

TEXAS LAWYER

At Gibson Dunn, Young Litigators Teach Courtroom Skills

By Laura Lorek

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At the Dallas office of Gibson Dunn, young litigators don't have to wait a decade to learn how to present in court; instead, they teach each other now.

"Instead of partners telling associates what they can expect in 10 years, we have third- to fifth-year associates teaching other associates what they can do now," said Andrew Mitchell, a fifth-year associate in the Dallas office.

For litigators, Gibson Dunn's program offers a replicable way to close the experience gap: associates learn courtroom skills from colleagues doing the work now, practice communicating those lessons, build internal credibility and prepare for responsibilities that AI cannot replace.

For Trey Cox, co-chair of Gibson Dunn's global Litigation Practice Group and co-partner in charge of the firm's Dallas office, fostering such early court experience has become a top priority.

He said the aim is not only to help litigation associates improve their skills but also to give them opportunities to apply those skills before facing pressure.

Two years ago, he helped establish a program in Dallas based on that concept; the associates



Credit: Khalid/Adobe Stock

run the monthly series, select the topics, lead the sessions, and teach on matters they have handled themselves.

As Cox explained, the program gives associates the opportunity to showcase their leadership and contribute to the firm's overall success.

It also gives the opportunity to mentor others.

"It's always your responsibility to coach the bench," Cox said. "There's always somebody that you can mentor, that you can lead, that you can help get better at what they're doing."

The sessions aim to be practical rather than theoretical. Usually, presenters follow a 20-minute format, similar to a TED Talk, in which they summarize a lesson from court in a clear, concise talk, much like a lawyer addressing a judge or jury. According to associates, this format has

helped turn individual case experience into common knowledge within the office.

The program differs from a conventional continuing legal education session because it uses work already being done in the office. Associates have given talks on a variety of topics, including jury instructions, preparing for hearings, examining witnesses, and using artificial intelligence when preparing for and reviewing depositions. As the participants pointed out, the aim is to make these lessons available so that another associate does not have to learn them independently.

Two years ago, the Dallas office established a litigation leadership council of senior associates and charged it with shaping the training, Cox said. The council developed three main initiatives: a litigation lunch-and-learn series focused on tips for practicing in Texas, a litigation lab based on short presentations in the style of TED Talks, and a Texas forms library containing frequently used litigation documents.

Cox said the structure is intentionally associate run. Associates identify topics, prepare the presentations, and teach from their own experience. The program is effective because associates not only get training from partners but also learn from peers already conducting depositions, filing motions and handling trial-related work, Cox said.

Mitchell said he recently led a lunch-and-learn on jury instructions after drafting them for a trial team. Rather than presenting abstract guidance, he walked associates through what he had learned about pattern jury instructions and the practical steps involved when an associate is responsible for the first draft.

Mitchell, having previously played professional ball with the Chicago White Sox organization, drew an analogy between the work and drawing

up a game plan in baseball. Although the basic structure remains the same, starting with pattern charges, studying the jurisdiction and coordinating with the trial team, in each case lawyers must adapt their approach and be prepared to advocate the instructions at the charge conference.

At the monthly sessions, the presenters usually sit with the attendees at tables in the conference room, arranged in a U shape, Mitchell said. Approximately 20 to 30 people take part, including Dallas associates and partners, along with lawyers from Houston who join via video conference.

Cody Johnson, a litigation associate in Dallas, said the training includes artificial intelligence, but not as a replacement for courtroom judgment. He added that one of the program's objectives is to build skills which artificial intelligence cannot replace, such as taking depositions, arguing before judges and presenting evidence to juries.

At the same time, associates have used the litigation lab to test AI workflows. Johnson said he presented on using AI to prepare for depositions and review transcripts afterward. Cox said one exercise used his deposition guidelines to create a grading rubric that could flag missed follow-up questions, unclear references, and other issues in a transcript.

Cox said that Johnson's AI exercise was based on the deposition guidelines which Cox had previously developed. Johnson entered those rules into an AI tool and asked it to produce a rubric for assessing deposition transcripts. According to Cox, the tool could examine a transcript and indicate areas where the lawyer should have asked further questions, specified an exhibit more clearly, or avoided pronouns that might have made the testimony less useful during cross-examination or in preparing a motion. The tool also assigned a numerical score, Cox said, giving the associates a kind of school-grade

rating showing how the deposition had fared against the guidelines.

Mitchell said that he doesn't believe any session has ever failed to meet expectations. He added that he wouldn't say it was impossible for one to fail, since that would depend on the presenter.

"Everybody has a different way to prepare for something," Mitchell said. "Every player I've ever played with prepared for a game in a different way. They had different routines and different things that they wanted to do to make sure they were ready."

Mitchell identified the techniques that suited his style and prepared his own materials before arguing a motion, after hearing Johnson explain how he prepares for hearings.

"Every attorney in this firm has to be their own genuine self to be the best attorney they can be," Mitchell said.

"I think we've done a very nice job of trying to pick topic areas that are broadly applicable across litigation practice and within that you'll have both the specific and the granular," Cox said. "This afternoon we had one of these lunch and learns on presentation and preparing for direct examination of both fact and expert witnesses, and that was split up between two different associates here in Dallas, and I thought they did a nice job of both speaking from their own experience performing these examinations but also how to prepare someone more senior."

Cox said the program is designed to be useful for associates at every level. Junior lawyers may use the sessions to learn the basics of preparing a witness or drafting an examination outline. In contrast, more senior associates may use them to refine how they prepare partners or trial teams for courtroom work.

"The design is what keeps this from falling flat because it's not partners telling associates what they want to learn; it's self-determined. The associates set the agenda of what they want to learn about and what they think would be interesting and valuable to them," Cox said.

Cox said these sessions show what is special about the firm as a whole: giving associates early responsibility.

The TED talk format translates well to the courtroom, Cox said.

"As trial lawyers, what we are in large part when we're in front of a jury is a teacher," Cox said.

Cox said teaching a subject to others has a lot of value.

"I learned a ton about trial advocacy from teaching trial advocacy because you have to learn how to explain it, how to communicate about it," Cox said.

The talks also help with career development.

"It helps you build an internal identity and kind of a brand within the firm, which is incredibly important as an associate who is trying to develop relationships with partners and grow your practice and your career," Johnson said.

Cox said that Rachel Robertson, who was part of the first class of the litigation leadership council, is now a partner.

"And there are additional members that I will say are up for partner," Cox said.

Cox doesn't go so far as to say a training program holds people at the firm, but he links it to camaraderie, teamwork, and job satisfaction.

"I do think it matters because it creates a spirit of camaraderie and teamwork, and we're all in this together."