

# Resilience in 2021: Mentorship, Perseverance and Growth

Pat your head and rub your belly. Now, get a friend to throw dodgeballs at you. Now, try not to blink. Sometimes practising law while juggling other responsibilities feels like that. Think of the same example but with another friend who tags the ball thrower and takes him out. Easier on you? Yes.

The practice of law should not be ventured alone. Just because we are in the midst of a pandemic does not mean we have to practice in isolation. Regardless of your level of experience, having a good mentor makes it all a little less daunting.

Your ongoing mastery of legal skills, practice management development, and growth in times of challenge and adversity partly depend on your support system. In Angela Duckworth's book, *Grit, The Power of Passion and Perseverance*<sup>1</sup>, she talks about empirical studies that demonstrate that intellect and natural talent are overemphasized, and coaching and mentorship are just as if not more important to the ultimate successes of the individual. Duckworth discusses many examples of the value of coaching, nurturing, and mentorship to carry someone along the way to achieving their goals far in excess of what their 'natural talents' or intellect might otherwise predict. Mentorship, be it an informal or formal relationship, has been an important facet of every successful and efficient professional's experience.

We decided to interview four talented and wise lawyers about the most important elements of a strong and healthy mentorship relationship. We wanted insight from the perspective of the mentor and also the mentee. The CPD will unfold in a question and answer style. Challenges related to practice management are constantly evolving, and can be exacerbated by major life or other events such as a pandemic being thrown into the mix. In our pre-interviews with each panelist, we were striving to determine what each thought about what and how to make the most of the mentorship relationships you want to cultivate. We asked questions aimed at finding out how you continue to grow (and prosper) in 2021. In reviewing the interviews we undertook with each panelist, certain themes surfaced. Some of what came of our interviews is summarized in general terms below.

1. Mentorship Can Come from Different Places & in Different Forms but always requires thoughtfulness

*"Without effort, your talent is nothing more than unmet potential. Without effort, your skill is nothing more than what you could have done but didn't."*

*- Duckworth, Angela. Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance.*

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<sup>1</sup> Toronto, Ontario, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2018

- What is necessary is thoughtfulness about what you're offering as a mentor or what you're looking for as a mentee. It is necessary to invest effort into assessing what you want to get out of the mentor and who might best be able to meet your needs.
- One panelist will talk about the need to want to be a mentor, the importance to her about keeping an open-door policy, and how she views mentorship as a team effort - a collaboration of sorts (lawyers of varying levels, staff).
- One panelist will talk about the need for regular and ongoing self-evaluation by the mentee to thoughtfully determine what is needed from the mentor and which of those needs may be met by the mentor. Perhaps the mentorship relationship ends up evolving into a peer-to-peer relationship.
- One panelist will describe how mentorship can and should include informal relationships as well. As a less-experienced lawyer, it is important to have more than one person you trust to expand your knowledge, practice management, and your way of thinking?

## 2. The Recipe: Ingredients Common to All Good Mentorship Relationships

*"Our Potential Is One Thing. What We Do With It Is Quite Another."*

*- Duckworth, Angela. Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*

- We all have the potential to achieve greater expertise in our practice areas, to work more efficiently and to generally get more enjoyment from the practice of law. Once you identify your goals, use your mentor to achieve them. That's the point of mentorship.
- One panelist notes for the Mentors, that you should not just be the Mentee's sounding board but also their promoter and champion. It is a responsibility that goes beyond reactivity, and answering questions in a rote fashion. Take on the role as you would a client, with a sense of duty, and as a fiduciary.
- Likewise, for the Mentee, ask yourself, why do you want to be mentored and what are you looking to gain? Who will end up being your most successful mentor will be driven by your needs and goals.
- One panelist will talk about the need for mentor self-reflection. Know your strengths and weaknesses. You should be ok with feeling vulnerable as a mentor and teacher (to show that you are also still learning, adjusting your practice from time to time).
- The need to set boundaries and establish concrete plans for how you will communicate with your mentor / mentee is a theme that arose amongst all of the panelists.
- The panelists will share different experiences that lend themselves to different styles of learning: the traditional work-based model that might exist for the mentee whose goal is to deepen his or her expertise, exploratory learning (asking questions to answer questions), and other styles and models. Different mentors will give you different styles of teachable moments.
- Taking the time on a regular basis is key both for the mentor and the mentee.
- If you are the mentor, engaging through healthy active listening is key.

- A mentor must be flexible and adaptable to a certain extent. Tailoring the advice and learning opportunities for the particular mentee must take into account the personal preferences of both people in the relationship.
- The relationship might be a traditional professional, work-based (substantive) relationship.
- The mentor should take an active interest in assisting with development of all aspects of the mentee's career and improving practice management.
- Consider how as a Mentor you intend to clearly and regularly send the message that you are approachable/available.

### 3. Mentorship in the Zoom era? Being Busy Even in a Pandemic Does Not Mean Quarantining from Mentorship

*"When It Comes To How We Fare In the Marathon Of Life, Effort Counts Tremendously"*

*- Duckworth, Angela. Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*

- We all continue to practice law remotely to some extent (perhaps more limited for some) nearly 12 months since the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern (Coronavirus Disease or "COVID-19"). Panelists were asked what strategies are particularly important for a thriving mentorship relationship due to practice management challenges brought about by COVID-19.
- A tailored approach to communication that works for both the mentor/mentee must be reconsidered in light of any limitations due to remote working conditions.
- What is key is ensuring scheduled, regular checkpoints even remotely or by some other means. Panelists will share their own experiences and strategies in this regard.
- One panelist identifies that proactive and prompt communication with the mentee should be treated much like you would treat a client. Be more aware of the need to check in on the mentee's well-being, however that can happen. In the pandemic, there are ways to connect (coffee, walk, video meeting)
- Scheduling check-ins at the very least once per month was identified.
- There are easy check-points and teaching experiences that may be arranged by simply remembering to ask the Mentee to participate or "shadow" on something the Mentor already had planned that might not seem like an ideal teaching experience but would still provide experience to the mentee.

The panelists all have different backgrounds and have graciously agreed to share their experiences and wisdom as it concerns mentorship. There is a lot of literature on the art of mentorship, but hearing from those well-respected lawyers within our own community will hopefully get you thinking about your own goals and provide you with valuable insight into how you might find growth in your own approach, notwithstanding that things in 2021 continue to look a little different.

We look forward to having you join us at the 2021 MBA Mid-Winter Conference!

-The Manitoba Bar Association, Women Lawyers' Forum Section