

Managing

Coaching: Making the Leap from the Remedial to the Strategic

By Marcia Pennington Shannon

When economic times are tough, there's a distinct tendency among the affected lawyers: As their practices slow down, so do their marketing efforts. Some intentionally withdraw from activities owing to scarcer resources. For others, the retreat seems more psychological, akin to burying their heads in the sand. But instead of playing ostrich, why not put some of your extra time into low-cost marketing efforts?

How can coaching help high-potential lawyers close the gap between current and expected performance? For insights, I recently had a conversation with Diane Costigan, a New York-based attorney development expert and certified organizational and executive coach. She has over 14 years of law firm experience, holding positions in recruiting, professional development and personnel, including formerly serving as Senior Director of Professional Development and Organizational Effectiveness at LeBoeuf, Lamb. She was also a featured panelist and coach for the ABA Law Practice Management Section's spring program on "Living a Life in the Law."

Many law firms use coaching as a corrective tool for lawyers who have specific issues getting in the way of their effectiveness. But the business world uses it differently?

DC: Yes—many companies provide coaching as a benefit for their top or high-potential performers. Some of the accounting firms and banks, such as Deloitte and JPMorgan Chase, for example, actually have coaches on-site to help with a vast array of topics, ranging from general career advice to specific performance enhancement tactics. Others give all employees over a certain level a coach to help keep them performing at high levels. In the business world, coaching provides employees with a process to set specific goals necessary for professional development, space to practice what they're working on, a means to track progress and garner feedback, and tools to help them make changes sustainable.

What can the legal profession learn from the business world's model?

DC: Giving your people targeted, specialized guidance is a smart business intervention. Even top associates and partners in a firm have things they can be working on to make them more effective at their jobs. In addition to the general benefits mentioned before, a coach is often engaged to help in an area in which the coach has a specific expertise. Areas in which a lawyer can receive coaching most often include:

- Business development
- Leadership
- Effective communication
- Stress management
- Time management
- Career development
- Emotional intelligence, or playing well in the sandbox
- Work-life integration
- Management and supervision skills

Having access to someone with a particular subject-matter expertise can have greater impact than having a mentor, although a good coach will find a way to work a mentor into the coaching process as a resource for the coachee. With pressure to bill in law firms continually increasing, time can become the enemy of professional development efforts, compromising training, feedback and mentoring because partners and more senior associates just don't have

the time to do those things. Professional coaches can be an effective way to help alleviate some of that pressure.

Do you see some law firms already using coaching as a strategic tool?

DC: Yes, although it's still in the early wave. A good example is the Leadership Development Program at -Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney. Each year they identify up to 15 or so partners who are in or may soon be in leadership positions. The program, now in its second year, includes an extensive leadership training curriculum as well as an individual coach for each participant. It's a very progressive program.

As another example, Shearman & Sterling is offering a coaching program to second and third-year associates as a retention tactic. In this program, the associates work with individual coaches on topics such as career guidance issues, work-life balance and time management. Some firms are also inquiring about adding coaching as a follow-up to feedback received during their upward review processes.

How does coaching work?

DC: First, a coach works with a coachee to establish one or two goals that the coachee will work on throughout the engagement. Once those goals are established, the coach helps the coachee come up with a plan of attack and some tasks to get started. Often there's "homework" between sessions, which typically are held once a week or every other week for about an hour. Homework or action items usually involve trying out new behaviors or implementing a given tool. The coachee will report in at the next session, process the results with the coach, listen to feedback and then come up with new action items. The feedback piece is crucial. Depending on what the coaching topic is, anecdotal or 360-feedback from other relevant parties can -really add value to the process, too.

The accountability factor is what makes coaching effective, since the coachees know that there is someone who is really paying attention to their actions and their goals. It borrows a bit from the Hawthorne Principle, which teaches that people who are being observed produce more. Just knowing that you check in with someone once every week or two can really keep you faithful to what you're doing.

How do law firms recoup the cost of coaching?

DC: Like with many professional development endeavors, that's often hard to prove in any quantifiable way. One indirect way firms may see a return on investment would be in retention. From the associate perspective, many associates see their chances of making partner as exceptionally slim and often even undesirable. They do, however, expect to be trained and developed, and the firm's approach to that issue can affect turnover rates. Coaching is a relatively inexpensive way to show associates that firms are invested in their careers.

From the partner side, many of the issues in which coaches are called in to help partners can also impact the bottom line. It could, for example, result in a partner bringing in more business or in adopting behaviors that make him or her more desirable to work with.

How much involvement should the firm have in the coaching process itself?

DC: For coaching to be effective, there must be high standards of confidentiality. The coachee needs to feel safe in the coaching space and that things won't get reported back to the firm. That being said, firms can be instrumental to the process by providing background to facilitate the coaching, arranging for the coach to speak to relevant parties, and soliciting feedback to see if the coachee is making progress.

What should a firm or individual lawyer consider before retaining the services of a coach?

DC: In terms of selecting a coach, chemistry is very important. You have to be able to get along with and respect your coach. Also, it's helpful to hire a coach who has some familiarity with the topics you want to work on, as well as knowledge of the legal profession. Referrals are always helpful because you can ask the referring person specific questions about his or her experience.

However, even if you have the best coach, the coaching process doesn't work if the coachee doesn't want or isn't willing to do the work that coaching entails. In an instance like that, the firm is wasting money. I've actually advised firms not to move forward with coaching for certain individuals if I felt they just didn't seem engaged. In addition, firms need to be prepared to provide other resources and support around the particular coaching issues. For example, getting coaches for all the associates who work with a difficult partner—to help them work around the difficulties—is not going to be successful if the difficult partner is not willing to make some changes as well.

Coaching is a powerful tool. Unfortunately, it's one of those things that's hard to quantify or appreciate until you experience it yourself. I would encourage firms who are interested in using coaching to start small and with high-potential performers who are likely to make the most of it.

About the Author

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