

THE RECORDER

No Shortcuts to Success: Knobbe's Susan Natland on the Importance of Leading by Example

By ALM Staff

October 25, 2023

Susan Natland, a partner at Knobbe Martens, is a finalist for the California Legal Award's Mentorship Award.

Natland and her mentee, Knobbe associate Kate McMorrow, spoke to The Recorder about mentorship styles and the impact of a strong mentor.

Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

How would you describe your mentorship style?

Natland: In a nutshell, my mentorship style is definitely to lead by example. I emphasize to my mentees that there are typically no shortcuts to success and it is important to put the time, effort and intention into your work and your career. To that end, I am often "in the weeds" with them on complex legal issues or on those late-night calls with them when urgent issues arise. I also think it is important to trust your mentees and understand that things will not always go perfectly, but it will all be a learning experience and opportunity for further growth. Failure is part of the process and I want mentees to know that and to have the freedom to try, fail, and learn, as I believe that will put them in the best position to have long, fulfilling careers. My mentees' success is something I am always thinking about and trying to help them achieve.

Although I enjoy working with and teaching my mentees, I also truly care about them and that they have well-rounded, fulfilling lives. I think getting to know each of your mentees is critical to true mentorship,



Susan Natland, left, and Kate McMorrow, right, of Knobbe Martens.

Courtesy photos

and I make a point to schedule time to bond with my mentees outside the office over a casual lunch, dinner, or—as was the case with Kate McMorrow—while getting our ears pierced together as part of a mentor-mentee bonding event to celebrate Kate's work anniversary with the firm! I think we may be the only mentor-mentee pairing in history, certainly for IP lawyers, to get our ears pierced together to celebrate a work anniversary!

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

Natland: As lawyers we are educated in the law, but not necessarily in management and mentorship. I believe law firms would benefit from investing in leadership training for all of their attorneys, and especially

attorneys in a position to be mentors. Firms should also work to ensure that leaders and mentors appreciate the various issues from a DEIA perspective that their young attorneys and mentees from various backgrounds may encounter, so that they can best serve and guide them in their careers. Finally, as I said with respect to my mentorship style, becoming a good mentor requires simply putting in the time, effort, and work. Firms and mentors should spend time thinking about what they want their mentorship to look like and then putting in the effort and holding themselves accountable to achieve that vision.

How has this mentor made an impact on your career?

McMorrow: Susan has made a tremendous impact on my career. I actually met Susan at various legal organization events in Los Angeles and ended up joining Knobbe Martens because of her and for the opportunity to work with and learn from her. Susan has been a constant teacher, advocate and coach in helping me develop and define my career. She has staffed me as the day-to-day contact for some of Knobbe Martens' largest clients with the most complex trademark matters, and worked closely with me on those matters. Susan has helped me develop creative and effective legal strategies, tackle complex new legal issues, and learn how to provide our clients with the best possible service.

Susan has also introduced me to leaders in the industry, nominated me for positions and awards, and sent me numerous opportunities to speak, lead, and grow my career in IP. For example, with Susan's nomination I was shortlisted for the 2023 Americas

Women in Business Law Rising Star in IP award. She also helped me secure a position serving on INTA's Project Team for its 2023 Annual Meeting and moderating a panel on artificial intelligence and trademarks at the meeting in Singapore. She has provided me with other speaking opportunities as well, including, for example, at The Copyright Society's Midwinter Meeting at which I was honored to speak on the intersection of copyright law, social media, and Gen Z. Susan is also an advocate for me within the firm. She actively participates in my reviews, ensures I am working with a variety of partners and clients, and encourages me to take on meaningful leadership roles within our group. I have received an incredible amount of support from Susan in advancing my career and am very grateful for her mentorship, leadership, and friendship.

What is one lesson you have learned from your mentor?

McMorrow: Susan often uses the phrase "value add"—to the point that it is always now on the top of my mind, and I am thankful for that. As a lawyer with a science background (which Susan has as well!) I am extremely detail-oriented (as is she). While being detail-oriented is useful in law, it can also cause you to lose sight of the big picture. Susan has helped me remember to make sure I am focusing my energy on projects that have the highest impact and value for our clients, as well as on delivering excellent client service in order to make their lives easier each day. I have enjoyed watching how clients respond to small changes that I have made in this regard, and am grateful to Susan for teaching me to keep focus on the "value add."