

THE LEADERSHIP
DIMENSIONWhere's Legal
Coaching Going?

By Douglas B. Richardson

The legal profession is still awakening to a fact well known to the private sector for several decades: personalized individual coaching can significantly improve leadership skills, communication abilities, management ability, collaboration and motivation. Slowly, lawyers are coming around.

But coming around to *what*? Who's getting coached? What are they getting coached about? What happens in coaching? What are the outcomes? Before the great economic train wreck slammed head-on into the legal profession, the evolution of legal coaching was following in the footsteps of corporate executive coaching. Current economic conditions, however, are causing legal coaching to lay new track and head off in additional directions.

Different Goals, Different Coaching

As in corporate executive suites, legal coaching in both law firms and corporate legal departments initially focused primarily on *remedial* efforts. That is, when an otherwise highly-valued lawyer demonstrated problematic, even career-threatening, behaviors or attitudes, an outside coach was enlisted to work — generally invisibly and confidentially — with the lawyer, usually over an extended period of time. Remedial coaching typically focuses on increasing an individual's self-awareness, often on issues of personal style (e.g., perceived insensitivity, arrogance, abuse of authority, aggressiveness, gender or other diversity issues, or general "emotional intelligence" problems). Once insight is improved, coach and lawyer generally create an individual development plan (IDP) that targets the modification or amelioration of certain particularly troublesome behaviors. Together they "work the plan" over a period of at least several months.

The Developmental Focus

In recent years, as firms have grown in size and

geographically, and the need for better legal leadership has become increasingly evident, leading-edge firms have begun exploring *developmental* coaching as part of leadership development programs for high-potential talent. Suddenly, instead of being seen as a "fix" imposed on a lawyer in trouble, coaching is seen as a positive perk, a signal that a lawyer is a high-potential leader. While the customary developmental coaching activity sequence (individual leadership assessment, objective-setting, creating an action plan and then coaching to plan) resembles remedial engagements, developmental coaching is proactive rather than reactive, focusing on developing maturity and needed leadership attributes, rather than on addressing problematic behaviors.

At Altman Weil, our law firm and law department leadership programs build on developmental coaching for groups of promising leaders. In these programs, the coaching agenda is tailored to the needs of each individual lawyer receiving coaching. Often the focus of leadership coaching is on communications-related "soft skills," such as gaining greater visibility or leadership presence throughout the firm, articulating a compelling vision of the future, modeling desired cultural norms, building collaborative alliances, assimilating merger partners or communicating a sense of urgency, momentum and accountability.

Against the backdrop of general *leadership* qualities (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivational ability, empathy and social skills), however, individual coaching assignments often also target specific practical *management* skills — planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling. Accordingly, a lawyer who needs to improve performance as new member of the Executive Committee or as an office managing partner might want a different kind of coaching (and possibly a different coach) than another

continued on page 8



Douglas B. Richardson

"... leading-edge firms have begun exploring developmental coaching as part of leadership development programs ..."

Legal Coaching ... continued from page 7

for whom improving rainmaking or social networking capability is the highest priority.

Key Person Coaching

Some law firms are also experimenting with a third kind of coaching that is neither remedial (i.e., nothing needs fixing) nor developmental (i.e., the leader already possesses a mature set of leadership skills). We call it “key person coaching.” Here, the greatest need is for a confidential personal advisor and sounding board as the firm or legal department responds to various organizational, political, environmental and economic challenges. Key person coaching may last a few weeks in response to a specific situation or continue for months, or even years, but it always shares two attributes: it is intensely personal and intensely contextual, focusing on the realities of the moment.

In engagements where the coach is, in effect, serving as a trusted *consigliari*, the dividing line between coaching and consulting may blur somewhat. Theoretically, consulting, on the one hand, involves sharing and teaching expertise and knowledge the client does not already have; it’s fundamentally an instructional relationship shaped by the outside expert. Coaching, on the other hand, starts with the assumption that the coaching client already has all the knowledge and resources needed; the role of the coach is to provide perspective, judgment and suggestions on how to align and optimize existing strengths and potential.

In key person coaching engagements, the coach has a mandate that relates as much to situations as to skills: *be as useful as you can, any way that you can*. Because this coaching generally creates an intense, trusting, confidential and protracted personal relationship, the coaching focus may be aimed and re-aimed repeatedly over time. It should never, however,

become an unplanned exercise or a “rent-a-friend,” or devolve into quasi-therapy. It is the job of the coach to keep the process grounded and focused on specific performance-related issues and agendas.

The Emerging Career Management Trend

In a changing legal profession, all lawyers are increasingly concerned with changing career management challenges. The classic questions — *Where am I going?* and *How am I doing?* — have taken on new urgency as jobs are eliminated and as a huge demographic bulge of Boomer-lawyers suddenly contemplates career transition pressures. We can expect this trend to accelerate as up-and-comers exert increasing pressure on Boomers reluctant to give way to the successor generation. Some law firms, aware of the risks of coercing senior-level lawyers to move on, are working with career coaches to create voluntary internal “equal opportunity” programs to provide lawyers with the assessment, guidance and planning they need to identify and pursue various late-stage career options.

Current Conditions; Altered Agendas

The extreme economic challenges facing the legal profession have created a painful paradox: to respond skillfully to unprecedented pressures and changes in their profession, legal leaders and managers need skilled coaching advice more than ever. Yet coaching is exactly the sort of discretionary expense that beleaguered law firms and law departments first strike from the budget. The pressure to focus on immediate economic realities means that long-term development of promising talent must take second chair to near-term practice priorities.

For the moment at least, large-scale leadership development programs with numerous participants

and a variety of coaches are being back-burnered. Scarce financial resources are being directed instead to professional development activities that produce an immediate return on lawyer productivity or efficiency.

Coaches and lawyers alike wait to see what the legal landscape will look like as we emerge from current economic stresses. Few predict an easy transition back to the same strategies and operations that reigned before the recession. Most imagine the emergence of a “new normal” that will take legal economics, lawyer-client relationships, practice management and firm leadership into uncharted waters. Part of the role of a legal coach will be to help lawyers navigate this transition, providing both general perspective and guidance on specific tactics and techniques.

The Right Coach for the Right Lawyer

Whatever direction they head, law firms and legal departments considering the use of coaches face two crucial priorities: 1) making sure that the right people are being coached and really can benefit significantly; and 2) making sure that the coaches they retain have up-to-the-moment knowledge of legal trends and developments, as well as strong basic coaching credentials.

Given the frailties of human nature, surely remedial coaching situations will continue to arise as often as ever, but sponsors will have to take greater pains to assure that: a) the stakes are high enough to warrant the expense of coaching; b) the potential coaching client fully appreciates those stakes (upside and downside); and c) the client has the capacity for change and growth to make coaching worthwhile.

It is also necessary to carefully vet possible coaching candidates for true leadership potential. While every participant will be flattered to be included in these programs, some may

prove unwilling or incapable of participating actively and effectively in the coaching process. The true stars of the future almost universally are able to translate coaching support into tangible gains in confidence, stature and judgment. Organizations that have realized the greatest benefit from coaching are those that make the effort to evaluate coaching candidate potential before the coaching investment is made. To paraphrase the old maxim, “quality in means quality out.”

It is equally important to evaluate potential coaches rigorously. While there are a number of respected coaching certification bodies, coaching itself remains an open-entry profession whose practitioners have uneven levels of skill and experience. The best legal coaches are fully aware of the competitive nature of the legal profession, appreciate the extraordinary stresses law places on its practitioners, and understand the complex interactions between lawyers and their colleagues, clients and competitors. They know that their coaching clients are likely to be skeptical, autonomous and resistant to change. They have to be empathetic when it’s appropriate and tough when it’s called for.

Measuring Results

It can be challenging to measure the efficacy of a soft skills program like coaching that often spans six months or more. There are few objective metrics that can be applied to the coaching relationship, except possibly where coaching focuses on rain-making and new client development.

Because most coaching focuses on improving the lawyer’s repertoire of behaviors, the best indicator that someone is maturing, gaining confidence or improving their judgment often is the emergence of positive changes in their interactions with others, manifested consistently over time. In developmental coaching,

multi-rater evaluations (so-called “360s”) from superiors, peers and subordinates are a good way to see how a lawyer’s style and abilities are perceived by others. It is tricky to use

follow-up support, paying out of their own pocket. This personal investment is perhaps the most telling proof of the value of coaching to the lawyer client. ♦

“Organizations that have realized the greatest benefit from coaching are those that make the effort to evaluate coaching candidate potential ...”

360s in remedial engagements, however, because the inquiry process may stigmatize the client or violate the confidentiality of a sensitive coaching relationship. In any event, it is imperative that there be some trusted feedback source within the law firm or legal department; coaches cannot rely solely on the subjective self-assessment of their clients, even if the client is well-satisfied with how he or she is progressing during the coaching process.

The best way to track progress is to set clear objectives at the outset, and to translate them into specific criteria in the lawyer’s individual development plan, which should be shared with a trusted person in the sponsoring organization. It is not unusual for individuals to master the behaviors targeted in their initial IDP — but at that point, the case, the cause and the quest are not over. The best coaching clients are lifelong learners, who understand the importance of continually updating their personal development objectives. Once they have learned to create fresh iterations of their IDP, the active participation of the coach may no longer be necessary, although many coaches maintain continuing contact with their prior coaching clients on an as-needed basis. Once a coaching program sponsored by a law firm or legal department is complete, some lawyers elect to continue coaching

Douglas B. Richardson is an adjunct consultant with Altman Weil, Inc., working out of the firm’s offices in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. He can be reached at (610) 886-2000 or info@altmanweil.com.