



COACHING TO IMPROVE SKILLS

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One of the Solo and Small Firm Section members wrote to me awhile ago about a coach she had hired to help her improve her marketing and management skills. She had attended several of my seminars in the past, and knew the “what” to do, but lacked the “how” to put it into action. This applied not just to marketing, but to all sorts of aspects of her practice that she wanted to improve. She just couldn’t get her thoughts to translate into action. At some point she came across a personal coach who “clicked” with her. She recommended him highly as someone who had helped her make significant improvements in her practice, and her bottom line.

Given my schedule, it took months before I found time to make an introductory call to coach Scott Messer (<http://www.salesevolution.com/>). And it then took many more months beyond that to schedule an opportunity to see him in action. On Monday, October 15, 2007, I was a guest at one session of Scott’s Sales Evolution “Boot Camp” which was held at Temple University’s Fort Washington campus.

The collection of “students” was diverse, although not a single one was an attorney. I was also the only woman in attendance. But the mix of mature entrepreneurs and sales people gave a nice blend of talent, perspective, and personality.

The purpose of the half day session was to further skills in relationship management, expectation management, and sales assertiveness. My neck hair initially bristled at that last phrase, until it was defined as a focus designed to change behavior from aggressive to assertive, in order to get what you want and deserve. It was all about how to ask for more business, ask for new business, get competitive information, and get in front of the right people. I was already thinking that this was something that would be of value for any young lawyer, and began taking notes and participating.

Messer's style was easy-going and entertaining. Most of what he said was not rocket science, but it resonated nonetheless. He kept doling out useful tidbits of information one could put to immediate use.

THE CLIENT IS ALWAYS RIGHT, BUT NOT ALWAYS RIGHT FOR YOU

Even though this was not a law-specific seminar, I was impressed with the universal applicability of the concepts presented. For example, in law firms I find that lawyers often take on clients against their own best judgment. There is often a mindset that one must take on as a client anyone who comes in the door. By ignoring that little voice inside which keeps saying "not this one" lawyers often find themselves losing fees, winding up with a dissatisfied client who bad-mouths the firm, or worse, facing a malpractice suit. Messer presented this series of five questions to ask before accepting any new clients, especially those who you suspect may be problematic:

1. Will it make economic sense to represent the client?
2. Will having the client or handling the matter enhance your reputation?
3. Will the client appreciate the effort and energy you put into their matter?
4. Will the client be a likely source of referrals?
5. Will the client allow you to do your job, and do their part to assist?

Coming to terms with the need to be selective in accepting clients is never easy. It means occasionally turning away those who need assistance in your practice area, and who are not conflicted out, just because they are not the "right" client for you to represent. You're probably thinking that it's impossible to know; you have no crystal ball. Yet, most attorneys readily admit that in hindsight they could clearly see the warning signs up front about the client they *should* have rejected, but instead chose to ignore them.

HOPE IS NOT A SALES STRATEGY

Messer's coaching philosophy is a simple one: One cannot train professionals how to be more effective in a one- or two-day seminar without extensive follow-up. It takes time, with continuing, ongoing reinforcement, using both live interactive coaching and a committed trainer who take a personal interest in helping one grow both professionally and personally. It requires a sustained commitment to continual incremental change and personal development. In short, it's a



commitment on the part of both coach and the individual being coached.

Those who have attended my seminars have heard similar words from me. Real progress is rarely about taking a giant leap forward at a moment in time. It is about making continual baby steps. Change is a process, not an event. But for some, creating a process to change is more difficult. And that is where the coach is helpful. A coach helps you define your vision, goals and objectives, create a plan, and guide you through implementation. It's like having a personal trainer come to your home to guide you through your exercise regimen. Sure you probably *could* do it on your own. But chances are, without that scheduled appointment which creates both accountability and motivation, you won't.

IMPROVING THE BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT SKILLS OF PARTNERS

I am frequently called upon to survey firm partners. One of the questions usually asked is, "Do you believe that all the partners in the firm are equally capable of helping to develop business for the firm?" Usually an overwhelming majority of partners answer no. I then ask, "If you answered NO to the previous question, do you believe that with some coaching and assistance the partner(s) might improve their business development skills?" Usually close to 100% answer yes. If you think about it, you probably would answer both questions the same. And yet, most firms do not seek out a good coach to work one-on-one with partners who need the assistance. There's a disconnect there I just don't understand.

Ok, maybe it's the cost factor. But I doubt it. Because in my experience lawyers find lots of ways to spend dollars in less beneficial activities. I can only conclude that there might be some stigma attached to utilizing the services of a coach / consultant. And that's just nonsensical. An attorney who takes positive steps to improve performance in any aspect, whether on the professional or business skill side of the practice, is to be applauded.

TEACHING YOUNG LAWYERS TO ENTER THE FEAR ZONE

I can't say often enough that marketing is a learned skill. For a few lucky souls it's a natural skill. But for the overwhelming majority of attorneys it is something which must be learned. And attorneys learn mostly by *doing*, not by reading or listening. That means that they have to be given ample opportunities to practice the skills they are being taught, to do them badly, and to get better with each attempt. Firms invest enormous sums teaching young lawyers how to be technically proficient. But they often wind up casting them aside when it comes time to make partnership decisions, because of a lack of rainmaking talent. And in



doing so, they lose their investment. That makes no sense and leaves no winners in the process.

One of the concepts Messer presented that I came away with has already been included in subsequent discussions with attorneys. Visualize the target on the archery range. The small red circle in the center —the bulls-eye— represents your comfort zone. That's where the activities you do well reside. It's usually fairly small, especially for a young lawyer. The yellow ring around that represents your discomfort zone. It includes situations and activities you force yourself to do, even though you are not as comfortable doing them, and may not do them as well. You will usually make some effort to avoid your discomfort zone when possible. Lastly, the white ring around the yellow discomfort zone represents your fear zone. This is the area where angels fear to tread. And it is the largest area on the target. You will do anything you can to avoid any situations or activities in the fear zone.

Developing ones marketing skill set is all about moving ones boundaries outward. It is about creating opportunities to step more frequently into the discomfort zone, so that eventually many of the situations and activities which were uncomfortable become comfortable. As the red comfort zone enlarges to accommodate these additional situations and activities, the boundaries of the yellow discomfort zone expand proportionately. This serves to shrink the remaining area taken by the fear zone. Continually expanding ones repertoire of accomplished skills and activities will make the fear zone become smaller and smaller. It will always be there, but the smaller it gets, the less impediments you will find to participating in the activities which will make you a successful rainmaker.

This process, in my opinion, must be a thoughtful one. And for many, it may require some outside assistance to map out a strategy, and to help hold you accountable from time to time to keep the promises you make as much to yourself as to your firm.

There are a number of coaches out there. Many work extensively with lawyers. For example, Steve Gallagher (<http://www.LeadershipCoach.us>) spent a long time serving as the Practice Management Advisor for the New York State Bar Association before leaving to become a personal coach.

If you're interested in working with a coach, take a look at the myriad of choices available at <http://tinyurl.com/29y37j> to find someone who "clicks" with you and meets your budget. Remember, this isn't really rocket science. It just seems that way when you don't know how to get started, and keep yourself motivated. And just as there's no stupid question other than the one which never gets asked — although I will allow there are a lot of inquisitive idiots in the world— the only



thing wrong with coaching is not using one when it can make a significant difference in your success.

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