

Success Coaching for Lawyers by Caroline Newman

Performance coaching is becoming hugely popular, particularly within city and large regional law firms as a means of motivating partners and other lawyers and to increase staff retention.

Two years ago, the idea of having a personal coach would have seemed inconceivable to many lawyers who are considered to be skeptical and cynical. The thought that lawyers who are considered to be at the top of their profession would need help from someone who is not a lawyer to achieve their goals would have been inconceivable. Coaching has become increasingly popular not only amongst celebrities but also amongst top professionals in the banking, insurance and finance sector. Today, some of the top 100 law firms spend an estimated £4.5 million on coaching annually. A significant number of law firms now offer coaching through the whole career life cycle of their lawyers

'In the old days, people thought that if you had a coach you clearly were remedial and you didn't tell anybody. Nowadays, you probably look a bit deficient if you haven't got one,' says Guy Beringer, senior partner of magic circle firm Allen & Overy, summing up coaching's transition from oddball to a key element in law firms' training programmes.

Women Lawyers coaching

There has been an increase in the number of women leaving the solicitors and the barristers' profession and this is costly for firms and chambers. To help stop this hemorrhage, some firms have put in place pre and post-sabbatical and maternity coaching programmes. Barristers' chambers are also considering coaching as a means of retaining their best lawyers.

Coaching for ethnic minority solicitors

Many law firms have been making huge sustained efforts over the last few years to attract and keep minority ethnic solicitors and partners. As a former city solicitor I would say that had I had coaching (and/or mentoring) at the start and during my legal career, I would have felt more confident in interacting with the partners, solicitors and clients. When I joined my firm there was only one other black lawyer of African/Caribbean origin and possibly 7 Asian solicitors. Often I felt out of my depth and isolated and felt as though I did not belong.

In my view it is essential that in order to attract and develop ethnic minority lawyers that firms should offer them coaching. Ethnic minority solicitors will achieve the same benefits as other solicitors but they will also feel more valued that their employers believe in them and are willing to invest in them. This means a great deal to a group that has been oppressed and has for too long been on the receiving end of negative discrimination. Many minority ethnic lawyers feel isolated and find it difficult to ask for help within their firm and often have no one to turn to. Knowing that your firm believes in you can give a significant boost to one's self-esteem. This will help to retain minority ethnic solicitors and support them in the transition into partnership and in achieving their career goals.

But, what exactly is coaching and how can it help lawyers?

The International Coach Federation (the professional body for coaches) describes coaching as: "...an interactive process that helps individuals and organisations to develop more rapidly and produce more satisfying results. Coaches work with clients in all areas including business, career, finances, health and relationships. As a result of coaching, clients set better goals, take more action, make better decisions, and more fully use their natural strengths"

Coaching helps lawyers to:

1. Get their business as well as their personal lives in order, which can go a long way towards solving what may have looked like purely business problems.
2. Identify what they want to achieve, set goals and to stay focused on achieving those goals.
3. Become more successful in accomplishing their career goals and meeting and exceeding their targets.
4. Achieve clarity - knowing what to do and how to do it.
5. Achieve business growth
6. Increase self-confidence with clients and other employees
7. Get a better work/life balance
8. Having a renewed sense of purpose for their firm and their careers
9. Work through new responsibilities, as well as helping those on the partner track.
10. Increase motivation
11. Achieve billing, client relationship and retention targets

Often there is tangible behavioural change. The lawyer is often happier, more motivated and making better decisions.

However, not only city lawyers are getting a coach. Solicitors in legal aid firms and self-employed barristers are also using coaching as a means to achieve these benefits. Some lawyers prefer to choose and pay for their own coach so they are free to discuss whatever issues they want to without the involvement of the firm. A person often contacts a coach if they feel that things are not right or if they feel that they are not in control of some or all aspects of their lives.

Coaching provides the space and the environment for people to think and make better quality decisions. Firms recognise that their staff is their greatest asset and that they need to keep them happy and productive.

'About five years ago, I would have been skeptical of the value of coaching. Now I am extremely enthusiastic, and I can think of virtually no areas of activity where people cannot at the very least be improved by it and a number where their performance can be transformed.' says one top city lawyer.

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