Fostering Authentic Connections

It has never been easy to be a new lawyer. For many, the steepest curve of learning the practice coincides with other high-stress life changes – like marriage and welcoming new children. Others are confronted with the unwelcome realization that cantankerous opposing counsel don’t always yield to reason, or that judges aren’t always persuaded by the brilliance of legal research. While some challenges are familiar and timeless, the newest lawyers among us joined our profession in the wake of a pandemic that fundamentally changed the rhythms and work habits of lawyers and judges. These new colleagues started or finished law school on a screen, instead of in a classroom. The pandemic cheated them of the in-person study groups, summer associate programs and social opportunities that got many of us through law school with our sense of self intact.

While we cannot change the tough circumstances of lawyers whose schooling and first years coincided with the pandemic, we have a wonderful opportunity to help them write a strong next chapter – and that’s by embracing them warmly into our community. As I’ve highlighted in past columns, one of my favorite parts of the LBA – and a pillar of its mission – is the focus on fostering an inclusive community. That focus has been on full display recently at events like our reception for summer associates and newly-admitted attorneys and the Litigation Section Happy Hour where lawyers, judges and law students were invited to visit in a collegial and relaxed atmosphere. At both events, members of our community got to catch up with old friends and get to know others whose paths they may not have crossed yet.

It is hard to overstate how valuable these informal in-person interactions are to building the confidence and sense of belonging for new lawyers. A first court appearance is likely to be far less daunting to someone who has had the chance to shake hands and meet the judge socially before the day of the hearing. And by the same token, even adversarial tasks between lawyers – like hashing out a discovery dispute – are often less acrimonious when the person behind the email is familiar. Informal social interactions among lawyers can help us accomplish work on behalf of our clients efficiently and productively, and without unnecessary venom and vitriol.

On top of these practical benefits, making time to attend social events also helps to combat the negative effects of isolation that many lawyers (not just new lawyers) experience. It’s no secret that practicing law can feel lonely at times, and it can be easy to fall into a monotonous rut. More lawyers than ever before are choosing to work at least some of the time away from a traditional office. The personal connections we forge when we take time to socialize with other lawyers, the sense of camaraderie we feel and the break from our daily routines are all important parts of tending to our mental health. We are only beginning to understand how the allure of chatbot conversations may exacerbate feelings of isolation or disconnectedness in the legal community. My strong instinct is that in a time when it may be tempting for a new lawyer to turn to ChatGPT instead of to a supervising attorney, we should make a strong commitment to prioritizing opportunities for casual conversations and socializing. So many frustrations and challenges of our profession feel less overwhelming when we have a chance to talk with other lawyers and be reminded that we are not alone in trying to figure things out.

For those of us who are fortunate enough to be surrounded by colleagues who feel like family, it can be hard to recall the feeling of being new or like an outsider. You may be able to recall someone who made an impression on you when you were a young lawyer – not necessarily someone you worked with or worked for, but someone who showed interest in you and was welcoming when you encountered him or her. You have the chance to be that person to these new lawyers. You don’t have to commit to a long-term mentoring relationship (although that would be terrific). It is as easy as showing up to social events whenever you can. When you show up, you send a message to new lawyers and to your peers that you care about this community and that you care about the success of its next generation. When you show up and talk with new lawyers about how your career has unfolded, you offer them your experience as an example – whether that was leaving a job that wasn’t the right fit, taking time away when you needed to focus on family or even running for public office. A tremendous thank you to all of you who have shown up and keep showing up. Our community and our newest colleagues are better because of your authenticity and generosity with your time.

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