

Coaching Tips for Partners and CMOs

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"I tried coaching that associate but it didn't work."

"Well," I asked, "What did you say to him?"

"I told him to stop annoying the clients, but he keeps doing it."

Unfortunately, both supervising lawyers and leading a law firm are far more complicated than simply telling people what to do. When facing an environment of change and uncertainty, or even when helping a single associate overcome some professional hurdle, coaching can be an invaluable strategy. With its increasing popularity, the word "coaching" is often used colloquially as a proxy for giving advice, providing direction, consulting, and other activities. Whereas, professional coaching organizations define it as helping people explore and discover answers for themselves. Have you ever repeated the same wisdom or advice to someone a dozen times but they just didn't get it? It is frustrating, isn't it? You have something valuable to contribute, but it just isn't getting through. Most people give up at this stage, thinking that they have done everything they can, and dismissing the person as "hopeless" or "impossible." Obviously, one's ability to manage such situations improves with training and experience; but even a basic understanding of coaching principles can make a huge difference in your effectiveness in circumstances where your usual approaches simply are not working. Here are some tips to consider when coaching associates and partners.

The Relationship is the Foundation

Your ability to be effective with someone is directly proportional to the strength of your relationship. If you don't like them, don't try to coach them. You can be the most brilliant and knowledgeable person in the world, but if you don't like the person or if you suspect that he or she don't like or respect you, game over. That lawyer won't listen to anything you have to say. You might think, "I'm really good at hiding my opinions," but people are far more perceptive than we imagine. Unless you have an Academy Award for acting, don't even try. What you can do, however, and what does make a difference, is to make a concerted effort to improve your relationship. Go to lunch. Find shared interests, talk about family, look for common values and beliefs, etc. Once you have established a rapport, you are in a position to initiate much more meaningful discussions.

What if the person is too busy and doesn't seem interested in taking time for lunch? Building a relationship in this situation is very similar to the challenge law firm lawyers face when approaching corporate counsel. No one has time for trivial conversation. People are busy and may not be inclined

to talk about their weekends. Nonetheless, they will appreciate anything you can do to actually help them. In such circumstances, making a key introduction or sending them an article related to their practice areas, for example, are substantive ways to generate a more positive relationship with someone, even if there have been tensions or disagreements in the past. In turn, this paves the way for more in-depth conversations and the opportunity to offer coaching or guidance.

See Their Greatness

In the world of coaching, we start with the premise that, as human beings, we all have wonderful qualities that are part of the fabric of who we are, such as integrity, generosity, caring, creativity, humor, commitment, joy, among many others. These essential characteristics are different from person to person. On the other hand, human beings also have a less delightful side, the part that comes out when we are stressed or just trying to survive in the world. In your role as a coach, your job is to focus on the positive and help people to act in alignment with that side of themselves. For example, a lawyer may be angry, frustrated or recalcitrant; but those traits may be manifesting in reaction to a deep level of commitment. Lawyers who genuinely care about doing a great job for clients or creating a supportive and collegial work environment may become angry or upset when their goals and commitments are stymied. To coach such a person effectively, you should appreciate and acknowledge that he or she is, fundamentally, a caring, committed person (rather than focusing on the fact that, in the moment, he or she may be acting like a jerk).

Ask, Don't Tell

As smart, capable human beings, we tend to look at other people's problems and see simple solutions. Yet, think back for a minute to a time when you were stuck, really stuck. This could be when you were trying to decide whether to leave a job or a relationship, or perhaps when trying to achieve a seemingly impossible goal. Lots of people gave you advice, and it probably didn't make much difference. Still, maybe you got lucky, and there was someone in your life, a friend, a relative, a coach, who asked you questions and helped you to figure out what you needed to move forward.

This principle of asking rather than telling applies at all stages of coaching. Just because you see a problem doesn't mean the person wants to talk about it. If you saw an obese person, you wouldn't automatically assume that he or she were ready to dive in and discuss a weight loss program. It's the same with coaching. Everyone has issues that they are working on, or that they know to be obstacles, but which they don't necessarily wish to discuss. To coach effectively, you need to work with whatever the person wants to talk about or whatever seems most important to them. As the conversation develops, you can look for opportunities to bring up what you see as their opportunity for growth. For example, an associate may mention that he is frustrated that he can never seem to leave work early enough to see his children before they go to bed. Maybe you think that he should be more organized or delegate more. Clearly, there is a relationship between these respective agendas. Once you start looking for it, there are usually ways to connect the concerns of the person you are coaching with whatever issue you would like them to address.

Motivation is Key

The lawyers you work with are smart and capable; or, if they are not, you will want to rethink your hiring and firing practices. Therefore, if your attorneys are not making progress with something critically important for their careers, like business development or improving an important skill, then there may be a lack of true motivation. This is tricky because even the lawyers themselves may not

be clear about their own desires. I had a client recently who was of counsel and hired me because she wanted to become a partner. She wanted to make more money, have more independence, and gain more status. We came up with a great business development plan. It was aligned with her skills, talents and interests; and it inspired her. Nevertheless, it soon became clear that she wasn't making much progress. When we examined the situation more closely it became evident that she didn't *really* want to become a partner. Although, theoretically she liked the idea, when she really thought about the partners' lives, from her perspective, they did not look appealing. The partners worked even longer hours, spent all their social time with clients, and had even "less of a life" than my client. Once her true feelings became clear, she realized she would prefer to work elsewhere and is now employed in the federal government. Another client with similar concerns about becoming a partner decided to stay at her firm, but with the understanding that she is creating a version of partnership that works for her, rather than emulating the life and work choices exemplified by her colleagues. Of course, it is unlikely that your lawyers will confess to you if they have mixed feeling about partnership or practicing law. However, it is useful for you to recognize, as someone trying to encourage, mentor or coach them, that one reason for resistance or lack of progress could be that they are ambivalent about their present career trajectory.

Accept Emotions

Lawyers often think that work should be separate from emotions, and that we should be objective and professional at all times. Yet, in reality, people get frustrated and scream at colleagues, burst into tears, wake up in the middle of the night worried about cases, careers, status, and work relationships. To dismiss the emotional component is like ignoring the wind's impact on a sailboat. Thus, in order to coach effectively, one must always consider the emotions under surface of any presenting issue.

I spoke at a legal marketing conference recently and asked participants to brainstorm about how to coach lawyers who are having trouble with follow-up. One group said they would delegate the organizational aspect to the lawyer's assistant. When I asked what they would do if the lawyer still didn't take the follow-up actions, one person responded, "This is why I think all firms should have an in-house psychologist." While many, no-doubt, would echo her frustration, there are more practical alternatives. If a lawyer is behaving in a way that seems irrational, it generally is not because he or she is crazy or stupid. Rather, that lawyer is just like every other human being on the planet in that fear, anger or upset may occasionally divert him or her from making the best choices.

Consequently, when people are acting irrationally, it is very likely that fear or other emotions under the surface may be getting in the way. While some individuals may need serious psychological interventions, for most lawyers, simply having a chance to talk about and acknowledge fear or upset makes a huge difference in their ability to move past it. If you are serious about coaching, it is important to accept individuals' emotions just as they are. Telling someone that his or her feelings are irrational or illogical will be counterproductive. Emotions are not rational. But, on the plus side, they are also temporary. If given attention in a meaningful and appropriate way, people can move from fear to purposeful action much faster than you might think possible.

Trying to coach your associates and partners may seem daunting or frustrating, at times. Yet, the effort is well worth it. When your best associate stops eyeing the door and reengages with the firm; two key partners resolve a conflict that has been creating tension in the firm for months; or that one attorney finally gets proactive about developing clients it will become clear just how useful and effective this approach can be.

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