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'Eye-Opening Experience for Associates': Why King & Spalding's Susan Vargas Speaks Candidly About Demands on Trial Lawyers

King & Spalding partner Susan Vargas is nominated for the California Legal Awards' Mentorship Award.

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Career Development

By ALM Staff | November 03, 2022 at 02:04 PM

King & Spalding partner Susan Vargas clocks about 250 hours per year to mentoring, and this year is on track to exceed 300 hours, out of her average total of more than 2,900 hours, according to the firm.

The Los Angeles-based litigator has been nominated for the [California Legal Awards'](#) Mentorship Award.

Vargas and mentee Anneke Shepard, an associate in the firm's trial and global disputes practice, told The Recorder about Vargas' mentorship style and its impact on Shepard's career.

Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

How would you describe your mentorship style?

Vargas: It is rare for a young associate to feel comfortable in proactively approaching a partner with candid questions about career development. For this reason, I do not wait for associates to approach me. I actively seek out their questions about how to achieve their professional goals. Proactively creating a dialogue with an associate is critical to the development of trust with a young lawyer. If they see and feel your interest in them, on a professional and personal level, they understand that you are invested and committed to their growth. In addition, I am a candid mentor.

While it is important to provide positive feedback, it is equally important to provide constructive criticism. Without providing guidance and course corrections, young lawyers will not deepen and improve their skill sets. While it is never my intention to crush a young lawyer's dream, setting realistic expectations is key to their success. As one example, many young lawyers think they want to be trial lawyers but have no understanding of what it takes. Candidly talking about the demands on a lawyer who tries cases can be an eye-opening experience for an associate. But honest conversations about challenges in the legal profession help young lawyers to calibrate their lives, at work and at home, to be successful.

What drives you to provide mentorship?

Vargas: I had the benefit a fantastic, committed mentor from the start of my career until partnership (and even now, though we work at different firms). His mentorship made every difference in the world to my success in the legal profession, as a trial lawyer and as an in-house lawyer. For this reason, I feel a sense of responsibility and intense desire to "pay it forward" to young lawyers with whom I work.

As an experienced lawyer, I understand the missteps that can be made during one's career with judges, opposing counsel and clients. While there is no substitute for learning from one's mistakes, there is also great benefit in being shown the ropes. I find it incredibly gratifying to help a promising young lawyer to succeed, and equally gratifying to help a struggling young lawyer to improve their skill sets.

What can individuals and law firms do to develop better mentors?

Vargas: The first step to developing mentors, much less better mentors, is for law firms to give concrete recognition to lawyers who make the personal investment to serve as a mentor. At a minimum, firms should acknowledge the non-tangible contributions of mentors through firm awards, e.g., Mentor of the Year, and/or giving “credit” for non-billable hours spent mentoring others.

How has this mentor made an impact on your career?

Shepard: Susan has had a significant impact on my career. When I was ready to get back on the partnership track at the firm, Susan not only supported my decision, but she went to bat for me. Susan solicited support from the partners I worked with regularly, met with the partners that made the promotion decisions, and even contacted retired partners to help build a case for me. I was promoted back to a partnership track associate effective Jan. 1, 2022. Susan was an integral part in securing my promotion. I am now up for a second promotion to senior associate, and Susan has already launched a campaign to make sure I am promoted again.

What is one lesson you have learned from your mentor?

Shepard: One lesson that I have learned from Susan is that your relationships with your clients are a lot like mentoring relationships—they only work if there is complete trust. You have to anticipate the needs of your clients, both in the matters that they have asked you to handle and those that they haven't. Your clients have to know that you will go to bat for them, just as Susan has gone to bat for me.

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