

Coaching For Lawyers

By Roy S. Ginsburg

Executive coaching, a professional development tool that combines strategic consulting and problem-solving counseling to help professionals set and reach their business and/or personal goals, has in the past decade found much support in the business community. Managers in corporations, including blue chip companies such as IBM, AT&T and Kodak, are realizing its benefits. Lawyers on the other hand, are just now becoming familiar with the concept.

That the coaching trend is more prevalent in corporate America than in the legal profession is no surprise. Historically, law firms have followed the lead of their corporate clients on implementing management and operational innovations. For example, most companies were using email and Web sites long before law firms got on board. Coaching has proven to be no different for a variety of reasons.

But what exactly is coaching and why should it be of interest to lawyers? Perhaps it's best first to say what it is not: *coaching is not therapy*. A central tenet of coaching is that the person working with a coach is currently functioning well, but wants to optimize performance. Moreover, coaching looks forward to achieve future goals; it is not concerned with the past.

BENEFITS FOR LAWYERS

Coaching can be of benefit to lawyers in areas as diverse as managing relationships with clients and colleagues, refining communication and negotiation skills, productivity, and working out issues of stress and work/life balance. Career management and practice development are additional areas where the insight, support, and prodding of a coach can give an attorney the extra edge to achieve in a competitive market.

Most attorneys will concede that superior people skills are often the distinguishing characteristics of the most successful attorneys. Nevertheless, many attorneys, being logical and linear by nature or training, have been skeptical of opportunities to develop these skills through coaching. The number of skeptics is going down, however, as more lawyers recognize that their technical skills alone can get them only so far in the legal profession.

Even among the attorneys who see merit in the personal and professional development that can be achieved through coaching, the idea that “I can do it myself” may be enticing. Attorneys tend to be a self-reliant lot, and may be put off by concern that taking on a coach will be perceived as a sign of weakness. But realistically, it’s the rare individual who can change behavior significantly without support. The problem, of course, is actually doing what you set out to do. Everyone knows that in order to lose weight, you eat less and exercise more. But how many people successfully lose weight without any type of support system? For attorneys, coaching provides the support system with its structure and discipline to “get it done.”

WORKING WITH A COACH

Working one-on-one, the coach and client first identify and assess the client’s goals and then devise a strategic action plan to achieve them. Coaches ask open-ended and provocative questions to help clients explore options they may not have ordinarily considered. Brainstorming frequently generates practical ideas, alternatives and realistic, attainable solutions. An action plan then provides a structure for commitment. The most important task of a coach is to hold the client accountable. In short, the best coaches are part strategist, part sounding board, part cheerleader and part taskmaster.

Coaching sessions, usually weekly, continue for a period of three to twelve months, depending upon the client’s objectives and progress. Sessions may be held either in person or over the telephone and typically last 30-60 minutes. Frequency keeps the client on track and permits timely adjustments. Many coaches also make themselves available when unanticipated needs arise between scheduled sessions.

From a financial standpoint, coaching can be a wise and prudent investment. Consider practice development coaching: if coaching support helps bring in just one additional piece of business, it has already paid for itself and then some. Alternatively, in the case of career management coaching, by investing in coaching to help retain a previously dissatisfied lawyer, the firm or corporate legal department

may save itself the far greater cost of replacing that attorney.

FINDING A COACH

So how does an attorney find a good coach? In many instances, the process is very similar to how clients find good lawyers, by referral. There are also Web sites with online directories of coaches.

Most coaches have received some type of formal training, and there are both attorney and nonattorney coaches. The advantage of nonlawyer coaches is that they are sometimes better equipped to bring a fresh perspective to an issue. Some are also more likely to add a level of spirituality to the experience, which certain clients appreciate. Lawyer coaches usually have a better grasp and understanding of the unique stresses of practicing law. They also tend to be more pragmatic than nonlawyer coaches, which many clients prefer.

Most critical is the coach's ability to relate interpersonally because the coaching relationship is an intimate one requiring respect and faith. Carefully interview prospective coaches before choosing. If complimentary sessions are offered, take advantage of the opportunity to discern and assess the intangibles of the relationship. Work only with coaches whom you trust and with whom you feel comfortable. Never hire a coach where there is no genuine rapport and don't be afraid to rely on your instincts about the personal chemistry.

It is often said that lawyers don't want to be the first to do anything, but don't want to be the last either. Coaching will become popular in the legal profession as more attorneys begin to understand and appreciate its value. What remains to be seen is how soon.

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