

How The Mentor / Mentee Relationship Provides a Deeper Understanding of Collaborative Practice

Introduction:

There are different ways to get better at the Collaborative work that we do. We have taken our introductory Training and our 35-hour Mediation training, and likely attended conferences and / or other trainings. Another way for us to understand the work better and to get some first-hand experience is through the mentor / mentee experience.

King County Collaborative Law in Washington State has put in place a Mentor Program designed to match up experienced practitioners with practitioners who are early in their Collaborative Practice. The Mission Statement of the KCCL Mentoring Committee is:

To provide developmental partnerships to foster the professional growth of all Collaborative Law practitioners.

The mentor / mentee relationship can take different forms, including but not limited to:

Shadowing a Collaborative Case, Mentored by a Professional of the Same Profession;

One-on-One Mentorship Meetings; and

A Group Mentoring Relationship where one Experienced Practitioner Meets with a Group of Less Experienced Practitioners.

This blog post reports on the One-On-One Mentorship arrangement of Kevin Scudder and Ali Keller of Seattle, WA, our purpose being to show how valuable the relationship is to both the Mentor and the Mentee from the perspective of each person.

What was my intention entering into the arrangement?

Kevin:

My intention was to create a relationship with Ali to talk all things Collaborative and to establish a relationship where anything Ali wanted to address could be discussed. I am a strong believer in learning through mentoring and I was on the KCCL Mentorship Committee with other committed practitioners to get this program in place. In addition, I have just opened up the Seattle Collaborative Law Center, my mission being to expand the awareness and knowledge of Collaborative Practice for both the public and professionals. Finally, having been mentored by those before me, I have always wanted to mentor others. Ali and I are both in the Cascadia Practice Group and having observed Ali start her Collaborative work, it was a natural connection for us to work together.

Ali:

I remember signing up to be a part of the Mentor Program at my first KCCL annual meeting, because KCCL and the Collaborative Law community in general were still so new to me. It seemed to me that it was essential to learn more about Collaborative law practice from others, since I was just beginning the process of growing my own Collaborative practice. How could I learn if very few of my own cases were formal (Participation Agreement signed) Collaborative cases? Mentorship sounded ideal. Kevin is also in my practice group, and when he called to inform me that we had been connected as Mentor-Mentee through KCCL, I think I literally said, "Really? Lucky me!" I was delighted that the formal Mentor Program was happening, and that I had not been forgotten as an interested participant. I saw the fact that I already knew Kevin (and had even worked with him on a Collaborative Prenuptial case) as something that would strengthen our Mentor-Mentee relationship, as well as our general professional-to-professional relationship.

What was the structure of the arrangement?

Kevin:

We meet by Zoom video on the first Wednesday of each month. Ali has been great at bringing issues to address at each meeting and these issues have had a wonderful linear aspect to them. Each month we have built on the threads that have been created and as with any strong Collaborative toolbox, we pull out tools as needed. For example, one month we brought in a “guest” Collaborative Coach to provide perspective that responded to one of Ali’s queries. We modify the structure and the issues to be discussed as needed as we go along.

Ali:

I have really enjoyed the accountability and regularity of the monthly meeting structure. Zoom has worked well for us from an efficiency standpoint (even before Covid-19!) because we can each step away from whatever else we are doing very quickly and efficiently to connect. I have created a notebook for my notes from each session. I refer to it frequently for case specific ideas, if Kevin and I had discussed specific strategies, or to simply recall some of my thoughts / notes taken during previous sessions. Kevin has, at times, suggested some "homework" items, such as encouraging me to network with other Collaborative professionals or identifying a podcast for me to listen to. The hour of our meeting time flies by. Our agenda has been more freeform -- throughout the month I take note of issues that come up for me in my practice that would be a good topic to discuss at our next meeting.

Have my expectations been met? Why or why not, and in what way?

Kevin:

My expectations have been exceeded. I have been heartened by the curiosity with which Ali has come to the relationship, her respect for my time and commitment, and the depth of learning that occurred. I do not pretend to know everything about Collaborative Practice and I have the humility to know that “my way” is not always the “right way” for the issue at hand, and on many instances Ali and I explored a topic that, together, helped both of us get a deeper understanding of what we were exploring.

Ali:

Every meeting we have had has enriched my practice. I feel so much gratitude for Kevin's authenticity, openness, and presence in our meetings. His voice is one that I can now hear in my head as I work through interactions with other Collaborative professionals or with our clients. I began the Mentor program much later than I had initially expected to, but I have been so pleased and encouraged at the timing of how this all came together.

As a learning experience, how does this method of learning compare to other forms of learning.

Kevin:

No one method of Collaborative learning is sufficient, in itself, to create a well-rounded Collaborative Practitioner. That being said, I believe that everyone would benefit from experiencing a mentor / mentee relationship, from both sides. I am not suggesting that it be mandatory, as such a requirement would tax limited resource, only that someone who has the time to fit in this experience is going to benefit. The question is when it is best to enter into that relationship. As a new Collaborative Practitioner, we come into our first case having taken the basic training, Collaborative and Mediation, and no context to which to apply that learning. For some this is a perfect time to be mentored as it creates a bridge from the training to continuing education and training that is often missing from our current education structure. For others, like Ali, the relationship comes after she has already completed a Collaborative case and a few Collaborative Prenuptial Agreements. This has provided her some context to develop specific questions about Collaborative Practice on all levels. Whether the mentoring starts early or happens after the newer practitioner has some Collaborative experience, when done well the relationship is guaranteed to provide both the mentor and the mentee great value. Mentoring is a complimentary learning form that should not be overlooked.

Ali:

By the time I was connected to Kevin as my Mentor, my Collaborative practice had grown some, so I had case-specific issues to work through and consider with Kevin. In the interim, I experienced other forms of learning, even other mentor-mentee relationships:

- 1) in my own law firm, I am fortunate enough to have a Collaborative Law mentor; and
- 2) my practice group provides a lot of mentorship for me as our members share different ideas/approaches and case studies at our meetings.

Having Kevin be a member of my practice group as well as my Mentor has created a deepened experience for both of us. One thing that I believe sets the Mentor-Mentee learning experience apart as a learning tool is the level of commitment and trust that is shared with just one other practitioner (versus an entire practice group or larger group training). Also, knowing that Kevin is a very experienced practitioner, but he can still benefit *his* practice by mentoring me -- that is pretty transformational.

What are some other benefits of this arrangement?

Kevin:

As a result of being mentored and having mentored others I am a better Collaborative Practitioner. In each role I have learned how to formulate questions internally and then to communicate those questions in a clear manner. Along the way it has aided me in building Collaborative Community, creating individual relationships, creating referral sources, building trust, and stoked a continued curiosity in becoming a better Collaborative Professional.

Ali:

I have appreciated Kevin's willingness to meeting me where I am each month, as different issues have arisen for me. I have been able to be honest about struggles or successes in specific cases or relationships. He has held those experiences in confidence. Knowing there is a regularly scheduled time for us to meet is so valuable -- having a dedicated time, space, and person to support my Collaborative practice growth edges is such a gift.

Has the mentorship experience been one you would recommend to others?

Kevin:

Absolutely. The return on my investment, as both mentee and mentor, has been spectacular. In working with KCCL to create the Mentorship Program our aim is to make this source of support and learning available to anyone who has an interest.

Ali:

Wholeheartedly, yes. As a mentee, I am so grateful for the support of this mentorship program and for Kevin's commitment to serving as my Mentor. I have experienced significant professional and personal growth. I hope to serve as a mentor to others in the future, as I further my practice. We, as Collaborative Professionals, all have so much to learn from one another.