

Working group report: DEI mentorship





Context

The **South African General Counsel for Diversity & Inclusion (SA GC for D&I)** initiative aims to foster greater inclusivity within the legal professional community by providing a platform for corporate entities, law firms, groups of advocates, and other legal sector players to engage on critical diversity issues.

A key aspect of the initiative is the creation of working groups to facilitate comprehensive and multi-stakeholder conversations around critical themes linked to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the South African legal fraternity.

These working groups discuss topics proposed and voted on by members and partners to the initiative.

Each working group is tasked with using the discussions to create an output intended as a public good resource for those wanting to enhance DEI. This document is such an output and we encourage readers to share it with others in the South African legal fraternity who may benefit from its content.

This particular document is the fruit of the collaborative efforts of the “DEI mentorship programmes in the legal profession” working group, which concluded its work in late 2024.

The SA GC for D&I gratefully acknowledges the efforts of all of those who took part in these working group discussions and thanks their organisations for allowing them the time to do so.

The discussions within the working groups adhere to the “Chatham House” rule, ensuring the anonymity of individual contributors to the dialogue. For further information or to become part of the SA GC for D&I and its current or future working groups, visit www.sagcdi.co.za.

Context

What are “DEI mentorship programmes”?

DEI mentorship programmes are mentorship programmes which have considered and integrated DEI principles. DEI mentorship emphasises the importance of addressing the unique challenges and opportunities that are impacted by an individual's identity, including key aspects such as race, gender, and language. The goal is to create mentoring relationships that are context-specific, individual-centric, and cognisant of social dynamics, thus fostering personal and professional growth.

The “DEI mentorship programmes” working group

The working group was collaborative initiative aimed at exploring and enhancing the role of mentorship in promoting DEI within the South African legal community. Comprised of representatives from various legal and corporate entities, the group engaged in discussions around key themes such as the differentiation of DEI-focused mentorship from generic models, types of mentorship, and the critical elements necessary for the successful integration of DEI considerations into mentorship.

What is this document about?

This document introduces ‘mentor cards’ which visually describe different mentorship archetypes, offering a clear and fun framework for understanding and explaining different mentorship roles such as sponsors, coaches, and reverse mentors. By outlining the distinct benefits and expectations associated with each type of mentorship, the document aims to help both mentors and mentees set realistic expectations and achieve meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships that consider DEI principles.

Who will find this document useful?

Legal practitioners, from junior attorneys to senior partners, can use this guide to develop easily comprehensible mentorship relationships that emphasise DEI. Human Resources and Learning & Development teams will find it a valuable tool for enabling appropriate and impactful mentorship relationships that align the expectations of mentors and mentees.

There are different kinds of mentorship - all of which can be beneficial to an individual. Understanding them will help both mentors and mentees



Mentorship types

The working group members engaged in discussions on the different types of mentorship, which led to the selection and exploration of **four common mentor types**: Sponsors, Mentors, Buddies, and Reverse Mentors. Each type offers unique support dynamics, tailored to various aspects of personal and professional development.

High formality



Sponsor

Formal and structured mentorship relationship with a focus on advancing careers and providing guidance on making strategic decisions.



Mentor

Structured support focusing on balancing personal growth and professional goals.

Professional development



'Reverse' Mentor

A less formal relationship that helps build the bridge between junior and senior professionals in the industry.

Personal development



Buddy/Buddies

Informal support focusing on personal self actualisation and day-to-day guidance.

Low formality

Sponsor



A sponsor can help you advance your career in your organisation and your industry - or help you deepen your chosen specialisation.

This is an individual that backs you (including in leadership team meetings), guides you when you need to make difficult and important big-picture career decisions, and cheers you on.

A sponsor is an expert in tough love, and talks straight.

A sponsor relationship may be formal and structured - or not. You may have more than one sponsor.

Strengths



Deep understanding of your firm and industry

Strong, relevant networks

Career guidance

Straight talk

Mentor



A mentor helps you navigate your immediate context - your day-to-day experience at your level and in your firm.

A mentor shares their experiences with you and helps you grow your network and exposure in the firm.

A mentor gives practical actionable guidance where appropriate - but is equally often there as a sounding board to help you solve challenges and meet opportunities yourself.

Strengths

Excellent listening skills

Problem solving and co-solutioning



Relevant experience to share

Encouragement and enthusiasm

Buddy/Buddies



A buddy helps you with day-to-day engagement at work.

They show you where to find things you need, who to speak to for certain issues, and what to do in particular situations.

Your buddy is particularly important in your first few months as you get settled into your new role and/or organisation. They help make you comfortable and confident. They preempt your challenges and help you address them.

Strengths

Patient and thoughtful



Knowledge of the organisation

Good internal networks

An understanding of your role

'Reverse' Mentor



A 'reverse' mentor - sometimes called an 'upwards' mentor - is someone from a younger generation to you that helps you understand generational similarities and differences.

Too often, as we get more senior in our careers, we lose touch with younger staff and with generational changes. Having a reverse mentor helps you keep in touch with societal changes and provides you with the exposure needed to ensure you are optimally managing and leading your staff at all levels.

Strengths

Diversity of experience and perspective

Prepared to listen & learn, and to share

Good observation skills



Clearly articulate generational differences

Matching mentors and mentees is key to building strong mentoring relationships - here are some ideas to consider



1. Consider the recency of individuals' experiences

For example, for candidate attorneys, it may be more helpful for some aspects of mentoring to engage with a mentor who was relatively recently a candidate attorney themselves, rather than a director who may have been a candidate attorney when the industry was very different.



2. Be deliberate about considering aspects of identity in matching

For example, for minority candidates, there could be benefit from learning from someone with similar life experiences, especially when it comes to career navigation. In contrast, for 'reverse mentoring' - where the goal is exposure to differences - you may deliberately mismatch individuals to encourage learning.



3. Take intersectionality into account

Remember that everyone's identity is multifaceted - and just because two people share one aspect of identity (eg., race, gender, language, education, sexual orientation, etc.), it doesn't mean they will automatically be a good mentorship match.



4. Make it voluntary, give people choice, and allow for change

Both mentors and mentees should be voluntarily involved wherever possible. And they should have at least some agency in the matching process - don't force someone to mentor someone they don't feel comfortable mentoring, and vice versa. Finally, provide a mechanism for people to change mentors and mentees if required.



5. Make the matching process fun and give people sufficient information to make choices

For example, 'speed networking' events can allow people to meet multiple potential mentors/ mentees. Digital profiles, which include descriptions of experience or requests for mentorship goals, can also be valuable.



6. Don't leave everything to HR.

Collaboration across the business, and support of mentorship programmes from leaders, are critical to making them work.

Prompts to help you run a good check in with your mentor/ mentee

It can be difficult to maintain momentum in mentor/mentee check-in discussions. It's easy to over-prescribe check-in agendas so that they become tick box exercises; and it's easy to leave agendas so loose as to not be useful. If you find yourself stuck, try asking these questions:

How are your current cases/projects going?

Are you facing any challenges you would like to talk through?

What will/can you do differently tomorrow to meet those challenges?

Have you come across any ethical dilemmas worth discussing?

What skills are you working on developing at the moment?

Can I help you find resources or opportunities to develop further?

What obstacles are you facing in skills development? What will/can you do differently tomorrow to meet those challenges?

How is your legal sector networking going?

Can I help you with any networking guidance or introductions?

Are your career goals still relevant, or has your thinking about them evolved?

Do you need a thought partner to refine or set goals?

How is your work-life balance (including your physical and mental health) **and do you need to take any actions to change it in any way?**

Share your comments, feedback, and experiences with us on LinkedIn or via email at info@sagcdi.co.za.



A photograph of a woman in a wheelchair, wearing a yellow shirt, engaged in a conversation with two men in an office environment. One man is wearing a green shirt and the other a red and black plaid shirt. They are standing and looking at a tablet held by the woman. The background shows office desks with laptops and modern lighting. The image is partially obscured by a large yellow diagonal graphic element.

We would like to hear your feedback!

Get in touch with us at
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