

Setting goals in legal coaching

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Practice Management analysis: Do lawyers need coaching to address their weaknesses? Robin Johnson, executive coach and managing director of OvationXL Ltd, says firms need to embrace partner-level support to tackle the shortcomings of its employees and increase profitability.

How prevalent is executive coaching in law firms?

A good number of lawyers have scepticism written into their DNA, so partner-level coaching has not been as broadly embraced as in certain other business sectors. Even 20 years ago it would have seemed extremely odd for a partner in a law firm to have a business performance coach--though times are changing.

What range of people use executive coaching in law firms?

A range of people use executive coaching, including:

Remedial candidates

These individuals may be labelled as being out of sync with their firm. Coaching helps to change specific negative 'behaviourial' traits.

Partners

The last ten years has moved to include supporting best performing partners, including people that one might at first assume wouldn't benefit from any additional help or encouragement. Everyone, without exception, can move up several notches through well-targeted personal development.

Heads of department

The benefits of bespoke coaching the top tier ripples out across the whole department and even the whole firm, so return on investment is higher.

What reasons do most people in firms have for using an executive coach and what can a coach offer?

The primary reasons for using a coach are to improve efficiency and profitability.

Many larger law firms have adopted 'whole life career development programmes' for their lawyers and there's much sense in this. Interventions at associate level and even with some partners can be performed in economic group workshops to cover off generic subjects such as time management. The more senior people become, the greater the advantage of going one-on-one. Whatever colleagues may say in public, I find 99.9% of senior people are privately reluctant to sharing their weaknesses in any detail in front of their peers.

It's best to establish a three-way relationship for each opportunity--the candidate, the coach plus their line manager (usually the managing partner or the HR director at this level). Coaching is not about getting together with the candidate for some comfortable natter. Highly specific outcomes need to be agreed right up front.

What are some of the most prevalent issues you deal with when coaching lawyers?

Coaching themes can be a barometer of the general economy, so this year there's much more work on strategic and commercial thinking with regard to mergers and acquisitions plus expanding resource (people). By contrast, four years ago there was more focus on job security, how to shed underperformers and even how to remain in business.

Timeless themes include:

- o greater self-awareness
- o enhanced communication skills (a big issue)/delegation skills/negotiation skills/public speaking
- o how to run efficient meetings that have specific outcomes
- o taking on more layers of responsibility
- o better ways of winning new business or expanding existing business

Among a candidate's themes, there might be some more personal topics such as how to regain energy levels, how to sleep deeper and for longer, how to manage elderly parents without feelings of guilt, work-life balance and how to cope better with extreme stress.

Another common issue is how to improve a particular relationship with a specific colleague.

How should the first candidate be selected?

This requires great care. Coaching is best presented as a privilege rather than a punishment. Some of my clients have asked one of their partners to help by being the 'guinea pig' for the new initiative. That's no bad approach. It often works well to choose someone who can go on to be the standard bearer. Some coaching follows an annual assessment. Improving annual assessment processes is another huge topic, as some firms conduct them in more robust ways than others.

What outcomes do you hope to achieve through coaching in law firms?

For firms that embrace the concept of partner-level coaching, I would be working to achieve significant year-on-year growth, faster decision-making, more efficient use of people's time plus turning unprofitable lines of business into profitable ones--and, vitally, creating a happier and more motivated workforce.

Is coaching lawyers an ongoing process or is it something lawyers may only need for a fixed period of time?

Heads of department are rightly nervous of any initiative that could turn into a time bandit so there's value in working fast.

The average [time I set] is five two-hour sessions, each paced one month apart. Sometimes a lawyer may say 'Well, I've decided to go ahead so let's do all the ten hours during the next month'. It doesn't work that way. The candidate needs time to digest each session. Sometimes their coaching landscape changes between sessions.

I had a new candidate approach me a couple of months back and I enquired if they had had any executive coaching before. They answered 'No, though I have a life coach'. I asked how many sessions they had had and the answer was 124. The relationship with their life coach had become a crutch and that is not the point of coaching.

Do you have any suggestions about how coaching can be used most effectively in law firms?

Firstly, talk to more than one coach so that you have a choice. It's worth investing some time and energy selecting a coach that possesses a cultural fit with your firm.

I often suggest working with just one or two partners at the start. Once these partners have been through the process they soon tell their colleagues how valuable the process has been by talking about tangible results they are achieving. Coaching should be transformational. It can change lives, in a business sense.

Are there lessons to be learnt from coaching in other business sectors?

It's healthy working across more than one sector, as you get a broader appreciation of what works, and what doesn't work, in leadership. 36% of my work comes from overseas and that's also useful, as there are massive cultural differences when it comes to managing people.

What happens once the coaching is complete?

Over 50% of my candidates ask for one follow-up session about six months after their contracted sessions have completed to help ensure they remain on track and that the results are being achieved. This is an opportunity to tweak new behaviours and perhaps introduce further practical tools for handling difficult situations.

Interviewed by Diana Bentley.

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