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How Coaching Picks Up Where Training and Consulting Leave Off

By Stephen E. Seckler

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The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know. —Albert Einstein

CONSULTING: If you're not a part of the solution, there's good money to be made in prolonging the problem. —www.despair.com

Education is in my blood. My father was a math professor, and my mother was a school psychologist. I was also raised in an affluent Jewish suburb in New York where academic accomplishment was highly valued.

Earning a graduate degree was my destiny from a young age. And I still consider myself a lifelong learner. The content that is freely or cheaply available through podcasts, webinars, Google searches, social media, YouTube, traditional media sources, and now ChatGPT has only accelerated my learning.

Despite this, I realized early in my professional career that reading and classroom training will only get you so far. Webinars, books, articles, and other educational content can increase our awareness of things we didn't previously know. But changing our behavior takes more.

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There are many tools that we can use as individuals or organizations to increase our effectiveness as professional service providers. Training and consulting are two great resources to help us identify the gaps in our knowledge.

In this article, I would like to explain why I believe that coaching is the missing link in elevating your performance and in achieving your goals.

I Began My Own Legal Career in Training

I had the good fortune of attending law school at Northeastern, which has a great co-op program. Before I graduated, I had worked for the U.S. Attorney in Massachusetts, a plaintiff's toxic tort law firm, the public defender, and the Office of General Counsel at Boston University. I also participated in a clinical program at Northeastern called the Prisoners Assistance Project. These were great opportunities for experiential learning and taught me the value of hands-on education with active feedback.

When I finished law school in the late 1980s, my interest in the legal profession was still high. But through my co-op jobs, I realized that my skills were best deployed in helping lawyers. I opted not to practice.

After graduation, I joined Massachusetts Continuing Legal Education (MCLE) as a program attorney. Over the next seven years, I planned hundreds of CLE programs with leading attorneys, judges, and consultants. Many of these were panels of experts talking about both substantive law and more practice-oriented topics such as marketing and law firm management.

In many ways, these were simply an extension of law school classes but with a more practical bent. The material was often delivered in lecture format, and the panelists prepared course materials that included a lot of checklists, sample forms, and other practice tips.

These CLE programs provided (and still provide) an essential resource in filling in the gaps that we don't learn as lawyers in law school.

But during my time at MCLE, I realized that the most valuable courses we offered were the hands-on trial practice workshops where participants were essentially coached on their litigation skills.

Becoming a Solopreneur and Launching a Recruiting and Coaching Business

In the 1980s and 1990s, the new field of executive coaching was emerging. Corporations were beginning to deploy coaches for their executives not as a remedial measure but as a way to elevate performance.

Coaching was also just beginning to find its way into the legal profession, initially to help lawyers increase their marketing skills. Marketing was also relatively new for law firms (the initial catalyst being the 1977 Supreme Court Case *Bates v. State Bar of Arizona*, 433 U.S. 350 (1977), in which the Court upheld the right of lawyers to advertise their services).

When our second child was born, I realized that it was time to leave the nonprofit world. My job at MCLE was largely a recruiting job, so I decided to launch my own search firm. In 1997, Seckler Legal Consulting was born.

At the same time, I wanted to be more than just a recruiter. I had worked with a coach in setting up my own business, so I began offering both recruiting and coaching services to the legal community.

Within a few years, I began to truly appreciate the distinction between consulting and coaching, and eventually, I stopped using the word “consulting” in my business name. Today, I operate as Seckler Attorney Coaching, and I am no longer recruiting.

Training Is an Essential First Step in Making Change; Consulting Can Further Raise Awareness

At MCLE, I enjoyed getting to know some of the leading minds in the Massachusetts legal community. I watched how they navigated their careers, and I was truly impressed at how much time these successful lawyers were willing to volunteer to help younger lawyers learn the practical skills they needed to be successful.

I also had the chance to plan numerous seminars put on by some great consultants.

I particularly enjoyed organizing and attending the more practice-oriented courses. I helped create a course entitled “How to Make Money and Stay Out of Trouble,” which is still going strong more than two decades later.

I also brought in some of the pioneers in legal marketing to “educate” lawyers about the marketing skills they didn’t learn in law school. I, myself, became a “student” of all things marketing.

These seminars made me aware of what I needed to know in order to be successful in generating work. But it wasn’t until I began implementing these ideas that I realized I needed help in getting my own business to the next level. Training didn’t necessarily change my behavior. Hiring a coach did.

Lawyers are good consumers of training. We got through law school because we were academically inclined. We are accustomed to listening to experts and turning to consultants for answers.

Law firms hire consultants to set up accounting systems, IT, websites, and a host of other marketing functions. But when it comes to our own individual performance, there is a gap between knowing and doing.

Continuing legal education programs and other outside training can provide some of the solutions, and hiring consultants can also be a big help.

But for most of us, attending a few seminars, reading a few books, or bringing in an expert is not enough. In part, that is because “you can’t read the label from inside the jar” (a phrase shared with me with me by another coach who was making the point that we all need a sounding board).

Hiring a Coach Is Like Hiring a Physical Trainer

Coaching is for lawyers who want to elevate their performance, increase their career satisfaction, and acquire the missing nonlegal skills that are necessary for success. It is similar in many ways to physical training. You might hire a physical trainer to help you develop and follow a fitness plan. Although you may already have a good idea of how to get in shape, you may be uncertain about which exercises to do, how long to spend on each one, or how to use the equipment at the gym properly.

Along the way, the physical trainer helps you develop short-term goals that support your long-term objectives. The trainer then holds you accountable. The trainer might support you when you are having difficulty and even suggest another approach when something is not working. Or the trainer might push you to the edge of your comfort zone.

That's why star athletes all have personal physical trainers.

Similarly, a lawyer hires a coach to help clarify professional goals and create an action plan for reaching these goals. Along the way, the coach provides support and serves as a sounding board and a resource. The coach also helps the attorney identify and move past roadblocks that are preventing success. A good coach then holds the lawyer accountable for achieving these goals.

Coaching Is Not Therapy, but It Is Therapeutic

Therapy is a relationship designed to help individuals address emotional, psychological, or behavioral issues. Therapists work to heal past traumas, manage mental health issues, and improve overall well-being. They use their clinical expertise to help clients understand and work through their past and present struggles, often focusing on healing and emotional stability.

Unlike therapists, coaches typically don't give advice or heal past trauma. Instead, they help individuals harness their own strengths and potential, focusing primarily on the future.

I like to tell my clients, "I'm not a real doctor, I'm a Juris Doctor. But I play one on Zoom." I don't diagnose or heal mental health problems, but the work I do in helping my clients be more successful is helpful to their mental health.

In addition, the knowledge that my clients bring into the room about the mental health challenges they have uncovered in working with a therapist can impact the choices they make in working on their professional goals.

What Issues Are Suitable for Attorney Coaching?

Attorneys can use a coach to work on a broad mix of professional issues at any stage of their career. Many attorneys choose to work on business development because selling is not a skill that comes naturally to many attorneys, and it is not a skill that is taught in law school.

In my coaching practice, I spend a lot of time helping lawyers overcome their resistance to selling and helping them to reframe legal marketing as an enjoyable activity that relies on building mutually beneficial professional relationships (see my article "[Turning Business Contacts into Business](#)" in the November 2022 issue of *GPSolo eReport*).

I also work with lawyers who are new to leadership roles. The things that make us effective in representing our clients (e.g., our skepticism, aversion to risk, analytical thinking, competitiveness, and preference for autonomy) can interfere when we are trying to be effective leaders and managers (see my article [“See Stop Thinking \(and Acting\) Like a Lawyer”](#) in the September 2022 issue of *GPSolo eReport*).

In addition, some of my clients are trying to figure out a better career fit in or out of the law. They need support in setting new career goals and in figuring out what steps to take to achieve those new goals.

Regardless of what we are working on, many of my clients need help with follow-up, goal setting, and general communication skills.

There are a lot of resources available to lawyers who need help with these issues. There is a lot you can read on the web about legal careers.

If you attend some training programs, read articles, listen to podcasts, or hire a consultant, you can get a better understanding of where the gaps are in your ability to generate work, run a law firm or corporate law department, or navigate a career transition. You may even learn some practical tips.

Coaching is what gets you from knowledge to action.

Put another way, coaching stands as the crucial “last mile” in the journey of professional development. While training equips you with knowledge and consulting provides tailored advice, it is coaching that bridges the gap between awareness and action. While other forms of professional support may illuminate the path, coaching ensures you navigate it effectively, turning potential into tangible progress.

Why Attorney Coaching?

Attorneys are good candidates for coaching because they are results-oriented. As busy professionals, attorneys have difficulty focusing consistently on things that are important but not urgent. Billable work often becomes the only priority in a lawyer’s day. Important activities such as administrative tasks, marketing, and giving feedback to associates frequently get put off.

In addition, although attorneys may get good training in lawyering in the early years of practice, they are less likely to get career guidance or guidance in developing a book of business or being effective managers.

Attorneys are also good candidates for coaching because they score high on personality traits such as skepticism and autonomy and low on traits such as sociability. Because coaching is generally one-on-one and not a “one-size-fits-all” solution, coaching gives lawyers the chance to take the lead in finding their own solutions by working with a coach who asks in-depth, individualized questions. This helps them get past their own skepticism and not waste time on issues they don't find relevant.

When Should I Hire a Coach?

There is no “right” time to hire a coach, but hiring a coach early on can avoid a lot of problems down the road.

Many attorneys hire a coach when they feel a pressing need. They want to make partner and need to learn how to develop a book of business. They want to go in-house but aren't sure how to conduct a job search. They were elevated to chair of a practice group and are used to being an individual contributor rather than a leader. They want to start their own firm.

Some lawyers may be stuck in a practice area that is not satisfying.

A coach can help a lawyer identify problem areas, create an action plan, and follow through.

Sometimes, a firm will pay for an individual lawyer to receive coaching. The lawyer should only accept this benefit if he or she is prepared to do the work. Coaching is about making change. It only works if the lawyer is willing to put in the effort.

How Do I Choose a Coach?

Hiring a coach is a very personal decision. Many coaches will give you a free consultation or coaching session. This provides you with the opportunity to see if you have good chemistry with that individual. Beyond chemistry, there are some objective considerations.

The more specialized your need may be, the more you should expect to pay. For example, a coach who can help with improving your general delegation skills would probably cost less than a coach who has deep subject-matter knowledge about how to set strategic direction for a midsized law firm or how to market a niche legal practice.

There are a range of styles in coaching, and you should decide which style best suits your personality. Do you want someone who will “hold your feet to the fire?” Do you want someone who will give you a lot of positive feedback? Do you prefer to work with someone who is very structured or someone who is flexible?

My style tends to be more flexible, and because I have been in the legal profession for more than 30 years and I've worked with lawyers in every conceivable type of role, I bring my “consulting” hat to my coaching work.

The bottom line is to find someone you feel you can work with and trust. Usually, this will mean finding someone who has been referred to you by someone else you trust.

Who Are Coaches?

At present, coaching still remains a relatively unregulated profession. Professionals come to coaching with a wide range of backgrounds. Lawyers often work with experienced members of the bar who have been through their own process and want to share what they have learned.

Coaches may also have a background in marketing, business, psychology, or career counseling, and some have been through a certification program offered by the [International Coaching Federation](#).

While I've never taken the time to get certified formally as a coach, I've been working with my own coaches on and off for more than 25 years, I've attended numerous trainings, and I consult regularly with a peer group of coaches who help me elevate my own performance as a coach.

Are You Ready for Coaching?

Practicing law can become a vicious cycle of constantly trying to bill more hours and saving everything else for a rainy day. Real career satisfaction takes both hard work and planning. This shouldn't wait for a rainy day.

Many lawyers do not take the time to reflect on what they really want. Some do not know what steps to take to achieve their goals. Others know the steps but cannot get themselves to take action.

In my experience, attorneys who build their own practice, figure out what they really enjoy doing, and develop the soft skills that are not emphasized in the practice of law are happier attorneys.

A good coach can help you get “there” quicker. So, what are you waiting for?

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