

CATCH A RISING STAR

Put Some Mentors in Your Pocket, and Save Them for a Rainmaker Day

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TODAY, TOM DEMETRIO IS A well-known plaintiffs lawyer in Chicago who shares top billing on the firm marquee with his mentor, Phil Corboy. When he graduated from law school decades ago, however, Demetrio was an unknown and Corboy was already a successful attorney

running his own law firm.

How did Demetrio get from there to where he is today? The secret, he says, is an approach that young attorneys can still emulate—with a bit of luck: hard work and finding the right lawyer, or lawyers, to work with.

It's difficult if not impossible for most fledgling legal eagles to launch a successful career on their own straight out of law school. But by forming alliances with more experienced attorneys, they can learn



what they need to know to establish themselves in the profession and prove their value to their employers.

"From a young associate's standpoint, the challenge is: 'How do I identify who those partners are?'" says Deborah McMurray, who runs a Dallas-based legal consulting firm.

"A lot of times, the associates don't really know who the most political players in the firm are. The person who gets the most attention isn't necessarily the biggest rainmaker."

To get to know potential mentors, associates should hone their conversational skills and ask in-depth questions, she says, preferably in a social setting where there is time to talk. For example, McMurray says, ask someone, "What was the defining moment that got you where you are today?" Or, "What was the choice you didn't make but wished you would have made?"

Demetrio says he benefited from the guidance offered through a mentorship he developed while still in law school. A judge with whom Demetrio had interned talked to Corboy, who then offered Demetrio a job the day they met.

"I got real lucky," says Demetrio, who started work at Corboy's firm later that same day. He credits Corboy, as well as others at the firm, with helping him learn the necessary skills. "The first job is the most critical one because you are going to learn the work habits, ethics and civility of the people you're most closely aligned with, and they stick with you throughout your career."

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH SUCCESS

TO FIND SIMILAR MENTORS, DEMETRIO SUGGESTS BECOMING active in a bar association. "You network, and you meet extraordinary people you can benefit from, if you take the time," he says. "Plus, it's cheap. When you first get out of law school, the dues are nothing."

Another option for litigators is reading transcripts of trials handled by lawyers they admire, Demetrio says. "Ask for them—that's all you have to do," he says. "Lawyers are pretty generous with their work product."

McMurray recommends guidance by several law firm mentors, rather than staking a future on a single partner's success. "Select two or three different people who may have different strengths," she says. Besides offering diversified training, a group of mentors also helps preclude "aligning yourself too closely with a lawyer who may leave" the firm.

Otherwise, "All of a sudden, you've tied your star to someone else's, and you're left in the lurch," McMurray says. "You might be a senior associate, and there are a bunch of partners who don't know who you are and what you can do."

She and Demetrio say young lawyers should recognize that they are in charge of their careers. Orchestrate it, they say, rather than focusing just on meeting deadlines and billable hours quotas.

"You're the author of your future and how much you want to dedicate to it," Demetrio says. "If you can find that person who will take the time to guide you—and it's a person you want to be guided by—jump on it, even if it's a lower-paying job opportunity. ... To me, that's more important than taking \$125,000 and slaving away without direction." ■