and respectfully.
- 40. Inform your mentor about how you use advice.** Let your mentor know the impact his or her help is having on your development. Tell how you apply the knowledge and skills you learn from your mentor, and how you use the advice or assistance you are given.
- 41. Share your expertise with your mentor.** You know many things that would benefit your mentor. There are many areas where mentors may lack skills, information, or perspectives that you can offer. Are you technologically proficient? Do you have a point of view about issues in the firm that affect you and your peers? Have you worked in another country or in another industry? Consider how your knowledge might help or interest your mentor, and share it.
- 42. Educate your supervisors about mentoring.** Supervisors who do not understand mentoring may become suspicious or resentful of your mentoring relationship and worry that it will affect your time and commitment to the work they expect of you. If you are participating

in a mentoring program at work, your mentoring experience will be smoother if your work supervisor appreciates and accepts your relationship with your mentor. Inform your supervisor that you are working with a mentor and explain the mentoring program. If your mentor and supervisor do not know each other, introduce them.

■ Show Consideration

- 43. Thank your mentor.** Your mentor is voluntarily assisting your learning and development. Although he or she may expect nothing in return, do not take your mentor for granted. Show your appreciation by thanking your mentor directly and commending your mentor to others.
- 44. Stay informed about your mentor's work and clients.** Take an active interest in your mentor's work. Be familiar with your mentor's clients and the ways your mentor serves them. When you hear about your mentor's clients in the news, tell your mentor about it; if you know your mentor has been working on a particular project, ask how it is progressing.
- 45. Learn about your mentor's outside interests.** Find out what your mentor likes to do outside of work. If it is something that also interests you, let your mentor know you share that interest and suggest doing it together.
- 46. Remember important occasions.** Birthdays, anniversaries, and other milestones are good times to send a note or card of congratulations to your mentor. So are special events and successes, such as receipt of an award, a victory at trial, or winning a big new account.

■ Concluding a Mentoring Relationship

- 47. Prepare to conclude your formal relationship.** Work with your mentor to wrap up any unfinished business. Keep the door open so you can return to the mentor for advice at a later time. Leave on good terms.
- 48. Stay in touch.** After your formal mentoring relationship has ended, keep your mentor apprised of your progress and achievements through occasional notes or calls. Express continued gratitude for the help your mentor gave you.
- 49. Continue to view your mentor as a resource.** If you and your mentor have had a good relationship, you can continue to call on the mentor for advice, support, and letters of recommendation.

■ The Last Word on Mentoring

- 50. Pass on the gift.** Your mentors have given you a wonderful gift. Honor them by passing along to others the benefits they shared with you. Become a mentor yourself.

➡ ***"The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reasons for existing."***

— Albert Einstein

Ida O. Abbott, Esq., speaks to professionals from an inside track based on her distinguished 25-year career as a lawyer and international management consultant. Ida is a noted authority on mentoring and professional development, and specializes in workplace relations, employee retention, and strategies to advance women. She can be reached at IdaAbbott@aol.com, or through her Web site, www.IdaAbbott.com.

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