



ATTORNEY SEARCH

No Need for “Mentors”: Summon Your Posse! (and turn the “in posse” to “in esse”)

Here is a quick test of your generational “orientation”: When you think of a “posse,” does your mind conjure up the image of 20 to 30 ranchers, all armed and eager to perform their civic duty while rounding up horse thieves? Or do you get the vision of eight or so of one’s closest friends all wearing terribly expensive clothes designed to look like Goodwill cast-offs, while listening to impossibly loud music with lyrics that require copious expletive deletions?

It would be to your infinite surprise, perhaps, that I would like to talk about the second image, and not just because it is more in keeping with the current zeitgeist. Rather, it is because I want to tell you something about professional development and career goals that is better served by thinking “collaboratively,” rather than “hierarchically.” More about that in a minute.

Posse Comitatus

The younger generation may throw the term “posse” around, and perhaps most who do are unaware that this is Latin, not English. Regardless, the venerable OED and even Black’s Law Dictionary let us know that the 19th-Century image is more correct. A “posse comitatus” (sometimes just “posse”) is the population of a county over the age of 15 that a sheriff may summon to his assistance in cases of keeping the peace or in pursuing and arresting felons. (See *Williams v. State*, 253 Ark. 973, 490 SW2d 117, 121). Regardless, I want to focus your attention on another Latin usage of “posse”; and that is the phrase “in posse,” which is not to be confused with “in esse.” Something is “in posse” when it may possibly be; something is “in esse” when it actually is. I want to draw the analogy between gathering a “posse” around you and thereby turning your career plans from “the possible” to “the actual,” or “in posse” to “in esse.”

You Need a Posse

Alright. Enough about Latin and competing images. Why should we worry about what a posse is? Quite simply, because you could really use one. It is always handy to have an armed force around you when looking to arrest scoundrels. It is also comforting to have one’s friends around when suffering from extreme ennui. More to the point, a posse can also come in handy when you are trying to get somewhere in your career. Simply stated, you can go further if you have a group of individuals around that are in relationship with you for the sole purpose of helping you meet your personal career goals.

All of us are involved in all sorts of relationships. Some of these are reciprocal (or are supposed to be). For example, your relationship with your spouse or significant other is (or is supposed to be!) a reciprocal one; you each give to the other in a roughly equal way. Further, your casual friendships and acquaintances are largely reciprocal; you each bring something to the table. Usually, one person is not giving more to the relationship than the other. Both enjoy each other’s company, and both impose on each other from time to time. But that’s not the way the posse works. Instead, the posse should be composed of people who are willing, for whatever reason, to help you further your personal and/or professional goals. The point is not that you help each other, but that they are helping you. They give; you receive.

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Gathering Your Posse

Where do these people come from? You would be surprised. For one thing, most people who have achieved some sort of personal or professional success in their lives are naturally predisposed to sharing the wealth of their experiences with others. I would posit that there are far more potential posse partners out there than individuals ready to take advantage of them. If you go through your day with the attitude of looking for relationships that could be of benefit to you, you will find them: in your extended family, at work, at clubs you belong to, at sectarian organizations you are affiliated with—all over the place. Open your eyes, be interested in talking to others for the mere sake of making contact, and you will find people willing to share their expertise and perspective with you.

Of course, you can get professional help as well. A professional or personal “coach,” therapist, clergyperson, and even your recruiter (!) are all candidates for inclusion in your posse. The point is to add to your list of goals in your professional plan (have you written one yet?) the gradual inclusion of individuals in your posse who are willing to help you when you need it.

A New Paradigm

You are not looking for “mentors.” Yes, I know that it is a popular word, and I seem to recall a number of television commercials extolling the virtues of being one. But what is a mentor anyway? In point of fact, there is not much consensus on what the word actually means. The classically educated among you may recall that Mentor was originally a proper name: Odysseus’ old drinking buddy, who was left in charge of the Ithacan king’s household while he was away being the hero and fighting the Trojan War. You may also recall that Mentor wasn’t much of a “mentor.” He allowed Odysseus’ house to be overrun by suitors to his not-yet-widow Penelope; neither is there any evidence in the text that he cared one whit for Odysseus’ son Telemachus. In fact, it was good old Pallas Athene disguised as Mentor that gave Telemachus timely advice. Moreover, for 2700 years, no one used the term “mentor” at all. It did not become a common noun until the late 17th Century, when a French mystic and educator to kings, Francois de Salignac de la Mothe-Fenelon, wrote a sequel of sorts to the Odyssey (*Les Aventures de Telemaque*). It was there in Salignac’s fiction that Mentor became a “mentor” to Telemachus—and from there that the word entered into our vocabulary.

I do not discount the idea of “mentoring” merely because it has spurious etymological roots. Rather, I discount the concept of mentoring because it carries with it an insidious paternalism. The mentor is “older and wiser” and “imparts wisdom” to a “younger, less experienced” mentee. This wouldn’t be so bad, but we tend to think of the person needing the mentor as being “underprivileged” or “disadvantaged” in some way. Worse perhaps, we tend to think of a one-on-one relationship. In that model, the perceptions and predispositions of the mentor invariably have a disproportionately large effect on his (again paternalism!) subject. If you don’t believe me, take a look at the glossy flyers that law firms are putting out about their diversity programs. I have seen many that show a kindly, white-haired male partner sitting down with a young minority attorney. The partner looks sage and wise; the associate, young and eager. Bah! I do not like that image, nor do I think it is a useful one. Rather, what all of us need, at every stage of our careers, is a group of people that we can rely on to listen to our problems, be a sounding board, and perhaps share with us some war stories. The relationship, while set up to be of benefit to you without strings, should be collaborative. The point is that you are eliciting comments from a number of people that you trust and putting it all together to come up with good decisions. You are not in the relationship to be spoon-fed by one well-meaning “elder.” You are building a network of trusted advisors that enjoy being a part of a team—your team.

Just Do It

Some practical advice. First of all, you don’t have to use the word “posse,” and no one has to know they are in it. All that is required is that you identify individuals you believe worthy to help you out and gradually develop a relationship with them. Coffee, lunch, phone calls, emails. If you pay attention to the process, it will be organic. There is no concrete checklist to this process; you have to feel your way through. Next, remember to maintain the right attitude. You are not trying to set up codependent relationships, you are not looking for the father or big sister you never had. No, you are instead asking a new sort of question in your career path. Instead of asking “how” (How do I get this deposition handled? How to I write this brief? How do I serve a guy in Kurdistan?), you need to ask “who” (Who can send me in the right direction? Who has the contacts or experience I can draw upon?). By the way, I stole that last bit from a member of my posse (a professional coach).

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So, start putting your plan into action. Think about the idea of a posse. Write “find posse members” down on your professional plan. Start thinking of the people you already turn to (if any) or those you already know that you really should call. “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Well, a posse can help you scout out the terrain so you don’t spend days going the wrong direction.

In Esse

The posse, as I alluded to at the outset, is all about the “in posse,” the possible. Having plans, getting advice, and making checklists are all about the possibilities you see for yourself in your career path. In the final analysis, you are building up a big store of potentialities (“in posse”) to begin to realize success in your life. You want to move from the possible to the actual, the real, “in esse.” The trick is, however, that you really have to spend 95% of your time working on process (the plan, the posse, the checklist) to begin to realize success. If you focus on the end result exclusively, you will either miss the boat, or get in the wrong one.

You may think that it is unrealistic to find successful people (however you define them) willing to take time out to talk to you. A reasonable concern, but an unfounded one. One of the busiest people of all time, our 16th president, enjoyed helping others. You may recall that Abraham Lincoln had a few things on his mind: the breakup of the nation, a heinous war, and incompetent generals. Yet, he had this to say: “I feel-though the tax on my time is heavy-that no hours of my day are better employed than those which thus bring me again within the direct contact and atmosphere of the average of our whole people.” Finally, and you knew this was coming, those potential posse members out there-and Lincoln was one-also realized that serving in such a role was of benefit of them as well, if not directly. Lincoln went on to say about his habit of meeting with various and sundry citizens seeking audience, “I have but little time to read the papers, and gather public opinion that way . . .the effect as a whole, is renovating and invigorating to my perceptions of responsibility and duty.” Thus, you find out at some point that your posse members find the relationship very rewarding. You never know, you too may decide that coming to someone else’s ‘rescue’ is just the sort of challenge you are looking for.

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