

Is It Time to Add a Coach to Your Team?

by Jim Moore

Currently only a handful of large law firms offer internal coaching and counseling, but the concept is gaining traction in professional development circles as the benefits of coaching become apparent.

After ten years of practicing law in a large law firm setting, I hit a crossroads and needed to decide where next to take my legal career. Despite my success, I no longer had the fire in the belly I needed to push toward partnership and was unenthusiastically poking around at in-house opportunities. I suspect this scenario may sound familiar to many of you.

While running through my pro/con list of what I liked and disliked about my practice, I realized that I enjoyed every and any contact I had with the Talent Development team at O'Melveny & Myers and, on a bit of a whim, asked some former lawyers how they liked their life in the legal professional development field. That whim turned out to prove the adage that "timing is everything." O'Melveny had just posted a position for an internal counselor/coach, and this is where I have found my home for the past six years and counting. The question I initially asked — and the one I get asked most frequently when I explain to people what I do — is why in the world would a law firm hire an internal coach who would likely be counseling people in ways that may ultimately go against the best interests of the firm? That answer is multifaceted and one I hope to explore with you through the help of some colleagues who ply this same trade along with me.

So Tell Me Again What You Do?

In the most concise and general terms, an internal career counselor/coach provides confidential, personal guidance to associates as they navigate the sometimes tricky career waters. There are times when your work with associates is focused on single, short-term issues, and there are times when you are exploring long-term aspirations and goals. There are occasions

where the subject is somewhat limited and mundane, such as help with drafting a self-report. Other times it can be rather complex, like changing careers or switching practice areas. Sometimes you function purely as a coach, providing support and encouragement, and other times you act more as a counselor, giving advice and reality checks. Whitney Beard, a Career Coach at Orrick based in southern California, sums the role up as "helping lawyers address day-to-day stresses that arise in the workplace as well as assisting with long-term career planning."

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There is also value in determining what the role is not. Carrie Marker, the Associate Development Counselor at Dechert LLP in New York, finds, "When people hear the term 'career counselor,' they often think about job searches. Though those resources are available, career counseling and coaching can be so much more than that by helping associates determine their long-term goals and plans." If career coaches/counselors are seen as "internal recruiters," then their services will never reach the fullest potential.

Indeed, the opposite is often true. "I had many attorneys come to me at a time when they were very 'burnt out' and considering leaving the firm," said Jennifer Rakstad, the Career Development Advisor (US) at Mayer Brown in Chicago. "Many of these attorneys are the 'stars' in their practice, and the partners they work with would likely be shocked to learn that they aren't happy," Rakstad said. In these cases, she "works with the attorney to come up with a game plan for how to move forward in a

way that is better aligned with their values and what they want to be doing in their career and practice. Most often this results in them staying at the firm and being much happier overall,” she said. Rakstad echoes a universal premise among internal counselors/coaches that “coaching is a great talent management tool that can be used to help attorneys progress at the firm and in their careers” and should not be viewed as merely a mechanism for leaving the firm or the practice.

What Should You Consider Before Adding a Coach to Your Roster?

Presently, only a handful of large law firms offer internal coaching and counseling, but the concept is being discussed with greater frequency in professional development circles. Some firms are test driving pilot programs in specific offices, and others are offering internal coaching to more targeted and limited audiences such as first-year attorneys. In my role at O’Melveny, and like some of my colleagues quoted here, my services are available to attorneys at every level of seniority, and some of us cover all offices in our firms.

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First and foremost, look honestly at the culture of your firm. Does a career counseling/coaching program fit? Who would use the program? Who would support the program? As previously stated, if a coaching position is set up to look like a veiled “counsel out” program, then it is doomed to fail. Five years ago at O’Melveny there was a sea change at the firm recognizing that partnership was not necessarily the goal for every attorney — nor would it be a realistic goal for some. Securing an internal career coach showed support for associates no matter what their short- or long-term career goals were. Just knowing that a firm is willing to take the leap and create an internal counseling role can create an atmosphere that encourages proactive career

conversations that extend far beyond the four walls of the coach’s office. The coaching program must, however, fit with the culture of the firm to grow real roots.

Another key and critical element is confidentiality. If the issue of providing confidential counseling is uncomfortable or untenable, then the program cannot get legs. Steven Cline, the Career Development Officer at Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt in Toronto, acknowledges that getting people to buy in takes some time; he learned that “constant reinforcement of the confidentiality message” was necessary to alleviate “some skepticism as to whether associates could really trust that my work with them would be confidential.” Lori Patton, the Chief Learning Officer at Womble Carlyle in Durham, North Carolina, added that confidentiality is critical so that “the internal coach has the utmost integrity to earn that necessary trust.” Rakstad, among other coaches, saw some initial tension around the confidentiality issue but echoed how essential this was for developing trust with attorneys. “I’ve had a few situations where partners were surprised when I have known information about attorneys I worked with but not shared,” she said. The trust that is built through coaching, however, will ultimately open those lines of communications more effectively, and associates will be encouraged and more likely to have those conversations directly with their partners in the future.

Getting buy-in from key partners who will support and herald the services of a counselor and coach is also paramount. Strong partner support provides the needed reassurance to associates that this service is important and that participation is encouraged. When partners see the value in terms of both retention and potential client development, they frequently jump on board the coaching/counseling bandwagon. Target a partner champion before you get started to help get the traction you’ll need to successfully launch the program.

What’s the Best Pitch to Sell the Benefits of an Internal Coach?

Coaching is universally seen as an effective retention tool that can help solidify other firm initiatives. “Coaches support larger

firm and lawyer development initiatives and serve to educate associates by sharing their knowledge of these programs during coaching sessions or in response to questions,” added Beard. “The internal position means that I understand the culture and many personalities that are impacting both leadership decision-making and an individual’s career,” remarked Patton. “I am engrossed in policy, procedure, and an awareness of the politics, so I am equipped to be efficient and effective in my feedback and offering insight,” she said. Patton added, “There is also an ease to having a coach ‘right down the hall’ or on auto dial.”

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As Rakstad pointed out, there are times when you can keep an attorney engaged who may have been considering walking out the door. This can be particularly effective with junior attorneys who are fighting an instinctive flight response. A good coach or counselor can normalize their experiences and/or provide them with the tools and support to find better career satisfaction at the firm before running for the door.

Marker finds that “a counseling program demonstrates a tangible investment in associates by the firm that goes beyond the skill building needed for their current position.” Rather than diminishing the mentoring relationships with partners, “it gives associates another avenue to discuss their individual development and career planning needs,” she said, “empowering associates and giving them the skills to find their own solutions in the future.”

Cline describes the benefits of an internal coach very succinctly: “Lawyers who feel supported throughout their career journey end up being either partners at the firm or happy alumni.” This “happy alumni” piece can have a tangible bottom-line impact. Beyond general goodwill, the benefits of

“happy alumni” can result in direct client work or enthusiastic referrals. One of my personal greatest success stories was connecting an associate on the East Coast with a partner on the West Coast who had a client who was looking for an attorney with the associate’s exact résumé. Because I knew the associate was considering a move, I was able to connect her with the partner, who ultimately helped her secure a position with his client. Everyone was happy and the firm further solidified an already positive client relationship.

Who Shines in This Role?

The resounding answer is a good listener. “Good coaches are good listeners,” said Patton, “and great coaches are active listeners who are present — shadowing the associate exactly where he/she is right now and offering mirroring and thoughtful questions in order to assist in clarity for the associate.” Cline adds, “Empathy and ‘engaged detachment’ are important to the process. Engaged detachment is the ability to engage fully with people while still letting them steer their own course no matter what that is or how much you may think it might not be the right one for them.” Beard refers to this as the “ability to resist the urge to solve problems for people and, rather, assist them to figure out the answers for themselves.” For Marker this necessary empathy means “trying to understand the issue instead of feeling sorry for someone and trying to solve their problems for them.”

Rakstad adds that a good coach will be flexible, with a willingness to learn. “This is especially critical for someone transitioning from an attorney position to a coaching role,” she said. “While many attorney skills will serve you well as a counselor/coach, there is lots to learn when you shift to this role.”

Cline and Rakstad also agreed that beyond just listening, excellent communication skills are a critical aspect of coaching. “The ability to ask powerful questions, being present with and truly listening to your ‘client’ are key competencies,” Rakstad said.

Self-awareness and emotional intelligence are equally critical. Patton finds that “it is critical to know yourself — your own

biases and your hot buttons — so that you can be objective and listen with a clean ear and not easily allow your own opinions to bleed into your coaching conversations.” Patton says, “There is a dance to this — no one is hiring a robot as a coach, and we all have opinions, but it is important to be true to yourself and yet not offer your own judgments throughout each coaching session.” Rakstad adds, “Self-awareness about your own strengths and areas for development is critical for a coach. If you aren’t self-aware, it is hard to help others grow and develop.”

All the coaches I spoke with agreed that a JD can be very helpful, and prior experience as a practicing attorney lends credibility. There is a level of more out-of-the-gates trust for associates who know the coach or counselor has direct understanding of what they are experiencing. “A JD is helpful in the mentoring roles that can be related to counseling,” said Marker. “I believe, however, that an understanding of how firms work, coupled with coaching or counseling training, are critical backgrounds for success,” she added.

Coaching credentials and certification are also highly encouraged. “I believe education and certification are critical,” said Patton. “The reason is that through the hours I recently spent in coaching school I have now experienced the techniques and practiced these approaches numerous times in a safe setting,” she said, “and I have a well-stocked toolbox of skills, questions, approaches, and greater confidence about my role as a coach.” Marker has a master’s degree in social work, which she sees as being “critical in my efforts to empower associates, stay present, and empathize with them.” Marker adds, “It has also taught me skills necessary to not ‘burn out’ doing this work.”

So Is It Time to Hire a Coach?

Employing an internal career coach is a real commitment that may not be right for every firm. While those of us who do this work tend to be passionate in our roles, we recognize that it “takes a village” and that there must be support on many levels

for our work to be successful. These services and programs must be fully fleshed out, deftly developed, and exhibit substantive benefits for everyone. Patton believes that success comes when “folks know that coaching isn’t just for remedial efforts but for superstars who want to ‘up their game’ or really good attorneys struggling with aspects of management, work, and life. When everyone sees the benefits, then coaching becomes less risky and better utilized.”

But we can’t resist one last pitch, which we’ll leave to Whitney Beard. “I can point to associates throughout our firm who have stayed longer than they were planning to as a result of coaching. This is not because I encouraged them to stay — I don’t do that. But, it is because through coaching these associates are able to manage stress better, communicate more effectively, and think strategically about their careers. Purely from a retention standpoint, coaching is a win for the firm. The icing on the cake is that coaching results in happier, less stressed out, more focused lawyers.”

I can only wonder what road I might have taken at my career crossroads if I had a coach in my corner at the time....

About the Author



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