
MEET A MENTOR: JONATHAN LAWRENCE

In a professional world where one hour of a two-hour client pitch can be a discussion about diversity, Jonathan Lawrence (Restructuring & Insolvency Partner at K&L Gates, member of their firmwide and London Diversity & Inclusion committees and co-chair of their firmwide LGBT+ sub-committee), discusses the importance of inclusion and how mentoring can help not only your career, but also your mental health.



Why did you want to be a mentor in the A&O Mentoring Programme?

The starting point was looking back at the mentors I've worked with through my career and how they've helped me. I'm very happy to be able to give back in that context to people who want to take advantage of the A&O Mentoring Programme. If you have experienced a difficult situation or a difficult period in work and thought "I wish I'd had someone outside the situation to talk to", then you can pay that forward to someone else by becoming a mentor. It is a great feeling and an amazing opportunity to see people progress and develop.

How many mentors have you had?

There are formal mentors and informal mentors so it's tricky to put a number on it. Sometimes you can have a mentor without ever even mentioning "mentoring" because you have a relationship with them and you don't need to formalise it in that way.

Do you get different things from a formal and an informal mentor?

Yes, in informal mentoring you might only need to bounce an idea off someone or say "I'm having difficulty with this situation, how would you handle it?" On the other hand, I've used formal mentoring in the run-up to particular stages in my career, such as promotions or particular pitches for clients.

What do people gain from being mentored?

Often we get caught up in the detail of a problem or in issues with personalities and we don't see the wood for the trees. Mentoring allows you to step outside the situation. Often a good mentor is just drawing out ideas and strategies you've already got within yourself but by verbalising them with a mentor you can come to your own conclusion. That's often a much better way because it's a solution you've automatically already bought into and are able to carry out.

It's important to have mentors available at all stages of your career. For a junior person, having a mentor who is two years further on is going to be far more relevant and helpful than, say, a mentor who is a senior partner. It's essential to have senior role models and senior buy-in to all of this but the gulf between a newly qualified and a senior partner is sometimes too wide to bridge when it comes to giving relevant and actionable feedback.

This month's newsletter is all about diversity, which is a subject close to your heart. What changes in how diversity is handled have you seen since you joined the law?

In some areas there has been an amazing transformation. In other areas, unfortunately, not a lot seems to have changed. On the positive side, when I first started my career, there wasn't any mention of LGBT+ issues; law firms and clients didn't really have network or affinity groups and now they do. That's been a huge transformation.

I know that A&Out, A&O's LGBT+ affinity group (of which I'm proud to be an alumni member), does great work at A&O to ensure that LGBT+ people and allies have a network. A&Out has over 100 members and 700 allies across the world. They meet with clients, peers and others outside the firm. Many also come together to work on pro bono projects to end LGBT+ discrimination around the world.

But there are still issues that need to be addressed. We still have trainee solicitors who arrive in law firms and go back into the closet when they have been out at university. I have anecdotal evidence of parents telling children "Don't come out at work, you don't know what is going to happen. Just be careful" and so on. It is eminently sad but what we can do to compensate is to create an atmosphere not just around the LGBT+ diversity strand but also around other diversity strands, to show you should be yourself. It's important to be authentic. In a lawyer-client relationship, trust is paramount and part of that is being transparent and open about who you are, whilst obviously always being professional.

What are the wider benefits of embracing diversity?

Diversity is now a strength in a legal career because clients are very open about their demand for deal teams of people who have different experiences and backgrounds to bring to their issues and teams that look like their own customers and clients. They don't want the group-think of five identical people. We have clients who look at billing guides on matters and will literally go through person by person saying "Well, in the pitch you said that the female junior lawyer would be working on the matter, but I can't see that she's got any time down here. Why is that?" They will go into the granular detail of who is doing the work and gaining good work experience, checking that law firms aren't putting forward diverse pitch teams but then just giving the work to the usual suspects.

We even had a pitch last year where the General Counsel of the client wanted to talk about diversity and inclusion for an hour of a two-hour pitch meeting. You've got to have a lot to talk about to be able to speak for an hour about diversity within your firm!

How do affinity groups help?

I think it's wonderful how the groups have grown. Having an affinity group or an employee resource group in a firm is an immediate sign that it's okay to be LGBT+ or have another diversity characteristic. A lot of us have more than one! Discussing diversity should be part of the induction process and even before that – in the recruitment materials and the recruitment process. But making people feel included is equally important. Law firms are notorious for marking a difference between lawyers and non-lawyers – even that phraseology is a bit suspect – so making sure that all staff are invited to events or are able to join groups is vital for having a cohesive working environment.

Do you find that having a mentor helps you maintain a mental health balance?

It certainly provides a safety valve. A mentor is someone to whom you can bring difficult situations that you maybe don't want to talk to your immediate colleagues about. One real issue with mental health is silence or bottling up issues. In my firm we have mental health buddies – in the same way we have physical first aiders – trained by the charity MIND. They are scattered through the office's teams and are someone to talk to or go out for a coffee with just to discuss a situation.

What would you say to encourage someone thinking of being mentored?

The A&O Mentoring Programme has a rich population – there are mentors of all different ages, levels and experiences and the Alumni team can match you up with someone who fits your level. You don't have to think of a mentor as being someone extremely senior or someone whose life doesn't resemble your own. The breadth of back stories of mentors means there's going to be someone who has just gone through an experience like you or has a background that you want to look into; for example, you might be in private practice but looking to move in-house or vice versa, or you might have had a career break and want to get back to work. There will be someone who fits your needs. You might not hit it off with the first mentor you meet, but that doesn't matter and it shouldn't put you off. You can try again with someone else.