

## [ DIVERSE pursuits ]

# PLANTING TREES AND CLIMBING LADDERS

by PAULINE E. HIGGINS

**L**awyers have a duty to develop the next generation of the legal profession. As they climb the ladder of success, they must pull others up behind them. They must plant trees underneath which they will never sit. Counsel should ask themselves how they are benefiting the profession and their workplaces by developing budding lawyers.

When I clerked at a firm during law school and when I later joined the firm, the partner to whom I was assigned exhibited confidence in my abilities, set high expectations of me and gave me work that stretched me from the outset. She included me in all meetings and brought me into the room on all discussions. She was serious, and I was busy with substantive work all the time.

She and other partners to whom I was assigned adopted a model of excellence. They set standards for, and with, me that developed my legal skills. They expected great work product and a basis for delivering results that remains with me and from which my clients, my employers and my community have benefited.

The legal skills, work ethic and delivering results for and to my benefactors are with me today, even though at one point I thought the work and long hours were going to kill me. When I reflect, I realize that she was developing my legal skills, and I can now claim the benefit of such hard work.

Why do some attorneys refuse to reach back and pull others up with them as they climb or to limit such efforts only to those of their own race and gender? If insecurity and fear bar lawyers from giving a hand up (not a handout) to new or junior associates — including attorneys of color and women — then the profession is in a sad state of affairs.

Also, when choosing junior lawyers to mentor, attorneys should not focus just on those with the best grades, the most prestigious schools or the most sparkling résumés. Rather, they should think about those in whose legal lives they can make a difference.

For me, the most significant issue in firms is the lack of development efforts for attorneys of color, women, and those who are different from the mainstream and “do not fit in.” This is where the climbing, pulling and tree planting can create immeasurable benefits.

Those in leadership in all legal arenas constantly must build junior attorneys’ fundamental skill sets and qualities of mind. Legal workplaces reap a permanent return on investment when experienced attorneys pull others up the ladder of success while they climb it and plant trees that

will spread their branches long after senior lawyers are gone. That’s true even if the junior attorney departs for a position elsewhere; the training remains with that exiting attorney, benefiting that lawyer and his or her future clients.

Investing in human assets is the most important investment firms, corporate or government legal departments, and nonprofits can make. Lawyers’ careers are not only about them. Each lawyer in a



position of responsibility has a serious obligation 1. to create opportunities for and support junior attorneys, and 2. to communicate candidly about attorneys who lack skills or are not developing professionally. Lawyers in leadership must ensure that each attorney develops a deep sense of belonging and each attorney receives the opportunity to learn, grow and thrive.

Some associates, just like some partners, will not make the cut. But that does not make it acceptable to cease efforts to develop them. Leadership must not stunt associates' growth potential at the inception of their careers by neglecting their development or assuming they will not improve their performance. Investment in skills and minds produces, personally and professionally, untold benefits and return.

This is where open and honest dialogue, even with respect to sensitive subject matters, is healthy. It is certainly healthier than trying to pretend that there are no lurking concerns.

For the long-term benefit of the junior lawyer and the firm, senior attorneys must give respectful, professional and candid feedback regarding writing and all critical components of success in a firm or a legal department. When reviewing work product, give immediate, constructive, beneficial feedback; timely review and timely feedback helps to boost morale and confidence. But do not personalize performance issues. Trashing a person's work benefits no one. It quickly kills the junior lawyer's spirit and confidence, and, in the end all parties lose.

## Bottom Line

Leadership can develop junior lawyers' minds and skills in a way that produces long-term benefits even when the bottom line is the main focus. A commitment to take care of every single human asset who enters the door can encourage strong financial results. Every person who enters and leaves a firm is a potential alumnus and client, with or without skills developed under the firm's tutelage.

Failure to pull along the next generation of attorneys robs associates whose skills lay dormant and cheats the firm and its clients of those undeveloped abilities. It is nearly impossible for associates who are not pulled and planted to compete with those who, from the outset, receive a helping hand by being mentored, nurtured

and pulled up the ladder of success by a senior lawyer climbing it. The playing field is, therefore, uneven in the absence of conscious and conscientious efforts to ensure equal opportunities for all. That inequity becomes more heightened when peers climb higher and branch out more quickly, not because they are brighter but because they are pulled along by a climber and tended by someone who knows the mightiest oak began as a small seedling.

If leaders create an equitable environment and an even playing field, offering true mentoring and training for all, they will see associates confident in their skills for serious business development, less turnover, a productive environment, more contented people and an improving reputation. Clients will benefit from the wisdom of the crowds and the value of differences.

Attorneys should take time to reflect on how many trees they have planted over the span of their legal careers. Each lawyer should ask himself or herself: When have I intervened to make a difference in the legal life of a new or junior associate? With whom have I shared my hard-won legal skills through tutoring and mentoring? In which human asset have I invested? Are those I have mentored now mentoring junior associates in turn?

No attorney attained leadership status alone. Each attorney must pull the next generation of lawyers along as he or she climbs the ladder of success. Lawyers in leadership roles are called to plant trees under which they may never sit. If they fail, the next generation will look back and ask why. 



*Pauline E. Higgins is a partner in and chief diversity officer of Lam Lyn & Philip in Houston.*