

Lawyers See Benefit in Professional Coaching

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By Stephen E. Seckler

Individualism is deeply ingrained in the culture of the United States. We live in a country where anyone can make it if he/she works hard enough.

But lurking behind this mythology lays a stark reality: In today's economy, no one truly makes it on his/her own. Leading politicians, professional athletes, and top-grossing musicians are surrounded by advisors who have been critical to their success.

Well-run corporations realize this. They know that talented managers are more likely to achieve peak performance if they have mentors.

In fact, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, there is an increasing trend in top corporations towards hiring external coaches to work with senior-level executives.

These executive coaches act as a sounding board and a reality check. They provide support, validation, and resources and hold the executive accountable to his/her stated goals.

Professional coaching is spreading to the legal profession as well. A quick search of the Internet will identify numerous consultants who offer coaching services to attorneys.

What is Coaching ?

Coaching is for individuals who want to raise their performance, increase their personal and professional happiness, and acquire missing skills that are necessary for success.

Attorneys can use a coach to work on any mix of professional and personal issues. Some attorneys choose to work on business development while others are looking for ways to achieve better work/life balance. Some want to become better managers, while others seek coaching because they need help leaving the practice of law or finding a more fulfilling position within the law.

The theory behind coaching is simple. An individual might hire a personal trainer to help him/her develop and follow a fitness plan. A professional hires a coach to help clarify professional and personal goals and create an action plan for reaching these goals. Along the way, the coach provides support and serves as a resource to the professional.

The coach also helps the individual move past roadblocks so the individual can achieve the right balance in his/her life and make appropriate changes necessary to achieve this balance.

Why Attorney Coaching?

Attorneys are good subjects for coaching because they are results-oriented professionals. But like most busy professionals, it is difficult for attorneys to consistently focus on things that are important, but not urgent.

In addition, while attorneys may get good training in lawyering in the early years of practice, they are less likely to get career guidance or guidance in developing a book of business.

Coaching picks up where traditional consulting leaves off. In a typical consulting relationship, a consultant will identify ways that you can achieve your desired objective. The end product is often a report detailing the steps that are necessary to achieve the desired outcome (e.g., more business). Sometimes a consultant will actually do the work for you.

If the consultant is simply identifying the necessary steps for you to achieve your desired objectives, this by itself is usually inadequate to get the desired results.

For example, suppose business generation is the objective. The consultant may suggest writing several articles a year, getting active in an industry group, starting a mailing list, developing relationships with the media, etc. The coach makes sure that over time, these things actually get done.

Overcoming the Obstacles to Good Listening

Exercise, meditation, and/or other stress-management techniques like yoga can help you manage the stress of legal practice and lower the "noise" that might otherwise compromise your effectiveness.

The bottom line is that it pays to take care of yourself. Without exercise or some other activity that gives you a genuine break from work, you are compromising your ability to listen (and ultimately you are compromising your effectiveness as

a professional service provider).

In the short term, you may be able to manage the "background noise" that comes with a high-pressure job without resorting to exercise. But if you do not take the time to calm some of this noise, it will eventually interfere with your ability to focus.

If any of this sounds too warm and fuzzy, then you can think of it as properly maintaining your professional equipment: your mind.

How Does Coaching Work?

The sports analogy is probably the easiest one to follow. Imagine that a coach observed a promising high school basketball player and came up with a list of recommendations for how the player could improve his game. If the coach left the player alone for two years to implement the changes on his own, no one would expect this player to be offered scholarships by major universities.

Similarly, the key to success in business development or in a career change is sustained effort. A professional coach sticks with the attorney after the steps are identified and ensures that they (whatever they may be) get done.

It boils down to this: Many of us know what we need to do to lose weight, get in shape, or make business connections. But are we going to do these things without any external pressure, or is work going to always be the priority?

In truth, it is difficult to explain in words what coaching is, because in practice there is a wide range of coaching models and styles. But there are some

generalizations that can be made.

Executive coaches often charge a monthly fee and schedule weekly phone conferences with their clients. Fees can range from a few hundred dollars up to several thousand dollars for very senior managers.

At the start of the coaching process, many coaches will ask their clients to complete a number of exercises designed to help identify priorities. It is also typical for the coach and executive to meet in person at the beginning to help establish rapport.

Who Are Coaches?

At present, coaching is a relatively unregulated profession. Professionals come to coaching with a wide range of backgrounds. Attorneys often work with experienced members of the profession who have been through their own process and want to share what they have learned.

Coaches may also have a background in psychology or career counseling, and some may have been through a certification program offered by CoachU (see www.coachu.com for more information).

The bottom line is to find someone you feel you can work with and trust. Usually, this will mean finding someone who has been referred to you by someone else you trust.

Conclusion

A law degree can still open up a lot of doors for you, but real career satisfaction takes both hard work and planning. Having the degree and working in a good law firm are not enough.

Many of us do not take the time to reflect on what we really want. Some of us do not know what steps to follow to get what we want. Still others know the steps, but cannot figure out how to rearrange their professional and personal lives to make room for these important but not urgent activities.

A coach can be the key ingredient in making things happen.