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Get the Career You Want with a Professional Development Coach

By Jamie Jackson Spannhake



As attorneys, we spend many hours developing legal skills and increasing substantive knowledge in our respective areas of practice. But when was the last time you assessed where you are in your career, developed a plan to take you where you want to be, and then followed through on the plan? We, as lawyers, often find it difficult to create the careers that we really want.

A professional development coach can guide you on the path to your success.

A Professional Development Coach: What It Is and Isn't

A professional development coach is a broad term that encompasses several different titles, including executive coach, career coach, business coach, and business development coach. It is a coach who helps the lawyer identify and accomplish performance-related goals, such as business development, leadership development, and career advancement, explains Ellen Ostrow, founding principal of Lawyers Life Coach LLC. "A professional development coach can help a lawyer in every area in which a professional needs to develop apart from technical legal skills," she says.

As a professional, a lawyer needs objective guidance when facing new levels of career advancement in order to understand what needs to be done, adds Ida Abbott, consultant and advisor in areas of leadership and professional development. A mentor might provide this guidance, but many lawyers don't have an effective mentor. A good professional development coach can fill that role and act as your "trusted external advisor," says Faye Patterson, executive coach, managing partner, and founder at PSA Consultants. She explains that a professional development coach is someone external to your firm who "provides perspective and information that will help you in guiding your career and guiding the relationships that are key to your success."

While a professional development coach can help in many ways, she is not a therapist. Some coaches are educated in psychology, but the role and process differs between coaching and therapy. Sometimes issues come up that are beyond the scope of coaching. Those issues can be a block to success and should be handled with a therapist. The coach must be aware of her own limitations, and able to make a recommendation for therapy if appropriate.

What Issues Can Be Addressed?

A professional development coach can help lawyers with many different issues and challenges. According to Ida Abbott, there are three categories of issues that are most often addressed in a coaching relationship. The first is remedial where the lawyer needs to develop new skills or improve existing ones. For example, when a lawyer has terrible time management skills and it is creating problems for his colleagues. The second category is career-advancing. For example, when a senior associate in a firm wants to make partner and doesn't know how to do that, the coaching relationship would focus on how to learn what needs to be done, and then how to do it. The third category of coaching is for improvement of a leader. For example, a partner who already has a book of business but wants to expand.

Ellen Ostrow also offers several coaching examples. She has coached a first-year associate who was trying to understand the internal workings of her firm and how to develop relationships that will position her for advancement, while also working to achieve her work-life balance goals. Ostrow has also coached lawyers whose goals are related to handling a difficult professional relationship as well as worked with women who face obstacles in their legal careers, helping them to understand unconscious gender bias and how to move beyond it.

Coaches can also help with business development, practice building and management, succession planning, career transitions, developing and managing your "brand," becoming a better leader, effectively utilizing law firm politics, and identifying the type of clients you like and the type of work that you want to do.

Essentially, whatever your professional development goals, a coach can help you succeed.

What to Expect from a Coach

During the coaching sessions, a lawyer can expect a lot from his or her coach. First, the coach must listen deeply in order to help the lawyer clarify and articulate a specific, measurable, and realistic goal. The coach should then help the lawyer develop a strategic plan, breaking it down into action steps, and support the lawyer in addressing obstacles. The coach will then provide non-judgmental accountability by checking in with how things are going with the action plan.

Throughout the process, the coach provides guidance, insight, and resources as well as facilitates change and sustains it through questions and assessments, says Rachele “Shelley” Canter, Ph.D, president of RJC Associates. “A good coach asks you questions that you haven’t considered and gets you to think,” says Susan Letterman White, J.D., M.S., founder of Letterman White Consulting. She provides the lawyer with a different perspective, and with valuable direct feedback regarding the lawyer’s effectiveness. A coach may also “push you out of your comfort zone,” says Ellen Ostrow. “Not so far that you want to avoid the sessions, but far enough to grow and change.”

What Is Expected of the Lawyer?

Like the coach, the lawyer has responsibilities within the context of the coaching relationship. According to John Bowers, assistant director of business development for Fox Rothschild LLP, the role of the lawyer is two-fold. First, the lawyer must be vulnerable, recognizing that he or she is potentially fallible. Second, the lawyer must invest time and serious thought in him or herself to build self-awareness. Because these traits are often contrary to the perception that lawyers project, the lawyer’s role in the coaching relationship typically may be uncomfortable for many, Bowers says.

It is also up to the attorney to articulate clear and realistic goals. It is okay if, at the beginning, the lawyer lacks clarity as a good coach can help clarify goals and values.

During the relationship, “the attorney must be open to changing and willing to act on the strategy developed in the ses-

The information in this article is based on interviews with six of the country’s leading professional development coaches:

Ida Abbott—Consultant and advisor in areas of leadership and professional development; author of several books, including *Sponsoring Women: What Men Need to Know* (www.idaabbott.com)

John Bowers—Assistant director of business development for Fox Rothschild LLP, he identifies and promotes new business strategies for attorneys (www.linkedin.com/in/johndbowers)

Rachele “Shelley” Canter, Ph.D—President of RJC Associates, she provides coaching and career transition services for attorneys and executives and adjunct faculty to the Women Senior Leaders Program at Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. She is the author of *Make the Right Career Move: 28 Critical Insights and Strategies to Land Your Dream Job* (www.rjcassociates.net)

Ellen Ostrow—Founding principal of Lawyers Life Coach LLC (www.lawyerslifecoach.com)

Faye Patterson—Executive coach, managing partner, and founder at PSA Consultants, practicing for 17 years, working with Am Law 100 law firms and with attorneys in corporations; she also provides leadership retreats (www.psaconsultants.net)

Susan Letterman White, J.D., M.S.—Founder of Letterman White Consulting, she works with law firms on leadership and strategy projects and with individual lawyers on career development plans (www.lettermanwhite.com)

sions,” says Susan Letterman White. Ultimately, the lawyer must do the work.

What Can You Expect During A Coaching Session?

In the first session, goals are usually defined. Often, assessment and implementation tools are used to help define goals and develop a strategy. After the initial session, subsequent sessions usually begin with a check-in about how the action plan went from the previous session.

During the sessions, “you can expect to have a lot of questions put to you that may be tough and make you uncomfortable, and that may raise issues that you want to ignore,” says Ida Abbott. Because the lawyer is often asked to focus on these difficult issues, the coaching relationship may be unpleasant sometimes. But most people are eager for the help, and they endure and succeed.

As you leave each session, you can expect to have an action plan of practical and

measurable steps that will allow you to assess along the way if the plan is working, says Shelley Canter. Between the sessions, frequent contact via e-mail or phone is common, if desired, by the lawyer.

Average coaching sessions are about an hour. While the initial session may last up to 90 minutes, as the relationship develops, follow-up (or “check-in”) sessions may be as short as 15 minutes. The frequency of coaching sessions depends on where the lawyer is in the process related to his or her goal. For example, when a coaching relationship is just beginning and the goals and action plans are still being developed, the sessions may be every week, or twice a month. However, when the lawyer is executing the action plan, there is more time between sessions and the sessions are shorter.

The length of time between sessions depends on the “homework,” i.e. the action steps that must be completed before the next session. It also depends upon the

lawyer's availability. There must be sufficient time to do the homework between the sessions, which can be challenging with a full workload.

There are a variety of models for how a coaching session occurs. Sessions can be in person, on the phone, via Skype, Google hangouts, Facetime, or other video connection. In-person sessions are preferred for the initial meeting. Many coaches prefer in-person sessions in a conference room because they have tremendous value for creating trust, openness, and focus. Nevertheless, phone coaching is very popular because of geography and busy schedules.

The length of the coaching relationship is entirely up to the lawyer and largely dependent upon her individual goals and how far the lawyer is from those goals. However, as long as new issues are coming up, or new goals are developing, the relationship can continue for as long as the lawyer feels she needs it and is getting value out of it.

While there is no "typical" length of a coaching relationship, six months is the average. Some short-term goals may take less time, but that doesn't mean that the relationship will end after the lawyer has reached her goal.

Some lawyers like to maintain a long-term coaching relationship even after initial goals are achieved to ensure that they remain on track in their careers. A long-term relationship might mean monthly or quarterly—or in some cases, yearly—in-person meetings, with telephone sessions in between. This kind of long-term relationship can be particularly helpful to a lawyer who does not have a mentor who is active in her career.

So You Want a Coach—How Do You Find the Right One for You?

Referrals are usually best. But if you don't have a personal referral, there are sources for finding a coach. Start with your local bar association, the American Bar Association (ABA), or the National Association for Law Placement (NALP). Also, attend seminars or read books or articles by your coaches of interest in order to get a sense of their philosophy and if you think you'd like to work with them. Peruse their

websites, Google them, and check out their LinkedIn pages to see what their clients have to say about them.

When researching coaches, start by considering their credentials. There are many different certifications and training programs available to coaches, so research those credentials and learn what they really mean. More training is not necessarily better; it needs to be training that is relevant to your goals. Equally important is experience coaching in the area that you want to develop. So, specifically ask if the coach has experience and training in that area and if he can help you reach your goals.

You also want someone who understands lawyers and the legal industry. Your coach needs to talk the language, understand the time pressures, and appreciate the difficulty of work-life balance. The coach need not be a lawyer but should specialize in working with lawyers.

In addition to a professional understanding, "make sure there is a personal connection," says Faye Patterson. You want to feel comfortable with the coach because her role is to ask you tough questions and help you sort through difficult choices. Shelley Canter says the lawyer should ask herself: "Does this coach have the insights and style I need?"

Once you have narrowed your choices, interview several coaches. Some topics you might want to address in the interview include:

- Their training and their approach to continuing education
- Their philosophy of coaching
- Their belief about coaching, e.g. do they believe in developing a lawyer or telling the lawyer what to do
- Number of sessions required or recommended
- Method of sessions, i.e. in-person, telephone, etc.
- Cost of sessions
- Where they are most successful and least successful
- Who they like to work with
- What percentage of their business is coaching, consulting, speaking, writing, etc.?

There are not necessarily right and wrong

answers to the questions, but the answers will help you determine which coach is best suited to your personality and your goals. During the interview, the coach should talk about herself, but she should also ask the lawyer questions to ascertain the lawyer's expectations.

Ask the coach for references and call them. John Bowers cautions, "If someone can't provide three references, you'll want to look somewhere else." Ask the references what the value of the coaching relationship was to them. What was the result? What would be their advice to you going into this relationship?

After the interview process, when you think you know which coach you'd like to work with, ask for a sample session. Many coaches offer a free initial consultation, essentially creating a sample first session so the lawyer can experience what it is like to interact with the coach and understand how she works.

Getting the Most from the Relationship with Your Coach

Once you find your professional development coach, work hard to define and attain the career you desire. Most importantly, remember that the success of the coaching relationship ultimately rests with you. Your coach will guide and encourage you to reach your goal, but you must show up and do the work. **CL**

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