

Step by Step

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COACH

BY JAMIE J. SPANNHAKE Much like working with a personal trainer to boost your physical performance, working with a professional development coach can boost your professional performance. But in both instances, you have to be ready to make changes and commit to the process—otherwise, you are going to be disappointed with the results. Here's advice to help lawyers get the most from the coaching investment, complete with hands-on tips gathered from professional development coaches who specialize in working with lawyers.



According to a Japanese proverb, “Vision without action is daydream; action without vision is nightmare,” sage words that apply aptly to one’s career as well. In other words, it’s not enough to have a vision for your career if you lack the knowledge, skills or motivation to make it happen. Likewise, even if you are taking steps to improve, you can’t know if they’re the *right* steps absent a clear vision. A professional development coach can help you focus on the steps you need to take to reach your goals and achieve your vision.

Effective coaches help lawyers develop their professional lives by bringing about changes in behavior and

giving them the tools they need to progress. Depending on their primary focus, coaches can provide help with making career choices and transitions, building or managing a practice, improving marketing and rainmaking techniques, or cultivating executive or other high-performer skills. But whatever type of coaching you seek, a targeted, effective process has this consistent theme: “A coach’s strength lies in her ability to understand human behavior and help the lawyer modify his behavior to reach his goals,” explains Susan Letterman White, founder of Letterman White Consulting.

So what should you expect from

your coach? A professional development coach can provide support in at least four areas:

- Assessing strengths and weaknesses
- Setting goals
- Planning and implementing strategy
- Integrating and sustaining change

However, it’s critical to remember that coaching is a collaborative process. While a coach will help break down your goals into actionable steps, and offer options for how to achieve goals based on your strengths and weaknesses, you must do the work. So your first step is to decide whether you are truly prepared to work with a coach.

Are You Coachable?

"You must be committed to the process," says Ellen Ostrow, founding principal of Lawyers Life Coach, who compares working with a coach to working with a trainer at the gym. While the trainer develops the weight program, the client must do the program to achieve results. If the client is not willing to put in the time and effort, the program cannot be successful.

For the relationship to succeed, the lawyer must also be "coachable," explains Shelley Canter, President of RJC Associates. That is, you must acknowledge that change is needed and be open to feedback.

For lawyers in particular, coaching can be uncomfortable, says Sara Holtz, founder of ClientFocus, because many lawyers just don't like to ask for help. Be aware that coaching requires acknowledging weaknesses, mistakes

or inadequacies, and it will require you to work outside of your comfort zone to change behaviors that are not working. Ostrow adds that the right coach will challenge the lawyer in a way that makes the process "optimally uncomfortable" and effective.

In addition, you must set specific goals. If the reason you need a coach is because your goals are unclear, then be prepared to share at least a broad vision of the future so the coach can help you figure them out. "You need to understand why you are seeking help from a coach and what you'd like to get out of the process," says consultant and advisor Ida Abbott. "Think deeply about what it is that you want to do and achieve."

To begin, spend time assessing yourself and your professional past. What have you tried before? What worked and what didn't work?

What do you like doing, and what are you uncomfortable doing? Seek self-awareness, and review prior evaluations to assess opportunities, skills, strengths and weaknesses.

Then, to get the most from the coaching engagement, you must be open during the sessions, since the coach's advice and feedback are based on what you share. "Be as honest with yourself and your coach as you possibly can be, otherwise the entire exercise will be worthless. If you aren't honest, the coach can't be effective," says Raquel Rodriguez, a coaching client and a partner at McDermott Will & Emory.

"Don't treat the coaching session like a deposition, where you only offer a short response to questions posed by the coach," says John Bowers, who spends time coaching attorneys as part of his role as business development manager at Saul Ewing.

You must also respect the process. "Treat the coaching session like a meeting with your most important client," says John Mitchell, executive coach at KM Advisors. During telephone sessions, turn off your computer, close your door and use a headset. Also, schedule 10 to 15 minutes before each session to transition mentally from work to the work of the session. Afterward, take the time to consolidate your notes and review your action plans. You need to be proactive between sessions and implement the strategy you've developed. Do the homework assigned, including assessing your progress since the previous session.

How to Find the Right Coach

Not surprisingly, given the nature of the work you'll be doing in the coaching process, it's important to find someone who syncs well with you and your needs. Start with referrals from

WHAT'S THE BEST ADVICE FOR A SUCCESSFUL COACHING EXPERIENCE?

"YOU NEED to understand why you are seeking help from a coach and what you'd like to get out of the process." Ida Abbott, consultant and advisor in leadership and professional development.

"MAKE SURE you are committed to your goal." Ellen Ostrow, founding principal of Lawyers Life Coach LLC.

"FOCUS!" Focus your efforts where they are most likely to have the biggest payoff. Sara Holtz, founder of ClientFocus and a business development coach.

"THE ONLY person who can change is the individual!" The coach can't do it for you. "Be as specific as

possible with what you want. If you want to change 12 things, and try to change them all at the same time, you will end up changing nothing." Shelley Canter, Ph.D., President of RJC Associates.

"TENACITY. Don't give up." Hook into your passions, because it is difficult to find the energy to keep overcoming hurdles without a passion for what you do. Susan Letterman White, founder of Letterman White Consulting.

"EVERYONE can benefit from advice that is from a perspective different than her own." Martha Fay Africa, a founding partner of Major, Lindsey & Africa.

others who've worked with a coach in the areas you want to address, and ask your bar association for referrals, too. Research the coaches. Visit their Web sites and read their articles. Consider education and credentials as well as experience, including the types of clients they've worked with. For example, is it important to you that your coach be a lawyer, or someone familiar with law firm culture, or who has experience working with lawyers?

Next, take the time to interview your candidates. Most coaches are happy to meet with a potential client to determine if there is a good match. In the interview, you want to get some details on the coach's experience and perspective. A key point to consider: Do you prefer a coach who will be able to offer you a perspective different from your own, or are you more comfortable working with someone that you feel is more like you?

Ask about their "coaching philosophy" as well. For example, some coaches make a distinction between consulting (offering solutions) and strict coaching (offering tools and options for self-determination of solutions). Find out their views on this difference in philosophy and assess which philosophy you believe will work for you.

Also consider whether you feel a personal connection. Are you sufficiently comfortable with the coach to be open and honest, to share your fears, mistakes and failures? "Make sure there is a personal connection and a professional understanding with your coach because you are trusting this person with your career," advises Faye Patterson, managing partner of PSA Consultants.

Most important in the interview, discuss why you are seeking out a coach. The coach should be able to tell you if she can help you achieve what

you want—and a good coach will tell you if she can't. Dr. Carole Stovall, president and CEO of SLS Global, says, "I ask potential clients what they are looking for. What would a successful coaching engagement be like? What is the outcome they want?" Knowing the answers to these questions will help you decide which coach is best for you.

What to Expect Once You Sign On

So after you've retained a coach, how does the process proceed? Here are answers to some common questions.

■ **How much time will it take?** While the duration of individual sessions will vary, depending on the coach and scope of work, it's typical to have a longer first session—60 to 90 minutes, with shorter follow-up sessions of 30 to 60 minutes. Typical frequency is once or twice per month, with e-mails or calls to check in as needed. The length of the *entire* engagement will depend on your goals. The minimum for many coaches is three months because most people need at least that amount of time to change behaviors, develop new habits and implement their strategies. Usually, though, there is no limit on the duration of an engagement. In fact, some lawyers maintain relationships with their coaches for many years, even after they've achieved their initial goals. For example, they may check in annually to specify goals and work on a strategy for the coming year.

According to John Mitchell, if a coaching engagement continues for years, it probably involves more than strict coaching. In these cases, the coach is serving as "a thought partner" who listens to a lawyer walk through scenarios and gives input.

■ **In person or on the phone?** Most coaching is partially in person and partially on the phone. While in-person sessions are the most beneficial, at least

initially, to help establish a good working relationship between the coach and lawyer, nearly every coach offers telephone coaching—it is efficient and can be very effective, especially for checking in between sessions.

■ **How much does coaching cost?**

Most coaches charge by the session. Fees vary, ranging from \$100 to \$1,000 per hour for individuals. The other common fee structure for individuals is a flat fee for a set period of time at a predetermined frequency—for example, \$5,000 for a three-month period with planned sessions every two weeks. Generally, if a firm seeks out coaching for its lawyers, then the firm pays the bill. If the lawyer seeks out coaching, he or she is more likely to pay. However, if your goals are consistent with the firm's goals, then you should ask your firm if it will pick up the tab. Other lawyers in your firm may already be working confidentially with a firm-paid coach, unbeknownst to you.

Getting the Most from Your Investment

A final tip is that you have to keep in mind that there is a distinction between a coach and a mentor. Mentors take you under their wing and take actions for you. "A coach, like in sports, is on the sidelines and encourages you to reach the goal, but you do the work," says Regine Corrado, a coaching client and corporate restructuring partner at Baker & McKenzie. "They are both important, but two different things."

The bottom line, says Diane Costigan, a managing director with the consultancy Shannon & Manch, is that the success of the coaching relationship ultimately rests with you. Her advice? "Show up and do the work!" **LP**

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