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OUR COMMITMENT

We are dedicated to establishing a workforce that reflects the needs and interests of our clients and a work environment that provides opportunities for people with varied backgrounds. Our commitment begins with the law schools where we seek to recruit diverse candidates and support the needs of minority students.

Introduction

One of the biggest factors affecting the retention and advancement of an attorney is mentoring. In this issue of the Hanson Bridgett Din, we explore the ways that attorneys have been able to develop productive mentoring relationships that helped them succeed throughout their careers. The attorneys we spoke with come from diverse backgrounds and their practices span across multiple sectors. Our hope is that the experiences and perspectives shared in this article inspire members of the legal profession to reflect on how they can mentor junior attorneys and law students, and dedicate more time to mentoring.

Featured Story: Spotlight on Mentoring

1. Who was the mentor at the beginning of your career?

[Sonia Gonzales] While I was the first in my family to leave my home state of Arizona and graduate from university and law school, I've never done it on my own. I recognized early on the value of learning as much as possible from people with more extensive experience and networks than me. Before law school, I worked in political advocacy and organizing. In a sense, working in legal advocacy and philanthropy is phase two of my social justice career. I have worked with the grassroots and the grass-tops from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Along the way, I've developed a diverse cadre of mentors; some lawyers, some not, some practicing, some not. Because of this, I've benefitted from an array of perspectives, world views, and networks.

[Paul Henderson] I did not have one specific mentor at the beginning of my career. I surrounded myself with a number of people whose perspective or experiences I valued. One of the realities I encountered was that there were not a lot of people that looked like me, or came from my community. I was the first African American hired in my office in five years. But, I was never close-minded to persons who were not from my immediate community, and I found that many people were willing to help me succeed if I was willing to put the time into building a relationship. One piece of advice I would pass on to young attorneys is to make the most of the opportunities that present themselves to you--if someone is responding to you, that is enough of an open door to start a relationship.

[Emi Gusukuma] I was blessed with a number of mentors early in my career--the folks at U.C. Hastings Civil Justice Clinic (CJC) immediately come to mind. Then Professor, now Academic Dean

Shauna Marshall, and then Professor, now Director of the CJC, Miye Goishi are two amazing women I've consulted on a number of issues spanning the professional (e.g. managing clients) to the personal (e.g. assessing career opportunities/moves).

[Kamran Khan] I had a handful of mentors early in my career. When I was a summer associate there was a more senior associate, Melissa Taylor (now a Kansas Court of Appeals judge), who helped me understand how the firm worked. There were also multiple partners who acted as mentors. Leo Dreyer, the head of my practice group, gave me great opportunities early on and helpful feedback that helped me grow. The best kind of mentors are organically grown, but formal mentoring programs are important to help plant the seeds that lead to such relationships. Some people easily find mentors. I think for diverse attorneys it can be a challenge to find someone who you will be able to develop a natural relationship with. Ultimately it is up to the mentee to define what they want from the relationship and get something out of that relationship.

[Joni Hiramoto] I did not have one mentor at the start of my career. I had several. Two of them were "assigned" to me by the law firm -- a partner for whom I worked and an associate. Another partner in the firm also reached out to me on her own, invited me to lunch, and schooled me on the firm culture.

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2. How did you find mentors in your career?

[Sonia Gonzales] Most of my mentors have started off as my supervisors. Typically, I would catch their attention by working extremely hard and taking pride in my work, no matter the assignment. I earned their respect and commitment by being conscientious, loyal, grateful,

and real. Supervising is by necessity or obligation, but mentoring is a choice--it is an investment, a commitment. You are asking someone to invest in your success so you must invest in cultivating the relationship. It takes time. It must be prioritized. The best mentors I've had share my vision and values and so in many respects, my success is an extension of their own. I think they enjoy taking the journey with me.

[Paul Henderson] I have always been proactive and engaged in finding mentors and building relationships. Being active in the local community and bar associations has helped to meet interesting people with different kinds of professional and life experiences. I have always sought out persons who really loved what they were doing learned and learned what they liked about their job and the experiences they were having. One thing that I encourage young attorneys to do is to think more proactively about their careers when they seek advice. Young attorneys need to be willing to create opportunities for themselves because you cannot expect to wait and hope others will create opportunities for you.

[Emi Gusukuma] Luckily, I found my early mentors in the classroom, as a law student at Hastings. I now have mentors--more like a Kitchen Cabinet--comprised of diverse individuals who provide feedback on various aspects of my life, including the legal, political and personal. When I was President-Elect of the Asian American Bar Association of the Greater Bay Area (AABA), some of the organization's founders and past presidents took me under their wings and shared important information about AABA's history, the challenges they faced during their tenures, and the victories they obtained. I continue to consult them as appropriate now that I am President, and am grateful that they still take my calls!



[Kamran Khan] Throughout my career I have had different mentors for different purposes. Attorneys should think about their career the way that a company thinks about its business. I think every lawyer should have their own board of directors--their own group of mentors. And like a business, this group of mentors evolves and different people take on different roles at different times.

[Joni Hiramoto] At each job, I had mentors who were senior attorneys whose work I admired. I sought them out, mercilessly peppered them with questions, and developed relationships with them. Some helped me not only with my development as a lawyer but also with ideas for my career path within our shared law office. My participation in local bar associations such as the Asian American Bar Association and the San Francisco Women Lawyers' Alliance, and on the boards of organizations such as the Asian Law Caucus and the Bar Association of San Francisco brought me into contact with people whose perspectives and experience helped me make decisions about career paths outside of my particular office. I also developed valuable contacts with experienced attorneys in a variety of pro bono cases.

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3. How have you sustained relationships with your mentors over time?

[Sonia Gonzales] Surprisingly, the best mentors I've had have also usually been the busiest, most successful people I know. These folks, while busier than most, are also the most organized with their time. I'm conscientious about learning their preferred modes of communication and I build in plenty of time for response when I reach out. I will go out of my way to make communications and meetings as convenient as possible for my mentors. I think they appreciate that. I also work hard at cultivating the personal connection beyond the pro-

fessional connection. Mentorship relationships come in many different forms but my most valued and impactful relationships are those built on a foundation of trust and genuine interest in the lives of one another. I prioritize checking in with my mentors on a consistent basis, just to say hello or have lunch. It should not be the case that they only hear from you when you need something from them. Mentors do not want to feel used. It is a more enjoyable investment of their time if they genuinely know and care about you personally and feel that you know and care about them as well.

[Paul Henderson] One of the most important things I have done to further the relationships I have developed is to make the most of the doors my mentors opened. I have always been conscious that when someone opens a door for me, my performance in that situation reflects on that person. So, one quality I look for in young attorneys I mentor is their level of commitment and the responsibility they assume in their own professional development.

[Emi Gusukuma] I reach out as regularly as I can--sometimes with information I think might be of interest to them, at other times with updates about me, or simply to say hello and schedule lunch. I talk to law student and young attorneys all the time and I encourage them to keep in regular contact with attorneys/senior attorneys who may be too busy to reach out to them, but would be happy to hear from them.

[Kamran Khan] Again, I think it is important to conceptualize your mentors as a group of people that evolves as your career advances. In addition to the persons who have immediate control over your career (i.e. supervising attorneys) sometimes your mentors are your colleagues and/or the people that work for you. You can learn from lots of different people if you are willing to listen. In my current role at Altria, I have mentors, including



the General Counsel of the company who has taught me a lot about the business world and what it takes to understand the business needs of a company like ours. Additionally, it's equally important to have non-lawyer mentors from the business side of the organization who help me better understand the business and my particular role within the organization.

[Joni Hiramoto] The mentoring relationships in my first job out of law school ended after I left the law firm. I did not sustain them over time. I sought new mentors in every work setting I entered.

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4. What is the most impactful career advice you received as a law student or junior attorney?

[Sonia Gonzales] My mentors have provided advice on a variety of issues, including technical skills, personal and professional habits, advancement in my career, and living a balanced life. The most valued advice has always been caring but candid. The advice that changed my career trajectory was: "be you... and be willing to throw out the master plan." If you are square, don't try to squeeze yourself into a round hole--just be yourself. Ask yourself, why did you go to law school, and why did you end up where you are today? It may take time and patience to identify the role or the practice that best fits your values, passions, and goals, but take the time. Mentors in diverse professional roles can accelerate the process of finding the best fit. When you are in the position that is meant for you, you will thrive. I met two of my now closest mentors as a summer associate at a large San Francisco firm. One was a partner with the firm and the other was his wife, who was then the Executive Director of the ACLU of Northern California. We bonded over shared interests and values. After just a few months at the firm the opportunity to work in management,

not practice, at the ACLU presented itself. This was not part of the master plan. I made the choice to be me. I am now giving the very best of me and making a much more significant social justice impact than I could have ever imagined just five years out of law school. The confidence to make that early decision was bolstered through the advice and counsel of my mentors. [Paul Henderson] Some of the best advice I got early in my career was to strive to over-deliver and exceed people's expectations. When someone asks you to do something and they expect it in a week--make every effort to get it done in a day, not a week. This is critical early in your career because you want to develop a strong reputation--attorneys' professional development are defined by their reputation.

[Emi Gusukuma] Do things beyond your comfort zone. Push yourself.

[Kamran Khan] Three things: First, don't worry so much about what you're doing, as much as who you are working for. If you are working for good people who you like and have an interest in your development, you will be happier. Second, lawyers tend to focus heavily on problems, but the solutions are the key. It is easy for lawyers to pick apart every problem, but the better lawyers propose solutions. Third, be fearless and willing to try different things. I think it is common for attorneys to feel limited after five or six years of practicing in one area. But, the reality is that if you are a good lawyer in one subject, you are a good lawyer and can take on new things.

[Joni Hiramoto] Just because everyone seems to be gunning for partner, doesn't mean it's what you necessarily want to do. Explore what is out there and take a cold hard look at life, and how you want to spend it. Money isn't as important as job satisfaction or finding meaning and value in the work you do. Best advice for



day to day work: if you are asked to research something, and you come up with nothing, don't go back and simply say "I found nothing." Instead, prepare a brief memorandum (one page or less) on where you searched, what you checked. In order to avoid finding nothing, seek the help of a law librarian. List your resources in order of category: Electronic searches / primary sources / secondary sources / tertiary sources. Make sure you have covered statutes, case law, treatises, journals, Witkin, CEB, etc. Think of what can be done strategically in the lawsuit if the answer is "there is nothing on point," and make suggestions at the end of the memorandum.

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5. In your experience, what kind of mentoring programs/initiatives have been most effective for attorneys from diverse backgrounds?

[Sonia Gonzales] In my experience, organic mentorship relationships are the most impactful and have the best opportunity to flourish. I've had good luck in circumstances where I've been working together toward a common mission or goal. It might be in a supervisory relationship in the office, with folks that you serve with on a board, or through some other volunteer capacity. Another important point is that my mentors are not all people of color, or women. One of my most invaluable mentors is a white male. What matters most is finding people who understand you on a core level in terms of shared values. Seek out diverse mentors from diverse backgrounds and practices. Finally, although you may be early on in your career, do not underestimate the value you can provide as a mentor to others. A guiding principle I follow: to those whom much has been given, much is expected. You might be a baby lawyer, but don't forget that you are a lawyer. Prioritize becoming a mentor yourself, as you may be surprised by how rewarding it is.

[Paul Henderson] Mentorship programs and initiatives that have buy-in from leadership within the companies and organizations can provide impactful opportunities for attorneys of color. I personally believe in creating change from within. When I was in the SF District Attorney's Office, I built a clerkship program that created more opportunities for attorneys from historically disenfranchised backgrounds. Research if the organization or company you are interested in has programs geared towards mentorship and find out how supportive their leadership is of those initiatives. I also think it is important for working professionals to help build bridges for students of color into the legal profession. Today, there is still a dearth of students of color entering law school. Programs that mentor students of color early on will help ensure that the pipeline for attorneys of color remains flowing.

[Emi Gusukuma] It's not easy to find a mentor. It only works if folks genuinely like one another, and I think most folks agree that the best mentor-mentee relationships are those that grow organically. That's why AABA works hard to create opportunities for students to interact with attorneys in a variety of settings--our Mentorship Brunch, Career Day, and myriad social events throughout the year--so that folks can strike up conversations that will hopefully lead to a meaningful mentor-mentee relationship down the road.

[Kamran Khan] Ultimately, this whole profession is about relationship building. In any mentoring program, it is the mentee's career that needs to drive the relationship. And as important as it is to have good mentors, it is more important to have advocates within an organization. There is an important difference--a mentor helps you progress professionally, but an advocate is a person who stands up and says that your career needs to advance within the company/organization. In the end there are a lot of good lawyers, but just being a good lawyer isn't always enough.



Featured in this article:



Emi Gusukuma
Special Counsel, Miller Law Group



Kamran Khan
*Assistant General Counsel,
Altria Client Services, Inc.*



Joni Hiramoto
*Judge at Contra Costa
Superior Court*



Sonia Gonzales
*Executive Director, California Bar
Foundation*



Paul Henderson
*Deputy Chief of Staff - Public
Safety at City and County of San
Francisco*

SAN FRANCISCO

425 Market Street, 26th floor
San Francisco, CA 94105
TEL 415-777-3200
FAX 415-541-9366

NORTH BAY

Wood Island
80 E. Sir Francis Drake Blvd., Ste. 3E
Larkspur, CA 94939
TEL 415-925-8400
TEL 707-546-9000
FAX 415-925-8409

SACRAMENTO

500 Capitol Mall, Ste. 1500
Sacramento, CA 95814
TEL 916-442-3333
FAX 916-442-2348

SILICON VALLEY

950 Tower Lane, Ste. 925
Foster City, CA 94404
TEL 650-349-4440
FAX 650-349-4443

EAST BAY

1676 N. California Blvd., Ste. 620
Walnut Creek, CA 94596
TEL 925-746-8460
FAX 925-746-8490