

Why Mentoring Matters: Dechert's Andrew Wong

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“What are you going to do?”

The question just hung out there. It was a simple one. But it was asked not just by anyone, but by a person I looked up to, a person that I considered a mentor. I thought this person would be giving me answers about my future and providing me advice about my direction. And instead of sitting down in his office to get answers, all I was getting was another question.

How should I respond? What could I say? All I could really muster in response was basically the truth, a weak, “I don't know.”

The funny thing about this whole interaction and that question is that this person probably did not even know how important this time with him was to me, and what that question meant to my future and my development. At the time, I had just joined the firm, and had spent most of my career working with another team in a different practice group. I also did not have my own clients.

Nonetheless, despite our different positions at the firm, this corporate partner at Dechert always welcomed me to chat, from interactions in the hallway, to check-ins at various meetings. And this person always listened to me, and kept updated about my work, life, and what I was doing.

Not surprisingly, he knew that I was at a crossroads. I had always respected him for his leadership, vision, and experience. That is why I always took the time to go to his office to chat with him and hear about his experiences and get his advice. But this time, instead of advice, all I got was a question.

Through his question, however, he was the one who really forced me to confront my future and what I needed to do. It was not the first time someone had asked me this question, or that I had not asked that question myself. In fact, it came up in review and planning meetings all the time. Only this time it was different. Because of who it came from, I wanted to make sure I had a response.

A Single Question Can Be Important

Sometimes it is just a question that can get you started. And that is what did it for me.

I knew I needed to develop my own practice, clients, and expertise. With the firm and my mentor's support, I worked in one of our Asia offices reconnecting and developing contacts and potential clients.

I was introduced to our Asia partners, and their clients, and worked to understand the specific issues that typically arose in cross-border litigation, including jurisdictional issues and judgment enforcement.

As these internal contacts grew, so did my external ones. I took every meeting and phone call that I could.

Eventually I caught a few breaks and was retained by a client for a cross-border matter. That led to another engagement, until ultimately, I had a number of Asia-based clients and a small cross-border litigation practice.

Even if he did not know it at the time, his views, opinions, and the time he spent with me as I joined the firm and tried to understand where I fit in always stood out. That was what I felt being a good mentor was. And that is what I tell everyone that is—or wants to be—a mentor to think about.

It does not always take a lot of time, or require awkward, forced conversations. In my case, it was just being there, and knowing that your words and actions can have profound effects on those who see you as a mentor.

Tips on How to Be a Good Mentor

So, here are my three basic points of advice to those who do not see themselves as mentors, but who should consider it.

Be Available. You never know who will benefit from your advice. It could be that junior partner, associate down the hall, or even the paralegal or business service professional who is walking by you. You are a leader and looked up to. Keeping your door open and just saying hi and inviting a

conversation may be all that it takes for someone to benefit from your knowledge, advice, and words.

Be Honest. When you are giving advice, be honest and truthful with anyone seeking your assistance. Challenge the individual. Your questions and observations may be all the motivation and insight that individual needs. You are not required to always have the answers, to give advice, or to outline a path—it may just be listening. Many times, the answer may have been there all along, and like for me, it just took someone to challenge me to take a path forward.

Be Aware. Be aware that your words, actions, and thoughts matter. People watch you, and they are affected by you and your actions. In my experience, it was just watching the person who provided this advice to me—how successful he was as a leader, trusted adviser, and client confidant. Observing him, his interactions with others, and how he developed in each role—each of those things played a role in why his question to me was so impactful for my future.

In the end, mentorship can be as simple as being available, honest, and aware. And of course, it really started with a simple question.

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