



## Executive Coaching in the Legal Profession

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**Coaching is rapidly becoming a corner-stone for management and staff development world-wide. Anna Britnor Guest, director of the Coaching & Mentoring Network, explores how far-sighted organisations harness the power of coaching to help partners and team members hone their people and leadership skills.**

In the last 5 years coaching has grown from a relatively low-key 'training' tool to a major development phenomenon which now underpins corporate values in organisations from blue-chip multi-nationals to ambitious SMEs.

No longer is it the preserve of those at the top or on the fast-track to seniority. Instead, coaching is now used by many as a means of encouraging all staff to identify and achieve their full potential.

And it's not just the corporate field that have found benefit in coaching – some within the legal profession are quietly finding that coaching adds a new dimension to their style of working.

According to Peter Beddows, Development Consultant to Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, the organisation has been building a comprehensive and aspirational people development strategy to extend broader capabilities beyond core legal skills.

As he explains "Perceptive lawyers recognise that whilst they may possess expert-level technical skills, relationship and leadership skills are also very important. These can have a huge positive impact in all areas of their work".

Hugh Crisp, Managing Partner at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, expands "For us, coaching is not just about working with four to five top people to lead the firm. Leadership happens at all levels – many of our staff are leading teams and managing cases. They need to work with people and get things done. In our business you can't wait to learn these skills".

### **So, what is coaching?**

According to Eric Parsloe, author and director of the Oxford School of Coaching & Mentoring, "The purpose of coaching and mentoring is to help and support people, in an increasingly pressurised and competitive world, to take responsibility for managing their own learning in order to maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and proactively become the people they want to be".

Whilst many organisations emphasise the importance of formal technical training coaching provides the personal attention required to develop softer skills.

It is a 'non-directive' process – the coach does not tell the individual what to do. Instead, they prompt, through questioning and reflecting, to facilitate the client's own thought processes.



Crisp identifies some common outcomes of coaching. “Coaching helps me to understand interpersonal relationships better, for instance, the difference between how I see myself and how others might see me. It helps me understand things I might otherwise be aware of but not be able to explain. I can better appreciate how I interact with others – in particular where I might conflict with some ‘types’ of people and how I can adapt my communication style or behaviour to overcome this”.

Crisp also finds that coaching brings fresh insights. “My coach has helped me to identify how to manage my weaknesses and how to maximise or make the most of my strengths. Without a coach I might have felt pressure to eliminate my weaknesses – an impossible task -, whilst just accepting my strengths as they are and not doing as much as I could to proactively make use of them”.

John Leary-Joyce, director of the Academy of Executive Coaching, which provides master coach training, agrees. “In many organisations there is pressure on managers and executives to be strong in all situations and not to admit to weaknesses or problems. Yet, privately, many senior executives or partners feel out of their depth in some situations and have no means of voicing or dealing with these concerns”. Coaching offers an entirely confidential means of achieving this. Leary-Joyce also explains that the relationship should be both supportive and challenging “The coach’s role is to be curious, to ask questions, to challenge ideas and assumptions, to uncover difficulties and explore them”.

Stuart Esworthy, executive coach with Worthy Associates, sums up the opportunity. “It’s a no-holds barred, ‘tell it like it is’ conversation – with no fear of comeback. It reaches the parts other conversations can’t reach”.

All those in the coaching field stress that coaching is not generally about fixing problems – it’s about taking an individual’s strengths and building on them.

As Pauline Willis, director at Lauriate Coaching, explains “In some organisations, people start with a perception that ‘If the company thinks I need coaching there must be something wrong with me’, but they soon see that it is not remedial. It’s about bringing real practical change through helping people to become more aware and to develop behaviours and attitudes which move them forward. Instead of being seen as a fix for ‘problem children’ staff at all levels see it as confirmation that the firm is committed to them and to investing in their future.

This can represent a significant mindshift for some organisations. As Esworthy explains “Within the legal profession there is sometimes a culture of self-sufficiency – you have to cope and ‘if you can’t stand the heat get out of the kitchen’. Professionalism is supremely important to law firms and there is an attitude that ‘we can’t be seen to be like ordinary people”.

Leary-Joyce picks up the thread. “Our work and home lives are a made up of a complex system of relationships and interactions between ourselves and other ordinary people. Strength comes not from isolating ourselves but from being comfortable within this complex and constantly changing environment. How often do we feel at odds with someone’s behaviour or with what they are saying? Chances are that if we feel like this then so do they about the situation or us. Having a greater understanding allows us to explore this with others, leading to more positive, productive and mutually beneficial relationships”.



As one of Beddow's coaching clients described it "I feel like until now I've been using my right arm – now I find I've got a left-arm as well".

Nothing works for all of the people all of the time, however. So, for a legal practice to take advantage of coaching there are some key considerations that need to be taken into account.

Confidentiality, for one thing, is fundamental. This is true for coaching in all organisations but Beddows feels that it is even more crucial in law firms. "In some blue-chips there may be total confidentiality between coach and coachee but the boss still tends to have specific expectations of what they would like the outcomes to be. A partnership firm has no experience of this model. Partners have obligations to their colleagues and this peer system maintains the working environment but there's no management structure in the form found in corporates. Although an individual's coaching may form part of a wider company initiative, it is entirely private – there is no organisational linkage".

Crisp adds "Building consensus and self-governance are very important values within our practice. Hand-in-hand with this is trust – managing partners need to trust each other to run their own area in a manner that upholds the business reputation". There is a strong parallel here with coaching, which encourages a collegiate or collaborative approach to development. As Crisp explains "It's a great thing to mentor someone and see them succeed but we tell our people 'we can't do it for you'. We give our people tools, help and access to good coaches but then it's down to them to make use of these – and then to help others to do the same".

Peter Callender, an executive coach working with corporates and the legal profession, agrees. "Trust is fundamental to the coach being able to challenge the client, asking the tough questions to help the client think about things they might not have considered. Many senior managers and partners get frustrated by the fact that their colleagues and staff rarely challenge their decisions – and when they do it's often from a defensive position".

To underpin these success factors of confidentiality, trust, collaboration and managing one's own development, there needs to be strong commitment within the practice to development and learning.

There is great pressure within the legal profession to maintain and develop legal knowledge and experience but those who see development of softer or interpersonal skills as only for those with 'problems' face an uphill struggle implementing coaching programmes.

Leary-Joyce stresses "Coaching has to be reflected in the firm's core values. There has to be an understanding that people at all levels are learning; that this is an ongoing process through our entire lives".

In order to successfully implement a coaching programme companies need to be open to a culture that:

- Encourages people to spend time being coached
- Recognises that development of personal awareness, interpersonal relationships and leadership skills is not only relevant but necessary to business success



- Offers a supportive environment where colleagues help each other to work with their strengths and weaknesses
- Is clear about the role and purpose of coaching
- Integrates coaching into a wider developmental initiative incorporating workshops and other training activities.

Coaches and recipients typically agree on criteria for appointing external coaches:

- Look for credibility and relevant experience and track-record
- Ensure your coach has a strong sense of the future – coaching is about looking forward not reflecting on the past
- Agree on clear two-way expectations, together with timescales and an in-built review process
- Ensure you have rapport with your coach and can build a strong degree of trust
- Check that your coaches are willing to bring in or work with other coaches or experts when they reach the limits of their competence.
- Seek recommendations – word of mouth referral is second to none. Check references and find out how committed they are to their own development – and the coaching profession
- Look for something different – rapport is important but look for a coach who doesn't mirror your own style

In conclusion, coaching is no panacea but those who adopt a culture of coaching within their firm can expect to develop an environment where good people achieve their full potential. As Beddows puts it "You don't have to be ill to get better".