

MENTORSHIP AS A VERITABLE FOUNDATION FOR BUILDING A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE AND INTEGRITY

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**BEING A GENERAL GUIDE TO YOUNG LAWYERS, ON THE OCCASION OF
HIS BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION, ON 28 NOVEMBER, 2025**

1.0 Introduction

“A mentor is someone who sees more talent and ability within you, than you see in yourself, and helps bring it out of you.”

- **Bob Proctor**
Canadian Author

The legal profession, by its very nature, is a custodian of justice, a pillar of society, and a demanding field that requires not only intellectual acuity but also unwavering ethical fortitude. In Nigeria, where the legal landscape is complex and rapidly evolving, the journey from being a new wig to becoming a seasoned legal practitioner is fraught with challenges. It is in this critical transition that mentorship emerges, not as a mere optional accessory, but as a veritable foundation for cultivating a sustainable culture of excellence and integrity.

The pursuit of excellence and integrity is at the heart of the noble legal profession. A justice system that commands respect and public trust depends on practitioners whose conduct reflects competence, character, and ethical fortitude. Yet, these values do not arise spontaneously. They are cultivated and shaped by institutional systems, personal discipline, and most importantly, mentorship.

Research shows that mentorship is fundamental in transferring professional values across generations, ensuring that excellence does not become episodic but structural.¹ Within the legal profession, where the stakes of error and ethical lapses are high, mentorship serves as both a compass and a stabilizing force. It equips young lawyers with the intellectual, professional, and moral grounding necessary to thrive in an increasingly complex legal landscape.²

¹ Kathy Kram, ‘Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life’ (1986) 25(4) Human Resource Management 639.

² Neil Hamilton & Verna Monson, ‘Legal Education’s Ethical Challenge: Empirical Research on How Most Effectively to Foster Each Student’s Professional Formation (Professionalism)’ (2012) 9(2) University of St. Thomas Law Journal 325.

The legal profession is built on the pillars of excellence and integrity. These values are the bedrock upon which trust is established, and the rule of law is upheld. This article examines mentorship as a veritable foundation for building a culture of excellence and integrity, particularly within the legal profession. It highlights mentorship's conceptual framework, the importance of excellence and integrity in the legal profession, the effect of ethics on the values of excellence and integrity, and the crucial role of mentorship in fostering a culture of excellence and integrity.

2.0 The Concept of Mentorship

Mentorship or mentoring is simply a relationship that exists between a more experienced individual (mentor on the one part) and one with a lesser experience (mentee on the other part), wherein the former guides the latter reach his/her goals or aspirations. It generally refers to a developmental relationship in which a more experienced individual guides a less experienced one in acquiring knowledge, skills, judgment, and professional values. The relevance of mentorship in the legal profession cannot be overemphasized.

In the legal profession, mentorship is a symbiotic relationship where experienced legal practitioners, at the bar or the bench, share their wisdom, expertise, and values with less experienced colleagues. This relationship is a powerful catalyst for growth, providing a safe space for mentees to explore, learn, and develop their unique strengths. Mentorship within the profession is an essential tool for transmitting knowledge, skills, and values from one generation to the next. In essence, mentorship transcends technical skill transfer, as it molds attitudes, confidence, decision-making abilities, and ethical reasoning.

Scholars opine that mentorship creates a fertile ground for excellence because it accelerates learning, broadens perspectives, and reduces the costly trial-and-error approach that often accompanies professional growth.³ Thus, mentorship is a strategic vehicle for cultivating leaders, preserving professional standards, and sustaining institutional legacies.

The concept of mentorship also includes the purpose of mentorship as well as the characteristics of a good mentor and a good mentee.

2.1 The Purpose of Mentorship

The aim of mentorship is for the mentee to connect with a mentor in order to gain the same or better knowledge or experience. The mentor offers advice and guidance and serves as a map for the mentee to follow to attain his/her desired goal. A mentor helps a mentee to excel in his chosen career and become the best version of himself by assisting the mentee

³ T. D. Allen, L. T. Eby, M. L. Poteet, E. Lentz, & L. Lima, 'Career Benefits Associated With Mentoring for Protégés: A Meta-Analysis.' (2004) 89(1) Journal of Applied Psychology 127.

to achieve set goals, build confidence and think beyond limitations. Some advantages of having a mentor are as follows:

- Mentors can identify areas in which the mentee needs improvement.
- Mentors find ways to stimulate a mentee's personal and professional growth.
- Mentors serve as a source of encouragement to the mentee.
- Mentors are disciplinarians that set necessary boundaries that a mentee may not be able to set independently.
- Mentors are sounding boards so the mentee can bounce ideas off them for an unfiltered opinion.
- Mentors are trusted advisers.
- Mentors can be connectors.
- Mentors have the experiences that a mentee can learn from to prevent making the same mistakes beginners make.
- Mentors are free, which makes them priceless in more ways than one.

2.2 Characteristics of a Good Mentor and a Good Mentee

In summary, a good mentor observes the aspirations, growth and development of the mentee, helps the mentee see his destination and offers encouragement. Ideally, a good mentor should not impose his ideas on the mentee but must understand and value the diversity of perspectives. Such a mentor is expected to be flexible, empathetic, non-judgmental, honest and disciplined. In addition, a good mentor should be able to listen properly, give constructive feedback and network effectively.

On the other hand, a good mentee should be a good listener and should be open to feedback – whether positive or negative. A good mentee must be dedicated, respectful and intentional about his/her career goals. Furthermore, such a mentee should not be opportunistic, and should not take advantage of the opportunity to gain favours of any kind.

3.0 The Importance of Excellence and Integrity in the Legal Profession

Excellence and integrity are non-negotiable in the legal profession. Legal practitioners must strive for excellence in their work, demonstrating competence, diligence, and attention to detail. Integrity is equally essential, as it encompasses honesty, transparency, and accountability.

Excellence and integrity are the principal pillars of the legal profession. The rule of law depends on practitioners who demonstrate competence, diligence, honesty, and respect for the rights of others. Legal scholars contend that excellence in law goes beyond academic brilliance; it encompasses analytical depth, effective advocacy, sound judgment, and a

commitment to justice.⁴ Without these attributes, legal representation becomes ineffective, and justice becomes inaccessible.

Integrity is indispensable in the profession, as legal practitioners must act with honesty, fairness, and fidelity to the law in order to maintain public confidence in the legal system. Lack of integrity undermines not only the reputation of the persons involved but also the credibility of the justice system. In many African jurisdictions, bar associations stress that moral uprightness is just as critical as legal expertise, particularly given the rising public demand for transparency and accountability.⁵ Thus, excellence ensures lawyers can competently serve society, while integrity ensures they do so ethically and responsibly.

4.0 The Effect of Ethics on Excellence and Integrity in the Legal Profession

The legal profession is regarded as one of the most regulated disciplines which require a high level of decorum from its practitioners. Legal ethics describes a set of codes and rules that regulate the conduct of lawyers. These codes ensure that lawyers follow the law, pursue justice, and zealously advocate their client's best interests. Legal ethics has been defined as 'the minimum standards of appropriate conduct within the legal profession, involving the duties that its members owe one another, their clients and the courts.'⁶

The ethics of the legal profession in Nigeria are codified into the Rules of Professional Conduct (RPC). The RPC is made for the maintenance of the highest standard of professional conduct, etiquette and discipline. Any conduct inconsistent with that required by the RPC will amount to professional misconduct and will be punished in accordance with the stipulations of the Legal Practitioners Act.⁷

No legal practitioner can be successful without a full grasp of, and religious compliance with the ethics and standards of the profession. Therefore, legal practitioners, as a necessary consequence, must therefore live by the ethics of the profession as contained in the RPC. This underscores the special importance of ethics in the legal profession.

Ethics provide a framework for excellence and integrity in the legal profession. By adhering to these rules, legal practitioners demonstrate their commitment to excellence and integrity, fostering a culture of trust and accountability. Ethics represent the moral compass that ensures legal excellence, rather than personal gain, is pursued in the administration of justice. Research has found that professional ethics shape lawyers' identity, influencing

⁴ Deborah Rhode, *Lawyers as Leaders* (1st edn, Oxford University Press 2017) 320.

⁵ Misnah Irvita & Asriani Asriani, 'Transparency and accountability in the justice system: Building public trust and justice' (2025) 5(4) Privet Social Sciences Journal 27.

⁶ *Black's Law Dictionary*, 10th edn.

⁷ Rule 55 (1) of the RPC provides as follows: If a lawyer acts in contravention of any of the rules in these Rules or fails to perform any of the duties imposed by the Rules, he shall be guilty of a professional misconduct and liable to punishment as provided in Legal Practitioners Act, 1975.

how they interpret their responsibilities and navigate dilemmas.⁸ Ethical literacy strengthens the capacity to balance zealous representation with moral responsibility.

A strong ethical foundation enhances excellence by ensuring that competence is not separated from responsibility. A lawyer may possess exceptional intelligence and technical skill, but without ethical discipline, those strengths become liabilities. Studies show that ethical mentorship significantly reduces professional misconduct and improves long-term career satisfaction.⁹

Furthermore, ethics elevates integrity by fostering honesty, accountability, and consistency in conduct which are qualities essential to sustaining the profession's legitimacy. In effect, ethics is the bridge between personal values and professional obligations, anchoring both excellence and integrity.

5.0 The Crucial Role of Mentorship in Fostering Excellence and Integrity in the Profession

Mentorship is a powerful tool for instilling excellence and integrity in the legal profession. Experienced lawyers and judicial officers can share their knowledge, skills, and values with mentees, helping them develop their professional identity and navigate complex ethical dilemmas. Indeed, mentorship is essential for building a culture of excellence and integrity in the legal profession. Some of the ways in which mentorship fosters a culture of excellence and integrity include:

- Transmitting knowledge, skills and ethical norms;
- Providing guidance, role-modeling, accountability and support;
- Providing constructive feedback;
- Supporting continuous learning and growth;
- Encouraging ethical decision-making; and
- Fostering a sense of community and shared values.

Through observation and interaction, mentees learn how to navigate ethical challenges, manage difficult clients, uphold justice, and maintain professionalism under pressure. Mentored professionals advance faster, perform better, and demonstrate greater ethical resilience because mentorship enriches both technical competence and emotional intelligence.¹⁰ A profession where senior colleagues actively mentor junior colleagues inevitably becomes one where excellence and integrity are not abstract ideals but practiced norms.

⁸ Hamilton & Monson (n 2) 325.

⁹ Jennerdene Rubbi Nunan, Aysha Ebrahim, Marius Stander, 'Mentoring in the workplace: Exploring the experiences of mentor-mentee relations' (2023) 49 SA Journal of Industrial Psychology 1.

¹⁰ Allen & ors (n 3) 127.

6.0 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, mentorship is the mechanism that ensures the torch of excellence is passed, and the non-negotiable standard of integrity is upheld. By embracing the sacred responsibility of guidance, senior members of the Bar and Bench invest directly in the resilience and distinction of the profession itself. When mentorship is institutionalized, intentional, and ethically grounded, it equips the next generation with the clarity, courage, and character required to be true custodians of justice. It is through this dedicated investment in human capital that the legal profession in Nigeria will not only secure its legacy but also build a future where excellence and integrity are not aspirations, but fundamental realities.