

A Grand Approach to In-house Practice

The national holiday most people associate with September is Labor Day. That's understandable considering its role as the unofficial end of summer and its purpose of honoring the great driver of our nation's progress: the American worker. Most in-house counsel, when asked to name the September holiday most relevant to their career, would obviously name Labor Day as well. Because of our workloads, it would probably be the top choice for corporate counsel regardless of month!

But it may surprise you to learn that Labor Day is not the only September holiday relevant to in-house counsel. That other national holiday is Grandparents Day, which falls on the first Sunday after Labor Day. The statute creating Grandparents Day was signed into law by President Jimmy Carter in 1978 and states, in part, that the holiday's purpose is "to help children become aware of [the] strength, information and guidance [that] older people can offer."

This is certainly a nice sentiment, but how can this be pertinent to our work as corporate counsel? While, thankfully, due to the same efforts that led to the creation of Labor Day, there are no children in our workplaces to whom we can provide "strength, information and guidance," there are plenty of adults. Part of our obligation to our companies is not just doing the work in front of us (i.e., the "law" part of jobs), but also doing what we can to make our department, and our company as a whole, a more effective operation. That is the leadership part of our role. Therefore, we must acknowledge and accept that mentoring — providing that "strength, information and guidance" — is an important way we can bring more value to our companies.

The most obvious people we work with who could benefit from mentoring are the lawyers who are new to our departments. If they are also new to the practice of law, then they most assuredly will benefit from any knowledge you can share with them.

But given the typical resume of in-house counsel, it is more likely that the new lawyer has practiced for at least a few years and is simply new to in-house practice. As we all know, in-house practice is a unique type of legal work, and lawyers new to in-house life can be effective

and productive members of the legal team much sooner once they learn the idiosyncrasies of representing a company from the inside. And that is where your involvement starts.

Your company doesn't have to have a formal mentoring program for you to be an effective instructor. And it doesn't have to be the workplace equivalent of asking them out on a date either. Casual is best. Simply let the new person know that you are willing to share with them things that you wish you had known when you started your in-house career. You don't have to sit and wait for them to come to you either. Send them an article with a note that you think they might find it interesting and helpful. I have found that *ACC Docket* and *www.acc.com* are both prime sources of useful material.

Another technique is to ask for their assistance with a project you are tackling. While this may end up taking more time initially than if you did it yourself, this investment of time will pay dividends in the long run, as your department and your own workload can only benefit from having more people who can handle a variety of matters.

Mentoring is even more valuable in small legal departments that may rarely bring on new lawyers. In such places, non-lawyers (e.g., paralegals) may be tasked with matters for which they have not had formal training (e.g., simple contract review). If that is the case in your office, then your ability to teach and provide guidance becomes even more essential.

The mentoring does not even have to be legal in nature. For instance, the lawyer new to your company may have more legal experience than you do. Nevertheless, sharing your knowledge of the company's culture and business can be just as important to the development of a well-functioning legal department as imparting legal information.

So, this month, as we honor our grandparents, whose wisdom and caring have done so much to shape our own lives for the better, please remember that one way to express that esteem is to take their example and apply it in our own lives. Our workplaces provide an excellent opportunity to do just that. And it won't involve buying any ice cream or knowing any knock-knock jokes. Unless you work for a really interesting company. **ACC**

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