

NEWS

How a Big Law Firm Is Linking Parental Leave, Mentorship

By Robert Storace

In an effort to highlight its successful mentoring program and start similar initiatives, powerhouse firm Robinson & Cole held its first all-attorney retreat Saturday, focusing on mentoring.

More than 185 attorneys, or about 90 percent of the firm's lawyers, took part in the firm's first all-lawyer retreat in 21 years. While the firm has periodic partner retreats, Saturday's endeavor in Westbrook put the focus on mentoring, reverse mentoring and a new mentoring program for attorneys taking parental leave.

Attorneys heard stories at the retreat of successful mentor/mentee relationships that have helped the Hartford-based firm continue to have one of Big Law's longest retention rates.

Partner Keisha Palmer said the successful mentor/mentee bond she formed with partner Jacqueline Scheib nine years ago is one of the reasons she was so eager to join the firm out of law school.

Palmer, who relayed her experience with Scheib at the retreat in front of her peers, told the



Keisha Palmer and Steve Goldman of Robinson & Cole. Courtesy photos

Connecticut Law Tribune Tuesday that Scheib, who at the time was her informal mentor, "introduced me to a lot of people at the firm. I learned about the firm through her and its culture and environment."

Law school, Palmer said, "does not necessarily prepare you for the day-to-day practice of law. It does not give you the skills of transferring something practical that helps your clients. You need someone to guide you in that respect and that

is what Jackie did. It's great to have someone who is your advocate while everyone is getting to know you."

Most Robinson & Cole attorneys are mentors, mentees or both. Every associate at the firm has two mentors. While most law firms have mentoring programs, managing partner Steve Goldman told the *Connecticut Law Tribune* Tuesday that "what is unusual is spending a whole day talking about this

topic as one of the most important things we are doing.”

Goldman said active mentor/mentee programs have shown to keep attorneys at the firm, the state’s second oldest, and lets them know their insight is invaluable. One initiative rolled out this past weekend at the retreat: mentors for attorneys preparing to take parenting leave.

“The feedback we’ve gotten from women going out on maternity leave is that it can be a real stressful time. It’s obvious that having a baby has its own built-in stress. There is a lot of stress but no automatic person to talk to about it,” Goldman said. Now, beginning immediately, Goldman said that person going on leave, usually the expectant mother, will be provided with a mentor to discuss all aspects of that leave so the employee is not doing it alone.

“The mentor will ask things like what the attorney is working on; what is their workload; do we have someone who is a backup if they go out sooner than expect-

ed?” Goldman said. “Oftentimes, those going on parenting leave are worried they will leave someone, whether a partner or a client, in the lurch. They just need someone to talk this all through with them.”

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The Robinson & Cole culture also encourages reverse mentoring, Goldman said. He said there are many things established and longtime attorneys at

the firm can learn from newer attorneys.

“Senior lawyers can learn about the diversity gaps from junior lawyers,” said Goldman, who acknowledged many of the more senior attorneys at the firm are not as diverse as many of the junior and younger attorneys at the firm. “Senior attorneys can also learn about the technology aspect of things from the junior attorneys. The junior attorneys tends to know more about technology than older attorneys.”

Mentoring and the retention of attorneys is intertwined, Goldman said.

“People want to stay with us because they feel there is a path for them to succeed at Robinson & Cole,” Goldman said. “We want even those that have left us to have a rewarding experience while they are with us.” ■

Robert Storace covers legal trends, lawsuits and analysis for the Connecticut Law Tribune. Follow him on Twitter @RobertSCTLaw or reach him at 203-437-5950.