

CHICAGO LAWYER®

MODERN MENTORING

ADAPTATION IS KEY TO LAWYER'S SUCCESS

BY CHRIS RUYSS

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hen Allyson Cox started her legal career at Smith LaCien LLP, she was eager to make a good impression. As the firm's first female

lawyer, she felt she had much to prove.

When Carla Colaianni, a veteran lawyer, joined the firm a year later, she and Cox quickly bonded through a shared love of cats and Italian culture. They also faced some unique challenges met by female attorneys at all stages of their careers.

Their relationship has evolved from a friendship between office neighbors to a mutually-beneficial mentorship. They have grown and adapted through changing circumstances and career stages. Despite their differing levels of experience, Cox and Colaianni turned to one another for advice and support on case strategy, technical procedures, and engagement with the legal community — including their participation in the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, volunteering and attending networking events and meetings whenever possible.

The two push each other to prioritize work-life balance in stressful times, and to strive for leadership opportunities and development in a variety of ways. Due to the time constraints of working at Smith LaCien, an active catastrophic personal injury practice, they eschew the formalities of regular meetings and traditional feedback mechanisms for something referred to as "modern mentoring."

Smith LaCien LLP is a Chicago-based law firm that concentrates in medical malpractice, wrongful death, transportation accidents, traumatic birth injuries, and mass torts. The firm has a lengthy track record of achieving exceptional results for clients, with more than \$3 billion in verdicts and

settlements, and over 150 cases with results in excess of \$1 million.

The phrase was adapted by attorney Ida Abbott, a recognized leader in the field of lawyer mentoring and the author of "The Lawyer's Guide to Mentoring." The book, first published in 2018, is considered a comprehensive resource on modern mentoring practices for lawyers.

Previously, mentoring was seen as a one-on-one process. It was long-term, top-down, and all-purpose, directed primarily at new and junior lawyers. It was concentrated on professional learning and development, according to Abbott. While development often remains the goal today, the approach has changed. Mentoring can take place between two people or within a group. Mentoring relationships are formed and conducted online as well as in person, and the relationships sometimes switch roles entirely.

"Everyone who practices in our field has a unique perspective and valuable insight to offer. That is why it is so important to connect with other lawyers," Colaianni said. "One way is to ask good questions."

At an American Association for Justice meeting for medical malpractice attorneys, Colaianni did just that.

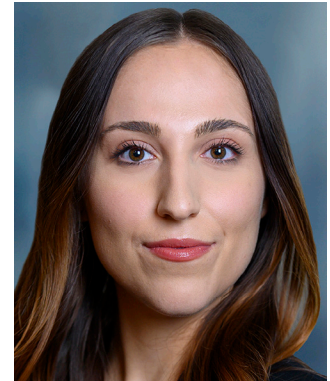
"It was fascinating to hear from top trial attorneys about the issues and challenges they're dealing with in their own practices and to share my own," she said.

That type of mentoring has a name — peer mentoring. It is a non-hierarchical form of mentoring in which two or more colleagues support and learn from each other.

Other modern mentoring models, which may be used independently or combined, include mentoring circles, virtual mentoring, and episodic mentoring. Also known as "situational" or



Carla Colaianni



Allyson Cox

"flash" mentoring, episodic mentoring is a single, brief learning encounter between an experienced lawyer and a younger one. The benefits gleaned from such an exchange cannot be overstated.

Cox combines peer mentoring, mentoring circles and episodic mentoring to complement her experience with Colaianni. Through her involvement in the Chicago Bar Association's Young Lawyers Section: Women in Law Committee, she helps to develop programming on legal-related issues for its members — often by bringing in more seasoned attorneys from multiple practice areas to guide young lawyers on a variety of topics. The group also launched a quarterly "Truth Sessions" meeting, during which young female lawyers can meet informally over wine and food, and share their firm experiences and struggles. They also exchange ideas and advice in a low-pressure setting.

Virtual mentoring has come into its own thanks to video conferencing and screen-sharing tools. Participants can join from anywhere. Not surprisingly, mentoring programs are often operated at the direction, or under the auspices, of state bar associations and state judiciaries, including virtual op-

tions. It's a boon for lawyers in remote areas, niche practices, or multi-office law firms, and for telecommuters for whom face-to-face mentoring may not be practical.

For example, the Diversity Scholarship Foundation has a First Generation Mentor Program. Cox took on her own virtual mentee last year, a first-generation law student in Indiana. The mentee was completing her final year of law school and getting ready for the bar exam.

The benefits of mentoring can last a lifetime. Early on in her career, Colaianni worked alongside a highly successful female trial lawyer who started her career at a time when few women became litigators. She would generously share her strategies, including how to present your case — and yourself — in court.

Colaianni recalled: "Since we were both small in stature, she taught me the importance and the art of standing out in a sea of other lawyers to make my presence known, and my voice heard."

Colaianni now takes pride in passing on the important lessons she has learned, knowing Cox will share her own insights with other young lawyers in the future.