

Performance Coaching in Law Firms – Maximising Your Potential

By Nick Cromwell

Increasingly, law firms are turning towards Coaching for their staff. This drive comes not just from HR and Training departments, but also from partners and senior lawyers themselves.

When dealing with performance issues, whether this is reactive (fixing a “problem”) or proactive (improving something that is already working well) the solution in the past has often been to go on training courses. Here, I would like to pose a question; what do most training courses have in common?

The answer is that most training courses involve an element of teaching or instruction. We go to be trained, to have things done to us, to come away with more knowledge about a given topic than we would have had previously. Coaching is not training, although good trainers will employ Coaching techniques. So what is Coaching? What distinguishes it from training and what makes it so powerful?

Socrates said, “I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think”. Coaching is the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another. It does this by enabling people to think for themselves to develop their own solutions. Because of this, it is extremely powerful. Coaching concerns the here, the now and importantly the future. If it looks to the past, it looks to the recent past in order to learn and change quickly. It is not therapy. Increasingly, in the business context Coaching is about improving performance. It does this by enabling individuals to meet their full potential and helping them to learn for themselves rather than by instructing or telling them.

Training courses can be extremely useful, especially on the technical side. If there is new legislation that we need to understand, it can be a very beneficial way to learn about this, to be able to hear from an expert. But what happens when we go higher up in an organisation? What happens when we become the expert or at least when others in the organisation expect us to be the expert? Where do we go for our support and learning then?

Recently, during a Coaching session with a senior partner and head of department in an international law firm, he recounted how when he first started working as an associate, he used to think; wouldn't it be great to be my manager, to have their level of freedom to make decisions. Later on, as a more senior lawyer himself, he thought he would have so much more time if he could attain the position of partner. As a partner, he wished to have the influence and responsibility of the head of department, thinking again that this would give him more freedom. When he did eventually get to be head of department, things suddenly looked very different. It was only then that he began to understand that leadership does not automatically give you more time, that delegation is an art and that he now had less people to talk to. It is an old cliché, but it really can be lonely at the top.

Coaching is valuable for people at any level within an organisation. However, it is particularly useful for senior and very senior people because they will invariably have

less people to talk to, have more responsibility, be under more pressure and have higher levels expectation both of themselves and by others. The head of the Intellectual Property department, for example, will be head of department because he or she is an accomplished intellectual property lawyer, not necessarily because they are an experienced manager. Coaching allows those in senior positions to look at all aspects of management. Common themes include running a department, strategy, managing a team, client relations and marketing. The coachee looks at issues in their own time and at their own pace, although the coach will use different models, tools and techniques to ensure that the Coaching session remains structured, objective and focussed on outcomes.

Coaching is more relevant now than at perhaps any point previously. We work in an increasingly competitive environment. The pressure brought about by the pace of change, increased competition (both internal and external) and the tension that can exist even within one department, for example because of the way chargeable hours are structured, and long hours are just some of the issues facing lawyers today. Many lawyers now work for firms with head offices based outside the UK, primarily in the United States. This brings pressure in terms of cultural difference and levels of expectation. Clients themselves are operating within an environment of heightened competition and law firms need to be able to respond to this. Coaching is extremely useful in providing space for objective reflection, followed by planning and finally action.

Increasingly, law firms can find themselves growing through merger, while conversely lawyers find that their area of expertise needs to be ever more focussed on one particular aspect of the law. A large part of Coaching has always been about successful change management.

Law is an especially tough profession, particularly competitive and, it has to be said, resistant at times to change. Despite this, it is my experience that this resistance to change is itself changing. More and more law firms are now embracing the concept of Coaching as a tool to increase potential and improve performance. Coaching is no longer seen (as it used to be) as a fix for problems but as a proactive way to assisting development, individually, within teams and across organisations.

About the Author: Nick Cromwell is an independent management, executive and leadership coach. He has particular expertise coaching senior lawyers, partners, heads of department and managing partners in law firms as well as directors and senior executives on the operational side. More details can be found on his website; www.nickcromwellcoaching.co.uk

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