
ACC DOCKET

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Who's on Deck?

Law Department Management



A few years ago, I was given the opportunity to serve as the legal counsel for the Association of California Water Agencies. At the time, there was no legal department. There was no one who could help me understand the role I had accepted nor anyone to help me grow into the position. I felt unprepared and overwhelmed.

I then remembered all the talk I had heard about mentoring. I understood it to be a valuable tool for career growth and management, and I found out first-hand how true that is by turning to three lawyers I knew, each with his own strengths, to be my “mastermind group” or mentors.

For many companies, their current approach to hiring is haphazard and crisis-based. There is little thought given to what the organizational needs are or, if known, attempting to address them before a vacancy occurs. By implementing a mentoring program with an eye toward succession planning, a law department can instead focus on managing its talent with the goal of long-term retention and capitalizing on its human assets.

This has the potential to result in better hiring decisions and cost savings. Additionally, employees are more satisfied when efforts are made by their employers to provide professional development opportunities — mentoring is one low-cost way to provide those opportunities.

By investing in each lawyer’s professional development, a legal department may benefit in its employee retention efforts as employees seek to grow in their professions while creating a pipeline of talent when more senior positions become available in the future.

According to www.mentorscout.com:

For many organizations, the knowledge retained in key individuals is the most valuable part of the organization. When these key individuals leave, this valuable information leaves with them. That is, unless the organization has an effective mentoring program that allows and encourages these key employees to share their knowledge and skills with other employees.

Where possible and feasible, law departments should seek to partner young or new in-house lawyers with experienced in-house counsel. The historical career path for in-house attorneys has generally involved attorneys moving from private practice to in-house. However, there is not always certainty where those lawyers go once they are inside. The roles and expectations of the two types of lawyering necessitate a transition period.

That transition needs nurturing, so that new in-house lawyers can navigate the change effectively. While it may be ideal for the mentor to have also transitioned from outside to in-house, what is more important is that the mentor understands the challenges of the transition and can be a resource to assist young or new lawyers in being successful in their new role.

Only one of the lawyers I turned to was an in-house lawyer. The other two were partners in law firms serving clients in the same industry. I chose the three for very different reasons.

In my case, I was not fully prepared for the promotion and there was no mentoring program to help me understand my new responsibilities. It was that realization that sent me looking for skilled and knowledgeable attorneys to help me figure out what I needed to know to be successful.

Almost everyone wants to feel valued and appreciated, and one of the ways we show that appreciation is through promotion when the opportunity arises. A consistent challenge with promoting people is that they need to be able to handle the position for which they are being considered. The employer is best able to prepare its employees for those opportunities when they arise. Mentoring and appropriate training should be provided so the lawyer can acquire the skills and knowledge needed for promotion.

With a little forethought and preplanning, no one needs to be the same situation in which I found myself. Law department leadership can help their new lawyers learn the ropes of the in-house environment or prepare for promotion by providing the resources and support needed early in the lawyer's tenure.

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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.