

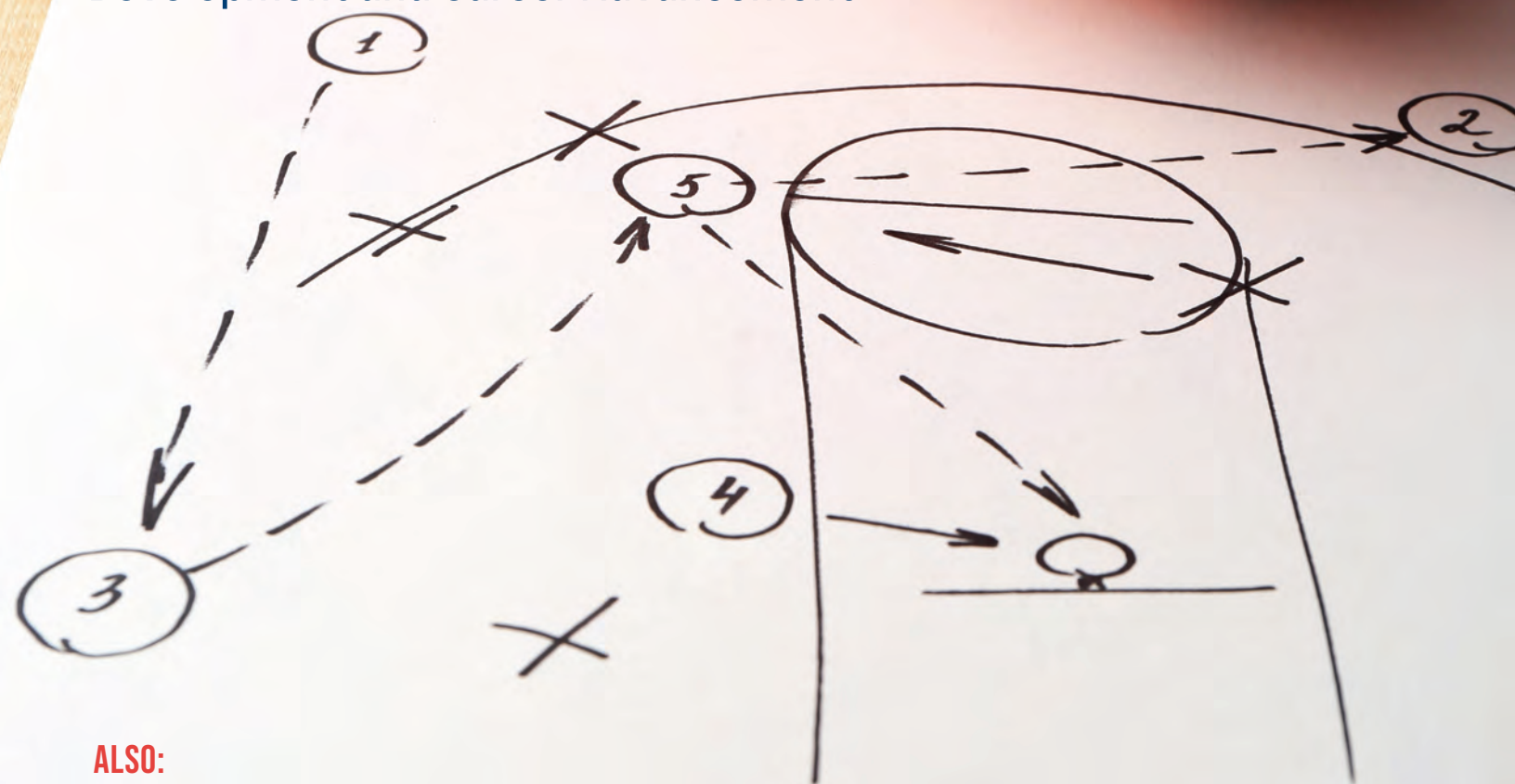
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## Mentoring on the Offense

A Strategic, Structured and Sustained  
Approach to Legal Mentorship, Professional  
Development and Career Advancement



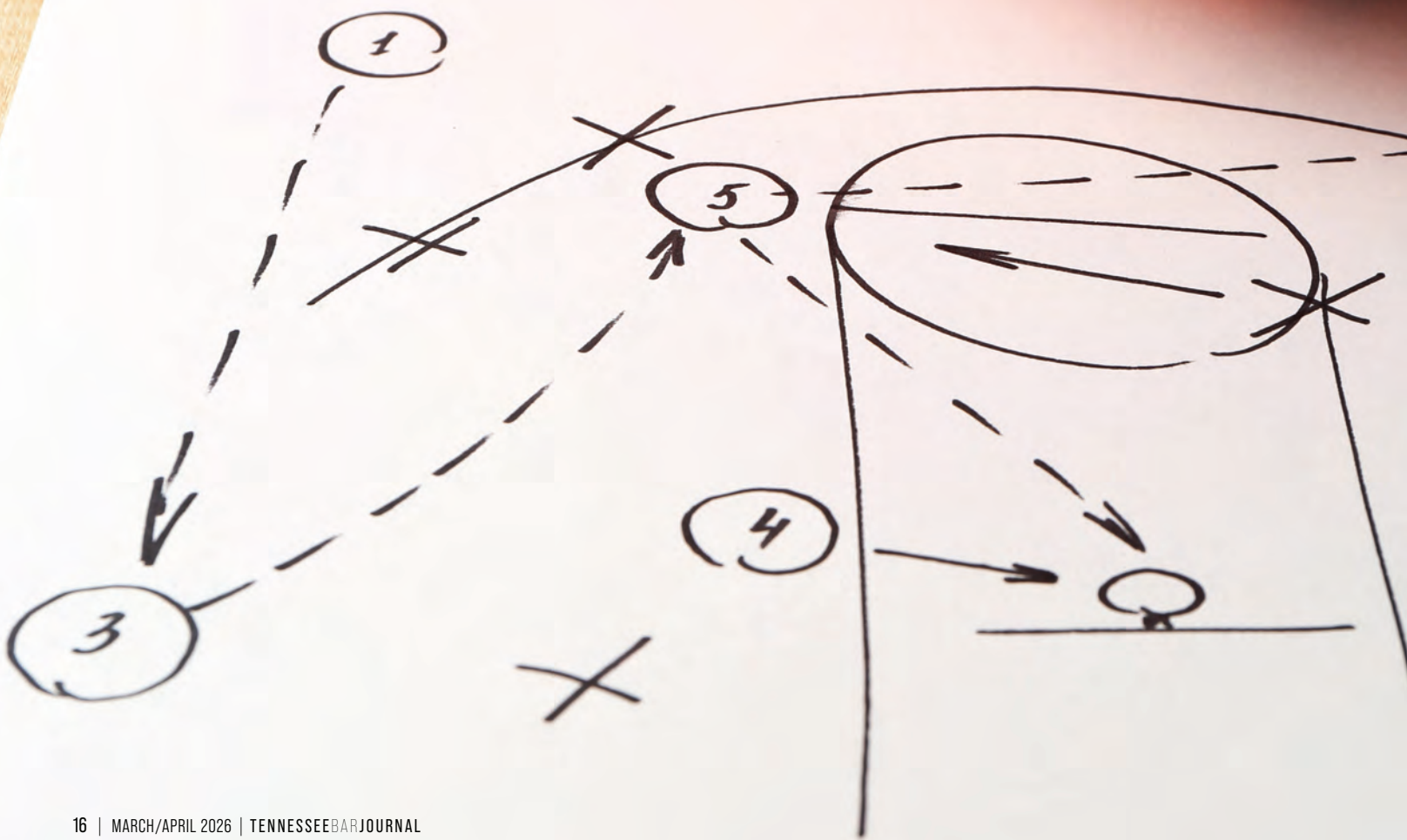
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A Strategic, Structured  
and Sustained Approach  
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# Mentoring on the Offense

**Editor's Note:** As former Tennessee Bar Association President George T. "Buck" Lewis often reminds young lawyers, none of us truly succeeds alone. In fact, "all successful lawyers are the products of our sponsors and mentors." Lewis and his mentee, Brock Willis, draw on their experiences — one an associate fresh from a federal judicial clerkship, the other a seasoned bar leader and law professor<sup>1</sup> — to illustrate how proactive mentoring can elevate your career and strengthen the Tennessee legal profession.





By George T. “Buck” Lewis and Brock Willis

**M**ost lawyers turn to mentors when a problem arises — constantly playing defense. But what if they switched to an “offensive” mindset? A proactive, strategic approach that emphasizes regular engagement and long-term growth rather than reactive crisis management. By meeting regularly with mentors and following a professional development plan, both new attorneys and experienced lawyers can maximize the benefits of mentorship for both parties.

### **A FRAMEWORK FOR ATTORNEY DEVELOPMENT**

“Mentoring on the offense” is a proactive mentorship model designed to assist lawyers at every stage of their careers — from law students and recent graduates to mid-career attorneys and experienced practitioners. The goal of this model is to help them intentionally enhance their skills, leadership abilities, client development strategies, long-term professional identities and legacies.

This proactive approach is consistent with what mentoring scholarship and bar-led initiatives have long recognized: lawyers who engage mentors early and intentionally report greater professional satisfaction, stronger skill development and a clear sense of professional identity. According to a study by the National Association for Law Placement (NALP) and West LegalEdCenter, 95% of lawyers participating in informal mentoring relationships rated the experience as “very beneficial” or “extremely beneficial.”<sup>2</sup>

Effective mentoring relationships also span institutions rather than remaining confined to a single workspace. Lawyers who maintain mentoring relationships through professional transitions — from law school to clerkship, clerkship to private practice, or public service to firm life — benefit from continuity in judgment, professionalism and long-term career strategy that no single institution can provide on its own. For this reason, lawyers should cultivate mentors both inside and outside their workplace. Issues will inevitably come up that require internal institutional knowledge, while others demand the confidential perspective of an outside advisor.

### **BE PROACTIVE, NOT REACTIVE: RETHINKING MENTORSHIP FOR LAWYERS**

If a young lawyer only calls her mentor when she is in a bind, she has already abandoned an entire side of mentorship. Instead, schedule regular check-ins — a coffee or lunch every quarter — whether or not you have an urgent issue.<sup>3</sup> This consistency demonstrates initiative and builds trust before a crisis hits. For young associates, new partners or lawyers transitioning practice areas, it is much easier to ask sensitive questions or admit uncertainties when you have developed rapport through ongoing dialogue. From the mentor’s perspective, an actively engaged mentee sends a powerful signal that this person is serious about growth.<sup>4</sup> Most mentors want to be more than an emergency hotline! As the American Bar Association (ABA) has noted in its guidance on legal mentorship, regular contact prevents the isolation many young lawyers feel early in their careers, and just knowing you have a standing quarterly meeting can provide reassurance that you are not navigating your career alone.<sup>5</sup>

### **SET GOALS AND CREATE A DEVELOPMENT PLAN**

Effective mentoring means more than simply chatting and going your separate ways. To get real value, come prepared with goals and a plan. What skills do you want to develop? Which practice areas do you hope to explore? Are you aiming for a leadership role, trying to build a client base, or both?

A development plan turns aspirations into an

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actionable roadmap. For example, if you want to improve trial skills, the plan might include taking a pro bono case or shadowing your mentor in court. If business development is the goal, perhaps you will join your mentor at networking events or draft a client alert together. Career goals might include making partner, developing a niche practice area, exploring the joy of pro bono work or building your professional network Memphis to Bristol, from Tiptonville to Ducktown.

This structure transforms mentorship from casual conversation into purposeful coaching. Consider emailing your mentor a copy of your professional development plan in advance to ensure you cover the priority topics. Each quarterly meeting can include a progress check: What has been accomplished? What obstacles have emerged? What new opportunities might be pursued? Before wrapping up, identify specific action items — tasks you will complete before the next meeting.

This accountability framework matters. One experienced mentor likened such follow-ups to court deadlines: when you know your mentor will ask in three months whether you have updated your résumé, completed that bar journal article or taught that CLE, you are more likely to get it

done.<sup>6</sup> The follow-through benefits both parties — mentees maintain momentum on their development, while mentors can monitor progress and adjust their guidance accordingly.

Professional development plans also benefit mentors by providing a framework for how they can help.<sup>7</sup> Rather than wondering, “How can I assist this young lawyer?”, the plan provides them with areas to focus on and allows mentors to strategically leverage their experience and networks.

## BEST PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE LEGAL MENTORSHIP

Being assigned a mentor is not enough — it is how you engage with your mentor that matters. Some best practices include:

**Meet regularly and reliably.** Set up recurring meetings, such as the first Friday of each quarter, and stick to them. Consistency builds trust and shows your mentor you are committed to growth.

**Come prepared with an agenda.** Jot down questions, updates or topics before each meeting. Think of issues you have encountered, feedback you received or decisions you are facing. Whether you are handling your first deposition, navigating law firm politics, addressing billing questions or considering a career move, a prepared mentee shows respect for the mentor’s time.

**Be candid and proactive.** Do not be afraid to ask “dumb” questions or raise concerns. If something is bothering you at work or you made a mistake, bring it up. Your mentor has likely been where you are and can share how they navigated similar situations.

**Seek opportunities and feedback.** Use your mentor as a bridge to new experiences. Ask for feedback on your work. Mentors can often provide constructive critique that busy supervisors cannot. Embrace that feedback — it is aimed at your improvement.

**Follow through and stay accountable.** After each meeting, execute on the action items you discussed. By the next meeting, report back on your progress. This follow through shows your mentor that their time is yielding results.<sup>8</sup>

## THE VALUE OF ORGANIC MENTORSHIP

While formal mentorship pairings are valuable, the most enduring mentorships often develop organically through shared interests or values. Experience from bar-sponsored mentoring programs suggests that matching mentors and mentees based on common ground — such as practice area, professional interests or shared background — helps foster stronger, more durable mentoring relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Bar and firm mentorship programs increasingly account for compatibility, but do not rely solely on formal matching. Seek out informal mentors in addition to any assigned ones. Attend Tennessee Bar Association (TBA) events, local bar meetings, CLE programs and networking functions. If you meet a seasoned attorney at a local bar event who just clicks with you, ask if they would be willing to grab lunch occasionally. Those organic relationships often stand the test of time and evolve into true friendships.

That said, common ground does not mean finding a clone of yourself. Diversity in mentoring is beneficial — a mentor who differs from you in background or perspective can broaden your horizons.<sup>10</sup> When mentor and mentee are on the same wavelength, the relationship becomes what one long-time mentor called “a beneficial two-way street.”<sup>11</sup>

## THE BENEFITS OF MENTORING FOR SENIOR ATTORNEYS AND LAW FIRMS

Mentorship is not a one-way gift from the wise elder to the lucky youngster. Done right, it is mutually enriching.<sup>12</sup> As former First Lady Michelle Obama put it, “One person might be senior and have more experience, but I’ve learned a lot from the people I mentor.”<sup>13</sup>

Teaching someone often forces you to reflect on your own assumptions and stay current in your field. Younger lawyers bring fresh ideas, technological skills — including AI tools, legal tech platforms and digital marketing strategies — along with diverse perspectives that expand a mentor’s outlook. Many mentors cite the joy of seeing their



GEORGE T. “BUCK” LEWIS is a shareholder at Baker Donelson, one of the largest law firms in Tennessee, Larry Wilks Distinguished

Practitioner in Residence at the University of Tennessee Winston College of Law, and co-founder of the Institute for Leadership and Professionalism. He has taught leadership at the University of Tennessee, Tulane University, Louisiana State University and Federal Express. Lewis served as TBA president from 2008-2009.



BROCK WILLIS is an associate in the Litigation Practice Group at Adams & Reese in Nashville and previously served as judicial law clerk to the

Hon. Mark S. Norris in the United States District Court for the Western District of Tennessee.

mentees succeed as one of the most meaningful rewards of their careers.<sup>14</sup>

As Judge Marshall L. Davidson III has observed in reflecting on his decade-long mentorship with former Tennessee Supreme Court Chief Justice Frank F. Drowota, the influence of mentoring often extends beyond legal doctrine to professional identity, judgment and character — shaping not only careers, but the profession itself.<sup>15</sup>

There is also a legacy aspect: by mentoring, seasoned lawyers extend their impact beyond their own cases, influencing the next generation. Booker T. Washington said, “If you want to lift yourself up, lift someone else up.”<sup>16</sup>

For these reasons, experienced attorneys should not shy away from mentoring because they feel too busy.<sup>17</sup> And for newer attorneys: do not feel like you are burdening a mentor by asking for their time. As long as you demonstrate enthusiasm and appreciation, you reignite the idealism that veteran lawyers recall from the beginning of their careers.

## **BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND CLIENT ACQUISITION THROUGH MENTORSHIP**

An often overlooked but critical aspect of mentorship is learning the skill of acquiring clients. This is best learned by watching someone else do it. Mentors provide invaluable guidance on which clients to target, helping mentees understand why some clients are good fits and others not so much.<sup>18</sup> Mentors can advise on when to sell the client on yourself versus when to introduce them to another person whose expertise better matches the client’s needs.

One crucial lesson mentors impart is a shift in perspective: it is not about what service you can provide to the client, but rather understanding what the client truly needs. This client-centered approach, modeled and taught through mentorship, forms the foundation for ethical, sustainable client relationships and long-term professional success.

## **PRO BONO WORK AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN LEGAL MENTORSHIP**

Another often-overlooked aspect of mentorship is its connection to our profession’s duty of service. Working on a pro bono case under a mentor’s guidance provides young lawyers with hands-on experience while modeling the profession’s core value of public service. The mentee gains skills and confidence, the mentor derives satisfaction from helping both the client and the mentee, and the community receives the necessary legal help.

Tennessee has a proud tradition of pro bono leadership. The Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services (TALS) hosts the annual Equal Justice University Conference, bringing together legal aid attorneys, private practitioners, law students and judges from across Tennessee to address access to justice issues.<sup>19</sup> This conference exemplifies the collaborative spirit that

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*“I bring extensive experience resolving differences in the context of transactions and corporate governance, with a deep background in technology (including AI). I excel in cases where the facts and law are not only complex and nuanced, but also uncharted.”*

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Ms. Bennett has served as an advocate, in-house counsel and ADR professional in complex disputes involving corporate transactions, health and other personal information, cross-functional governance issues, data-driven business models, and highly-regulated environments. At JAMS, she will resolve cybersecurity & privacy, higher education & Title IX, business/commercial, health care and life sciences matters.

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effective mentoring can foster.

Additionally, innovative law school programs are integrating service with mentorship. At the University of Tennessee Winston College of Law, students answer questions on online legal help platforms, bring their answers to class for discussion, and work with their professors to develop answers that are then submitted to help Tennesseans in need. This approach combines skill development, mentorship and public service in a single educational experience. Vanderbilt Law School and Belmont University College of Law have similar programs that connect students with experienced practitioners.

Free Legal Answers and comparable pro bono platforms offer ideal opportunities for mentors and mentees to serve together. A mentor and mentee can log in, select questions in areas the mentee wants to explore, and collaborate on responses. The mentor provides guidance on tone, substance and spotting issues, while the mentee drafts the advice. It is low-pressure — no court deadlines or in-person appearances — but high-impact for both the client receiving help and the young lawyer building skills in client communication, legal analysis and practical problem-solving. Many questions can be answered in 30 minutes to an hour, making it easy to fit into busy schedules.

Beyond virtual platforms, mentors should find other pro bono opportunities to tackle together — co-counseling on a landlord-tenant dispute, staffing a Saturday legal clinic or researching an issue for a nonprofit. Such collaboration provides a valuable training ground for the mentee and strengthens the mentor-mentee bond through shared purpose and service.

## THE JUDICIARY'S RECOGNITION OF MENTORSHIP'S IMPORTANCE

The critical role of mentorship has not escaped judicial notice. In *Powell v. Nelnet Inc.*, United States Magistrate Judge Bill Davis opened his opinion with these words: “Mentorship is a gem of the legal profession.”<sup>20</sup> Experienced attorneys provide junior colleagues with necessary

guidance, and that guidance relates to more than just substantive law and best practices for preparation and presentation of clients’ cases. It extends, or at least should extend, to lessons in diligence, candor with courts, respect for opposing counsel and other parameters of ethical conduct and professionalism. A good mentor can make a mentee’s legal career soar. The absence of one can cause a career to stall or falter.

Davis went on to note that “failures of mentorship do not injure only would-be mentees. The consequences are often felt by firm management, colleagues, opposing counsel, judges and the judicial system more broadly.”

## A WORD OF CAUTION: THE LONG GAME

For mentees, one final word of caution is in order. Effective leadership in the legal profession is about long-term diplomacy and relationship-building, not short-term credit-taking. Early career attorneys may be tempted to claim credit for every win, every client contact or every breakthrough idea. Resist that impulse.

The most successful lawyers understand that professional success is built on reputation and relationships developed over decades, not on who gets credit for this quarter’s results. Be generous in sharing credit, gracious in accepting guidance and patient in building your practice. The mentor who introduces you to a client today may not expect you to give them credit every time you work with that client five years from now — but they will remember if you were gracious and professional in handling the introduction.

This long-term perspective is itself something best learned through mentorship — watching how respected senior lawyers navigate relationships, build reputations and maintain their professional networks over entire careers.

## PLAN, PARTICIPATE AND PAY IT FORWARD

Mentorship should not be left to chance or limited to desperate phone calls on the eve of a deadline. It works best when it is strategic, structured and sustained.<sup>21</sup>

Lawyers who engage meaningfully in

mentoring often find themselves naturally drawn into leadership within firms, bar associations and civic organizations, where the same skills of listening, guidance and accountability are essential.

If you are a new or young lawyer, take ownership of your mentoring relationship. Draft a development plan and share it with your mentor. Put quarterly meetings on your calendar and treat them like important client meetings. Come with questions, leave with homework. Join TBA committees, attend practice section meetings and participate in mentorship programs offered through your local bar. Find mentors who inspire you, including mentors outside your workplace. Remember that every great lawyer had help along the way.

If you are a seasoned attorney, do not wait to be asked. Offer your guidance. When you do mentor someone, engage fully. Help them map out their path. Give tough feedback when needed. Introduce them to people who can open doors. Your impact on the mentee can echo through their entire career.

Mentoring is a two-way street traveled by generations of Tennessee lawyers. As Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” In mentoring, what you get in return is the pride of shaping the future of our profession and often a rejuvenated love for that profession. This is the essence of mentoring on offense: reframing mentorship not as a last resort, but as a deliberate strategy for building excellent lawyers and a stronger Tennessee bar. ■

## NOTES

1. Mark A. Baugh, “The Importance of Mentorship and Sponsorship in the Legal Profession,” *Am. Bar Ass’n* (Nov. 20, 2023), bit.ly/4r8R5g6 (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

2. Mark Koff, “Informal mentoring relationships lead to greater value for young lawyers and law students,” *Thomson Reuters* (Dec. 12, 2012), bit.ly/45WXTVD (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

3. See Kathleen G. Furr & Locke Houston Waldrop, “Successful Mentoring and Accountability Tips for Young Lawyers,” *Baker Donelson* (July 22, 2021), www.bakerdonelson.com/successful-mentoring-and-accountability-tips-for-young-lawyers (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

4. *See id.* (emphasizing that regularly requesting mentoring discussions signals commitment to the mentoring process).

5. *See* Mark Baugh, “The Importance of Mentorship and Sponsorship in the Legal Profession,” *Am. Bar. Ass’n* (Nov. 20, 2023), bit.ly/3M1lVbk (last viewed Jan. 28, 2026) (quoting Sir Isaac Newton, “If I have seen further [than others], it is by standing [on] the shoulders of giants.”)

6. *See id.* (likening mentor follow-ups to court-imposed deadlines that increase accountability).

7. *See id.* (explaining that follow-through allows mentors to monitor progress and development).

8. *See id.* (advising regular meetings, preparation, candid discussion, feedback, and follow-through as hallmarks of effective mentoring).

9. *See* Attorney Mentoring Programs: Selected Profiles, Nat’l Legal Aid & Defender Ass’n (describing state bar mentoring programs that match mentors and mentees based on practice area, interests, and professional background to promote effective mentoring relationships), [www.nlada.org/sites/default/files/pictures/attorney-mentoring-programs-selected-profiles.pdf](http://www.nlada.org/sites/default/files/pictures/attorney-mentoring-programs-selected-profiles.pdf) (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

10. *See* Sandra J. Chan & Stephanie Perry, Planning for a Diverse and Equitable Future, ACTEC (discussing importance of mentoring lawyers from diverse backgrounds to expand

firm talent and promote equity in profession), [www.actec.org/press-releases/mentoring-young-lawyers-and-the-impact-of-affinity-bars/](http://www.actec.org/press-releases/mentoring-young-lawyers-and-the-impact-of-affinity-bars/) (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

11. *See* Mentor Externship Program, Univ. of St. Thomas Sch. of Law (describing the law school’s Mentor Externship Program, in which more than 500 practitioners volunteer to mentor students and help them develop professional skills and relationships), [law.stthomas.edu/mentor/](http://law.stthomas.edu/mentor/) (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

12. *See* Dan Cotter, “Mentoring New Lawyers Yields Rewarding Experiences for Both Parties,” *TYL Mag.* (Apr. 2017) (noting that effective mentoring relationships benefit both mentors and mentees and require effort from both), bit.ly/3OtZ9cF (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

13. Carolyn Twersky, Michelle Obama & Valerie Jarrett on Mentorship, *Seventeen* (Sept. 10, 2020), [www.seventeen.com/life/a33971831/michelle-obama-mentor-valerie-jarrett-mentorship-advice/](http://www.seventeen.com/life/a33971831/michelle-obama-mentor-valerie-jarrett-mentorship-advice/) (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

14. *See* Cotter, *supra* note 12 (noting that done right, mentoring relationships can be rewarding for both parties and require both sides to work hard to understand their roles).

15. Marshall L. Davidson III, “The Power of a Mentor,” 20 *J. App. Prac. & Process* 1, 1–2 (2019), [lawrepository.ualr.edu/appellatepracticeprocess/vol20/iss1/2/](http://lawrepository.ualr.edu/appellatepracticeprocess/vol20/iss1/2/)

16. Princess Agina, “If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else,” Laidlaw Scholars Network (Aug. 19, 2024), [laidlawscholars](http://laidlawscholars).

network/posts/if-you-want-to-lift-yourself-up-lift-up-someone-else (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

17. *See* Cotter, *supra* note 12 (noting that many formal programs at law firms are not as successful as they could be because mentors do not see value in spending time away from billable hours to foster relationships).

18. *See* Furr & Waldrop, *supra* note 3 (explaining that shareholders often serve as gateways to client development and can introduce mentees to internal and external networking opportunities).

19. *See* TALS’ Equal Justice University Conference, Tennessee Alliance for Legal Services (describing the annual gathering of lawyers, advocates, social workers, and pro bono attorneys focused on access to justice and civil legal assistance in Tennessee), [www.tals.org/page/1107/tals-equal-justice-university-conference](http://www.tals.org/page/1107/tals-equal-justice-university-conference) (last visited Jan. 24, 2026).

20. *Powell v. Nelnet Inc.*, No. 4:23-CV-00783-SDJ-BD, 2025 WL 1584694, at \*1 (E.D. Tex. June 4, 2025) (opening a sanctions order in a case involving discovery misconduct, spoliation of evidence and inadequate supervision of junior attorneys by their firm, and emphasizing that failures of mentorship can undermine ethical practice, professionalism and the administration of justice).

21. *See* Furr & Waldrop, *supra* note 3 (emphasizing calendar appointments, prepared agendas, routine follow-ups and strategic use of mentoring opportunities).

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