

How to benefit from a mentorship programme



Dr. Ruth Bloch-Riemer

Bär & Karrer's tax partner offers advice on developing a mentorship programme and why lawyers can benefit from participating

In the latest *IFLR* Women in Business Law interview, Dr Ruth Bloch-Riemer, partner at Swiss law firm Bär & Karrer, shares about her experience as a mentee and mentor, what it takes to develop a strong mentorship programme, and how participants can get the most from mentorships.

Can you share about your experience as a mentor/mentee?

I've had a mentor at Bär & Karrer for 10 years. I was fresh off from my bar exam, and my line manager provided coaching and mentorship over the years to help me expand my skillset, such as networking and business development. He also helped me with my further education to become a certified tax expert and achieve a PhD in law, while being open to my flexible working schedule – which allowed me to pursue my career with three young children.

These are also aspects that I now convey to my team members and mentees. I think it's important for lawyers to not only focus on developing technical skills and further education, but also expand their skills in getting new business and building networks. These are skills that young lawyers, especially women lawyers, can benefit from participating in mentorship programmes.

How do lawyers benefit from a mentorship programme?

The most important aspect is for mentees to feel that they have support and to have a sounding board when they want advice on something they want to implement. It's good to be able to hear from a mentor on the pros and cons of an idea. As a mentor, I focus on empowering my mentee to achieve their goals, but not necessarily give hands-on support.

Why do you say that women lawyers, especially, can benefit from participating in mentorships?

In Switzerland, while more than 50% of law graduates and many junior associates are women, but by the time graduates take their bar exams and perhaps pursue a LL.M. programme, the ratio of female

and male lawyers is not so close to 50:50 anymore. Over time, many female lawyers transfer to less exposed jobs, partially with a significantly lower penum, or go on maternity leave and never come back. The quota of female partners then shrinks to only 10 to 15% of female partners at law firms.

One problem in Switzerland is that childcare is expensive. It cannot be taken for granted that the larger family environment is available and ready to provide meaningful support. Another challenge is society's approach to both parents working full-time or in a higher penum. Women, unfortunately, still often think that it's not possible to pursue a career and have a family. Unfortunately, that means women are fading out of the job market, especially talented women.

Through mentorships, women lawyers can open up and share about their experiences. Many questions often don't get asked because people are hesitant to ask them. I find that a mentorship is a good tool for women to discuss these questions. For business development and networking opportunities, we often see that men can participate in various formats but that women focus on other priorities. A mentorship provides women with a niche to build success and confidence where they are not as shy about asking questions regarding work-life balance or embarking on business development tasks such as doing a university lecture or writing an article.

But mentorships aren't limited to women only, men often find themselves in situations where they need advice. Therefore, at Bär & Karrer, we explicitly also invite men to participate in the full range of diversity and inclusion related events as well as, in particular, the mentorship programme.

Is it useful to have a mentor outside of one's own firm?

At least initially, it's better to have a mentor within one's firm because every firm has its own dynamics. Having someone within the firm who knows about it is useful, but it can also be useful to have someone outside the firm, such as an in-house counsel or someone not necessarily with a legal background. Outside mentorship proves to be advantageous for more senior lawyers who are aspiring to be partners and want an external view, market feedback and someone with more managerial and leadership skills.

What tips do you have for someone who is or wants to be a mentor?

It all boils down to a matter of self-confidence. This is something that you want to instill in your mentee. It's also useful to have a structured approach to provide support, and to use tools such as a mindmap as a framework for visualising ideas and brainstorming.

It's important to keep in mind that a mentorship programme is for mentees to develop themselves, not for the mentors to help them solve any issues. The mentor is also there to develop pre-existing ideas a mentee might have and help shape and implement these.

Can you tell us more about the mentorship programme at Bär & Karrer?

It started off as an informal programme but recently became more formalised after a group of junior lawyers at the firm developed it as a "bring your own initiative" programme where staff came up with new ideas for the firm. It was welcomed by the partners, HR and support staff. Anyone new joining the firm and

any existing staff can participate at any time. Participants simply have to approach HR and tell them they are interested to have a mentor. The HR staff would then match a mentee with a mentor and they can meet up on a regular basis.

There are various methods of developing a mentorship depending on what the mentee wants to achieve. But there's usually a mentorship contract where the mentee lists out goals. The mentor provides a sounding board and offers input and insights. It's a tool to help people help themselves to grow and develop, whether it's work life balance, business development or general experience sharing. The programme has gone very well and is much appreciated by mentees and mentors. It's also a good opportunity for mentors to get feedback and pass on experience to the next generation of future senior lawyers and partners.

What advice do you have for firms that want to develop a mentorship programme?

Implementing a mentorship programme in a firm can help to capture talent. It's important to make sure that there is open dialogue, and participants can support each other, especially now as we go through such difficult times during Covid-19.

In addition to making sure logistics is well-planned, a good programme should include feedback to help it improve over time. There should be a go-to person if something goes wrong. In terms of content, it should be flexible to meet the individual needs of mentees. At Bär & Karrer, we hired a coach to support mentors in the kick-off session to help us clarify the role of mentors, and what it is and isn't. It's important to not think that a mentor is a mentee's formal counselor – there are issues that are beyond the scope of a mentorship. There also needs to be clarification that commitment to a mentorship is not road to partnership, and that there is transparency on equal treatment.