

How to Be an Effective Mentor

By Allison Wolf, Founder and Lead Coach, The Lawyer Coach & The Flourishing Law Centre

Mentorship is one of the most powerful, enduring forces shaping our profession. Every lawyer carries stories of being mentored — some inspiring, some cautionary — and those experiences ripple forward in how we support others. This article invites reflection on what you bring to your mentoring relationships, how you can “level up” your approach, and how mentorship can strengthen both your leadership and your firm.

Why Mentorship Matters

At its best, mentorship is leadership in action. A mentor doesn’t just transfer knowledge — they model curiosity, courage, and care. They help newer lawyers move from uncertainty toward confidence, and from rote execution toward independent judgment.

For firms, effective mentoring deepens culture, supports recruitment and retention, and builds the next generation of leaders. For mentors, it can be energizing and meaningful, reconnecting you with the early days of your own career and reminding you of how far you’ve come.

Mentorship also strengthens empathy. As one lawyer in a recent discussion put it, “It takes me out of my current mindset and reconnects me with how it felt to be anxious and unsure.” When we remember that feeling — and offer the reassurance and clarity we once needed — we grow as leaders.

The Benefits for Mentors and Firms

Mentoring relationships create tangible benefits that go far beyond goodwill:

- **Firm culture and continuity:** Mentorship builds trust and connection across generations, creating cohesion and morale that no policy manual can replicate.
- **Retention and engagement:** When associates feel seen, supported, and developed, they stay. Mentorship is one of the strongest predictors of retention.
- **Practical knowledge transfer:** As experienced lawyers explain complex issues, they revisit first principles — often improving their own clarity and communication in the process.
- **Leadership and skill development:** Mentoring develops empathy, feedback skills, and perspective — all essential for leading people effectively.
- **Legacy and meaning:** Many mentors describe mentoring as a way to honour those who supported them, and to leave a lasting imprint on their profession

Guiding Principles of Effective Mentorship

Before diving into specific skills, it helps to ground mentoring in a few core principles that define its tone and success.

1. Curiosity

Bring genuine interest to your mentee's experience. Curiosity opens space for discovery and signals respect.

2. Supportiveness

Encourage growth while offering steadiness. Mentorship thrives in an atmosphere of generosity.

3. Acceptance

Meet your mentee where they are — not where you think they “should” be. Judgment closes doors; acceptance builds trust.

4. Focus and Commitment

Be fully present in mentoring conversations. Let the noise of practice recede for a few moments and give your full attention. That simple act is powerful in itself.

Mentorship can actually become a restorative pause in a busy practice — a time to focus wholly on another person's development, leaving aside the clamour of clients and email for a while.

The Core Skills of Mentorship

1. Listening and Questioning

Listening might seem passive, but it is one of the most demanding skills in mentoring. Our brains are noisy prediction machines; we finish people's sentences, jump to conclusions, and filter their words through our own experiences. True listening means quieting that inner commentary to fully hear what's being said — and what's beneath it.

Active listening includes noticing tone, emotion, and body language; reflecting back what you've heard (“Here's what I think you're saying — tell me if I've got it right”); and asking clarifying questions such as “What's underneath this?”

In one mentorship story, a mentor asked her junior simply, “What's giving you the most stress right now?” and then listened. Only after the mentee had talked through the file did the mentor gently ask, “What was your process?” From there, she offered practical guidance — a structure for managing complex files — but by starting with deep listening, she also conveyed trust and respect.

The mentee later said: *“Even though I’m junior, she made me feel like my thoughts mattered.”* That’s the power of listening well.

2. Encouraging and Developing a Growth Mindset

Encouragement isn’t cheerleading; it’s the art of seeing potential and naming it. Lawyers often see their weaknesses in high definition and their strengths in grayscale. A mentor can help rebalance that perspective.

When your mentee shares a challenge, notice their resourcefulness and perseverance as much as their mistakes. Reflect it back: *“I’m hearing real persistence in how you approached this.”*

Watch for fixed-mindset language — *“I’m not good at this”* or *“I’ll never be like them.”* Shift the focus from *proving* to *improving*: *“You’re learning this skill. Here’s where I see progress.”* Sharing your own stories of failure and recovery also normalizes growth and imperfection.

Encouragement is fuel for development — and for belonging.

3. Truth-Telling with Care

Honesty builds trust when it comes from a place of genuine care. As one senior Alberta lawyer shared with me, *“One of the most valuable things I can do for a mentee is to be candid, even if it’s uncomfortable.”*

Mentorship isn’t flattery; it’s a relationship where truth and empathy coexist. Constructive feedback lands best when a foundation of respect is already strong. Your mentee should leave hard conversations not diminished, but supported to grow.

The formula: listen first, affirm effort, speak truth kindly, and stay in relationship afterward.

4. Sharing and Requesting

Mentees want to hear how you’ve handled similar challenges — but resist the impulse to lead with advice. Ask questions first:

- “What approaches have you considered?”
- “What do you think might be getting in the way?”
- “Where do you see an opportunity here?”

Once they’ve done some thinking, you can offer: *“Would you like to hear how I’ve handled something similar?”* or *“Here’s one idea — take what fits and leave what doesn’t.”*

That language preserves their autonomy and signals collaboration, not command.

5. Action Planning

End each mentoring conversation with clear next steps:

- “What’s the first small action you’ll take?”
- “What could get in the way?”
- “How can I support you?”

This converts insight into progress and builds accountability. Over time, small actions compound into real development.

Structure and Stages of Mentorship

Formal or informal, every mentoring relationship moves through stages: formation, deepening, and closure.

Starting Well

Early meetings should focus on getting to know one another — understanding goals, strengths, and expectations. Clarify frequency, confidentiality, and commitments. In law firm settings, it’s especially important to protect the time: if meetings are repeatedly cancelled, the signal sent is that mentoring is not valued.

Maintaining the Relationship

Regular contact — even brief check-ins — builds trust faster than occasional long meetings. A 15-minute touch point can be more powerful than a quarterly catch-up. Keep conversations balanced between what’s going well, what’s challenging, and what’s next.

Closing Well

When a formal mentoring cycle ends, debrief together: what each person learned, how the mentee has grown, and what ongoing connection might look like. Closure helps both parties integrate the experience and move forward with intention.

The connection between mentorship and sponsorship

Mentorship is about *development*; sponsorship is about *advancement*. Both matter, and they often intersect.

A **mentor** has knowledge and will share it. A **sponsor** has power and will use it. Mentors help you grow; sponsors help you move.

Sponsors advocate publicly for their mentees — recommending them for key files, leadership roles, and opportunities that increase visibility and credibility. Mentors can evolve into sponsors once trust and proven performance exist.

For mentors, this may mean:

- Connecting mentees with opportunities such as board positions, articles to co-author, speaking engagements, or shadowing on a court appearance.
- Making introductions to clients, referral sources, or senior leaders.
- Naming their contributions in rooms when they aren't present.

However, sponsorship requires judgment. It should be earned through demonstrated ability, not bestowed prematurely. The strongest relationships integrate both roles: the mentor helps a lawyer grow into readiness; the sponsor ensures that readiness is recognized.

As one slide in this presentation puts it: *A mentor guides you privately; a sponsor champions you publicly.*

Mentoring Gen Z Lawyers

Mentoring Gen Z lawyers effectively calls for adapting to what will work best with this new generation. Based on *Susan R. George's* October 2025 ABA article and current trends, here are key ways to engage effectively:

1. Focus on Training and Shadowing

Gen Z lawyers crave practical exposure. They learn best by watching experienced lawyers in action — through shadowing, debriefing, and hands-on participation. Invite them to observe client meetings, negotiations, or mediations. Then, take time afterward to discuss what they saw and what they wondered about.

2. Embrace Short-Term, Targeted Mentorships

Rather than a single, long-term mentor, Gen Z often benefits from multiple short, skill-focused mentorships — each designed around a specific area (advocacy, writing, business development, or client communication). This modular approach builds confidence and variety.

3. Offer Access Through Flexible, Online Models

Try experimenting with online mentorship rosters such as the Law Society of Alberta's *Mentor Express* that let mentees connect with mentors for time-limited conversations. Accessibility and immediacy matter to Gen Z, who value on-demand connection and responsiveness.

4. Make Feedback a Continuous Loop

Gen Z expects frequent, constructive feedback — not as judgment, but as dialogue. A quick check-in after a file or hearing is often more valuable than a formal review six months later.

5. Connect to Purpose and Meaning

They want to understand *why* their work matters. Connect day-to-day assignments to the larger purpose of serving clients, advancing justice, or supporting the team.

6. Leverage Reverse Mentorship

Your Gen Z mentees bring insight into technology, social trends, and emerging client expectations. Invite their perspectives. The most successful mentoring relationships are two-way learning partnerships.

Common Challenges and How to Navigate Them

- **Over-Reliance:** Encourage mentees to think problems through before coming to you.
- **Time Pressure:** Protect your meeting times. Treat mentoring as a standing client appointment.
- **Confidentiality Lapses:** Be explicit about what stays private.
- **Mentor Mismatch:** If it isn't working, name it kindly and explore alternatives.

I learned a valuable acronym from lawyer coach Amy Binder: **W.A.I.T. — Why Am I Talking?** The more you listen, the more your mentee learns.

Bringing It All Together

Mentorship, when done well, is both a privilege and a practice. It's a space where skill, empathy, and honesty converge. It strengthens firms, builds confidence, and reminds us of our shared purpose as professionals.

As you reflect on your own approach, consider these questions:

- What kind of mentor do you want to be remembered as?
- Which skill could you strengthen next?
- What's one new experiment you'll try in your next mentoring conversation?

Each conversation is an opportunity to shape not just another lawyer's career, but the culture of our profession.

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For more resources: thelawyercoach.com

References

This article and the corresponding presentation draws on two sources:

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