

## Lawyers in the trenches: how executive coaching can help

By: David Brendel and Stefan Kalt ☉ June 8, 2017



Law schools and continuing legal education programs do an excellent job teaching such subjects as civil procedure, torts and criminal law, but they typically don't teach aspiring lawyers how to market their services, work effectively with clients and colleagues, mobilize support staff, or manage projects — in short, how to run a law practice like the business that it is.

Law schools and CLE programs also teach little about setting long-term professional goals and the steps needed to reach them.

The same goes for personal organization, health and wellness, stress management and work/life balance.

Law firms and other employers of attorneys (in both the private and public sectors) struggle to help recent hires develop the knowledge, skills and habits critical to success in those areas. Small and medium size law firms, in particular, often don't have the time or resources for such training and development.

### How can executive coaching help?

Executive coaching seeks to fill the void.

Through a structured process of "active inquiry" sessions with the coach, attorneys can achieve greater clarity about their professional and personal goals. The coach will ask the attorney open-ended questions designed to deepen the attorney's self-awareness and open his mind to novel and innovative approaches to practice management as well as behavioral changes to propel career growth and job performance.

Coaching sessions are scheduled regularly, typically once or twice a month for four to six months, to help attorneys stay on track toward reaching their goals. By the end, lawyers have a sustainability plan that identifies practical steps for lifelong learning and deepening of relationships with trusted advisors, mentors and colleagues.

### Alternatives to executive coaching

For some attorneys, participating in facilitated group seminars and dialogue sessions can serve a similar purpose. These types of seminars enable attorneys to receive peer support and feel less alone in their struggles.

By having confidential dialogues with colleagues across a wide range of practice areas, attorneys can learn from each other about best practices and new developments in the law beyond their own specialty area.

They can gain insights and perspectives on how to manage demanding clients, underperforming colleagues, tight deadlines and regulatory challenges. Some groups also address professional branding, digital marketing and other opportunities in the internet era.

Some even venture into the ethical and philosophical realm, addressing core values and a mission-driven approach to the practice of law in a broader societal context. Individual or group coaching can go beyond merely helping lawyers avoid burnout and allow them to achieve greater joy and fulfillment.

### Case study

Here is a typical scenario from our coaching practice. The case is presented as a "composite" of several clients, in order to protect the privacy of each.

Dana, an attorney who runs a law firm with three other lawyers and a couple of paralegals, has been under major stress. Whenever she receives a phone call, her shoulders tense up. In some cases, it's a potential new client calling — engaging and lucrative, but demanding and tough to work with. "I can't blow this one," Dana thinks to herself.



She's been winning fewer clients lately and knows that she needs to keep every client she can land. She collects herself and comes across well on the call, but finds it difficult to focus after having slept for only a few hours the previous night.

Much has been on her mind: the difficulty managing her new paralegal, long work hours and absence from family life, her practice's lack of direction, and little time to network and market her services. In short, she has been feeling exhausted, frazzled and apprehensive about her future.

How can executive coaching help Dana improve her situation? Coaching first and foremost is about helping clients pause, take a deep breath and reflect on their life priorities. Coaching conversations, driven by the active inquiry process, empower clients like Dana to proactively consider novel ideas and approaches, rather than default into a previous set of self-limiting cognitive and behavioral habits.

The coach and client together create a developmental action plan that defines key challenges, sets forth practical goals, and articulates strategies to reach those goals. They create a document separating "limiting mindset" from "aspirational mindset," and "limiting behaviors" from "aspirational behaviors."

The process helps clients change their beliefs and behavior patterns so that they can effectively implement the strategies outlined in the action plan.

Among the goals in her action plan, Dana included setting healthy boundaries with clients. To achieve this goal, she chose to experiment with delaying her responses to some non-urgent requests. One of her limiting beliefs was that she "must respond to all my clients immediately if I want to maintain my practice."

She used the coaching to shift toward a belief that "clients have hired me in part to exercise my good judgment about the appropriate time for taking action on their behalf." Always answering client calls immediately counted as one of Dana's limiting behaviors. She worked hard to transform her pattern of being overly reactive to client inquiries and demands.

When feeling drained, she began to let some calls go to voicemail and returned them later or the next day. When she did answer the calls, she frequently informed the client that she would need to schedule the conversation for later.

Dana used the coaching process to track her success at implementing these changes and adapting them to unique scenarios. With time, she felt better about her work product and had greater confidence that she was providing superb service to clients, while also taking care of herself.

*David Brendel and Stefan Kalt are executive coaches at Leading Minds Executive Coaching.*

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