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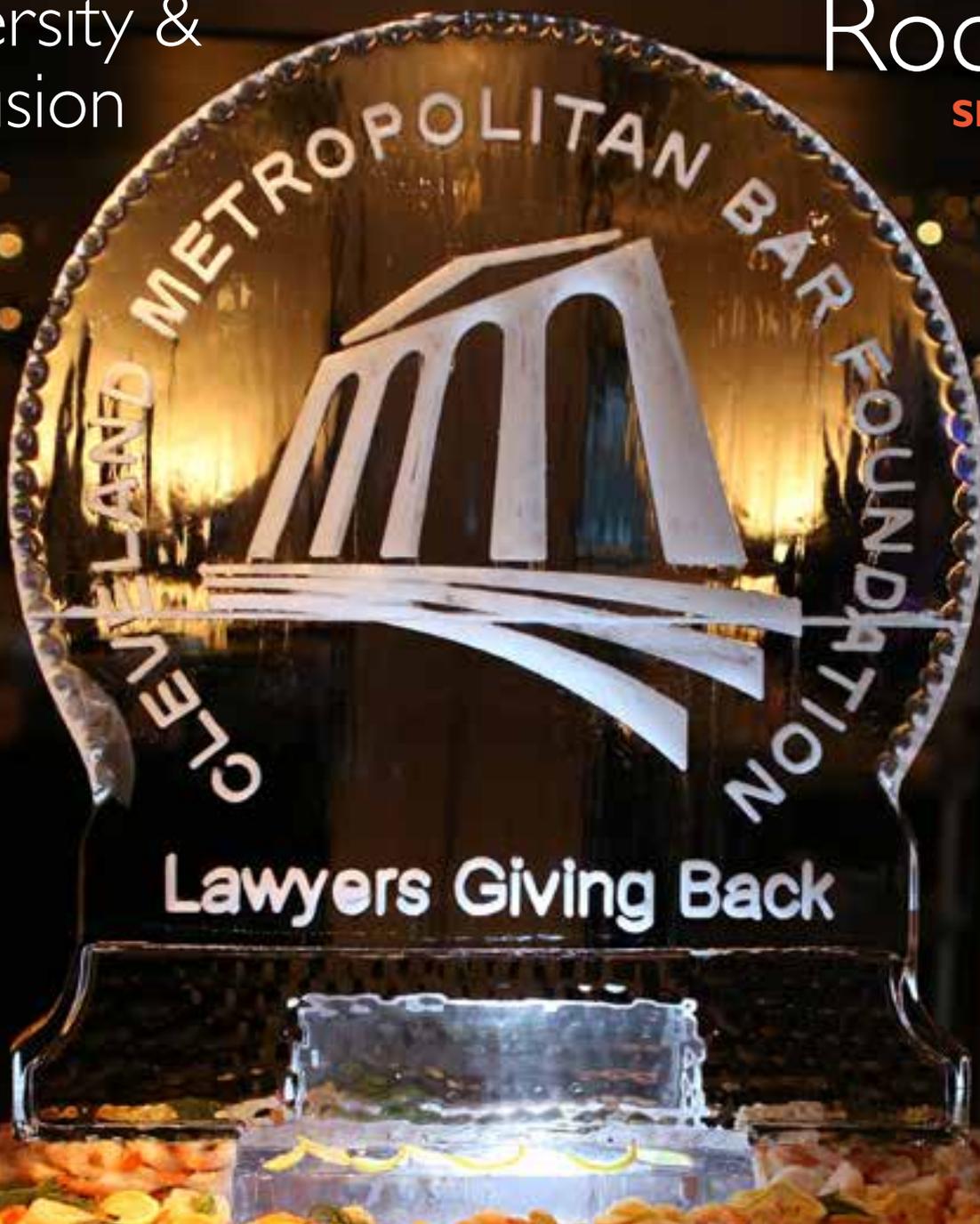
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# Lighting the Career Path Through Mentoring and Championing

BY ADRIAN D. THOMPSON

**A** Buddhist proverb states, “If you light a lamp for someone, it will also brighten your own path.” Mentoring programs help young lawyers develop and learn new skills under the direction and advice of a seasoned expert, their mentor.

Mentoring is a career development and talent retention tool. The very act of mentoring brightens the career paths of both the person being nurtured through counsel, “the mentee,” and the person providing the counseling, “the mentor.” The law firm/employer itself, also benefits due to the enhanced communication between the mentor and mentee which ultimately supports the organization’s direction toward sustainable growth gained from enlightened participants. Quality mentoring greatly enhances the mentee’s chances for success and the company’s ability to meet/exceed its goals and objectives. Therefore, the importance and significance of a formal mentoring program cannot be diminished.

## Mentor Duties

Mentor duties are to advise, motivate, coach, champion, inspire, teach and lead by example. Mentors are more senior professionals in their careers and are battle tested. Mentoring occurs when an experienced lawyer takes a personal interest in one with less experience and helps the junior lawyer learn and advance. Mentors provide mentees with a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a friendly push in the right direction. As active listeners, mentors offer support, guidance and constructive criticism as appropriate. Mentoring also provides the mentee with a leader to turn to with questions. Mentoring programs help to foster healthy work relationships by providing a perspective based on career wisdom in a genuine effort to help develop the mentee’s career.

## The Mentoring Relationship

The relationship is reciprocal because both the mentor and the mentee should get something from the relationship, such as professional development and personal growth. Mentors should also grow through their mentoring position by honing leadership skills and remaining in touch with the next generation of practice leaders. Mentors often serve as positive role models both personally and professionally for their mentees. With a mindset based upon mutual trust, together this team achieves an enhanced awareness of what it means to practice law. Through their interactions, they observe the business impact that the law has on their client matters. Additionally, they observe how the legal industry’s contributions are helping our communities grow.

## The Process

Mentees interact with mentors of diverse backgrounds, levels of experience, talents and interests. While working together with their mentor on a roadmap for long-term success, mentees naturally develop close working relationships with their mentors and other senior lawyers. Mentors can serve as excellent sponsors and allies to mentees by following a collaborative process to gain knowledge of the mentee’s career objectives. Mentees have the opportunity

to interact with proven leaders who have contributed significantly to the success of the organization and to the community at large. The mentor and mentee should engage in formal, substantive conversations that involve professional and personal goals and aspirations.

Together, they will set mutually agreed-upon goals and expectations... a roadmap to success. At Taft, we ask our mentors to focus on some of the following skillsets to help the associates on their roadmap for success.

1. Taking initiative
2. Networking
3. Self-management
4. Ability to see the entire perspective
5. Collegiality
6. Being a team player



- 7. Leadership
- 8. Organizational savvy
- 9. Ability to persuade
- 10. Valuing all members of the organization

The overarching objective for the process is to develop essential skills and knowledge and become involved and committed to professional and civic activities that excite the mentee and will help to spur long-term business and civic relationships.

**Unconscious Bias and Stereotyping**

Mentoring programs also help to combat unconscious bias in the workplace. Unconscious bias is a normal part of how people make decisions, by helping people process information based on past experiences and cultural norms about age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, sexual identity and other factors. The mentor-mentee relationship, if structured properly, can help examine the current climate by getting mentor program participants to openly discuss and examine their own background and identities, so that they can interact more authentically with colleagues, clients and members of the community.

**Mentoring Saves Money**

Organizations implement mentoring programs

to align the goals of the organization with the professional development path of its employees. Mentoring generally helps boost employee morale and engagement. An inclusive atmosphere leads to improved employee morale and loyalty, thereby reducing turnover and boosting productivity.

Research indicates that retention and mentoring go hand-in-hand. Organizations should weigh the costs of implementing a mentoring program against the high cost of employee turnover to be won over by the benefits of mentoring. Turnover is expensive and its associated costs are largely hidden. Costs mount from lowered productivity due to loss of an employee, overworked remaining staff, lost knowledge, training costs, interviewing costs and recruiter fees. Turnover cost estimates run as high as 150 percent of annual salary, per *Inc. Magazine*.

**Meeting Organizational Goals**

Mentoring programs will be judged successful if they:

- Enhance the ability to maintain an environment where the unique skillset of each individual is utilized.
- Provide team members with the opportunity to be successful.

- Increase a firm's/company's ability to retain high performing diverse employees/attorneys.
- Create and maintain an environment where client needs and expectations are met and/or exceeded.
- Create an environment where business and social objectives are met and/or exceeded.

While in law school, the mentee's goal was to obtain knowledge. In the workforce, the mentee's goal is to contribute that knowledge to the organization and the greater community. The mentee's career goals are evolutionary. Good mentors assist mentees with their professional evolution with personal support to facilitate success in their career and beyond.



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