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Early Career Professionals—Learning to Learn: Becoming a Better Health Law Mentee

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Upon first darkening the door of my law school, I was overwhelmed with considerations on how to succeed in both my legal education and in my subsequent legal career. The advice that us 1Ls received stacked up as high as the pile of books that our professors dropped into our arms. However, upon graduating, I realized that while all of the ancient wisdom imparted to me (usually through an informational lunch with free pizza) was helpful, one piece of advice stood out more than the others: “Learn how to be a law student.”

I realized that I could not learn the law until I mastered the art of active learning. Just like anything in life, being teachable requires practice and cannot be achieved passively. Yes, learning how to learn is an ironic—and somewhat meta—concept. However, it makes intuitive sense. As a law student, your strategy in taking notes in your 1L second semester likely looked different than in your first semester. That is because you internalized the information you received from your first set of exams and subsequently changed your focus to the types of subject matter that you knew would be useful for a future exam.

Learning is a skill that too few of us (myself included) try to improve upon or even consider developing. To that end, below are some techniques I have picked up throughout the years that might aid your journey to become the type of mentee that you would like to mentor one day.

Be Present

While the nature of schooling has changed in our post-COVID world, students in the traditional in-

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person model need to show up to class every day. That is because educators know that there are enormous benefits to having physical interactions in our otherwise virtual world. Work is no different.

If you have the option to physically be in the office, then you should do it as much as possible. More work opportunities present themselves when you are interacting daily with different coworkers, clients, and other individuals. Not only will it build your network, but your attention span and capacity to learn will also likely be higher as opposed to if you are always communicating through a screen. Additionally, you may find that such small, daily interactions give you more of a sense of camaraderie and community.

If your job is remote, you can still find ways to connect with people. Be intentional about your communications and build in time to have the sorts of conversations that would otherwise occur organically in the office. While sometimes it is necessary to go off camera, try to have as much face-to-face time as possible so that others remember that there is a face behind the screen.

Always Take Good Notes

When I started law school, I wrote down everything I could. Unfortunately, that just led to serious hand cramping and a verbatim transcript that had no organized thoughts behind it.

Taking notes is critically important in the health law sphere, but taking good notes is even more important. Helpful notes are the ones that demonstrate that you first processed the applicable information and cemented those thoughts by hand. Though it goes without saying, this requires active listening. Also, you cannot take notes unless you have your go-to pen or keyboard. Always be sure you're equipped to take notes, both in and out of the office.

Ask (a Lot of) Questions

The constant refrain students hear from educators is that if you have a question about something, then chances are someone else does too. This notion is important if you have questions about a situation in a team setting. However, it is even more imperative if you are the one responsible for producing a deliverable.

Health law is not easy, and many health law practitioners, while experienced in the legal field, do not have much experience working other jobs in the health care industry. The health law sphere consists of entities with an alphabet soup's worth of acronyms. There is a labyrinth of perplexing and overlapping regulatory schemes consisting of unfamiliar medical and technical terminology. Not only is it okay to ask questions—it is expected. Otherwise, proceeding with no direction is like running headfirst into the jungle without a map. Not only is it inefficient—it is risky.

Get a Mentee Yourself!

Though it may seem paradoxical at first, this is a tried-and-true technique for learning that learners often undervalue. Being able to cogently explain concepts forces your brain to reconcile with what it

actually knows. Having someone else ask pointed questions prods and shapes your own thoughts until they are digestible by someone who is unfamiliar with the subject. In a way, this process transports you to the hot seat in a law school classroom taking part in the Socratic method.

You do not even need to make a formal mentor-mentee relationship. If you are in the workforce, you can discuss matters with a less experienced coworker. If you are a law student, you can discuss ideas with classmates. Further, if you really want a challenge, then you can try teaching it to a person who does not have any knowledge of the subject matter whatsoever!

Say Thank You

Everyone leads busy lives. In health care and the practice of law, time is incredibly valuable. When people take time out of their day to teach you, it is a measurable investment. This is especially true when they offer constructive criticism, which shows that they have thought critically about your efforts and are willing to have a potentially uncomfortable conversation with you for your betterment.

Learning is not just something that we do during our academic careers, at professional conferences, and through orientations for new jobs. Instead, learning is a lifelong process. Therefore, just as thinkers and innovators have reworked processes over time, we should constantly reflect upon, and take steps towards, optimizing this process.

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