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Executive coaching for attorneys drives self-improvement, success

As the legal environment continues to be extraordinarily competitive, it is more important than ever for attorneys to be at the top of their game. A lawyer's performance is now measured by much more than just how good they are technically. Indeed, clients evaluate and hire counsel based on many other, more subjective characteristics.

However, these skills are not taught in law school and their importance is often undervalued during an attorney's formative years. Yet these are the very attributes that differentiate merely solid performers from high performers, the good from the great.

There are a variety of ways that lawyers can effectively drive self-improvement and success. On-the-job training and mentoring are two primary development techniques. However, it becomes increasingly difficult to continue growing at a steep trajectory throughout one's career solely relying on these methods. One must often look to other, more creative ways to hone the necessary skills to become better professionals, role models and people.

Executive coaching provides one such mechanism. It has long been used by corporations in developing their high-level executives and individuals being groomed for those positions. It is a form of professional development and mentoring which provides a framework and context within which attorneys can assess where they are and where they are headed, both professionally and personally.

Coaching performs a number of valuable functions. It helps you to prioritize what is important to you, to develop a strategy for reaching your goals and to implement an action plan using that strategy. Coaches take you from theory into the real world and help you identify your strengths, weaknesses, self-limiting behaviors and blind spots. They give

you honest, real-time feedback and provide accountability, support and candor in a way that most other people cannot. Coaches see you in the same way others see you and one of the core aspects of the relationship is teaching you that for better or worse, other people's perceptions of you often drive your experience in the world.

Coaches ask powerful questions designed to elicit answers that will fundamentally impact the coaching process. The relationship must be built on trust and confidentiality — without them, it will fail. As Harvard Business School professor Thomas DeLong states, coaches are "truth speakers" — they tell you what you need to hear, not necessarily what you want to hear. This is critically important, particularly as you grow into a more seasoned professional, since it becomes increasingly difficult to obtain this information from those with whom you work, particularly when they are people who report to you. Coaches also function as good sounding boards and are committed to your success, however you choose to define it.

It is important to understand what coaching is not. First, it is not a substitute for therapy or other forms of treatment. Sometimes there are issues that need to be addressed by certain types of trained professionals such as psychiatrists or doctors, not by coaches. Depending on your specific needs, coaching can actually do more harm than good if you are not receiving the appropriate help you need. In addition, coaching does not provide a quick fix to your issues and problems. Rather, it is a process of self discovery and self-development and takes time to unfold.

If a coach is promising quick, easy answers with little or no effort on your part, you should carefully consider whether the coach is truly qualified. You must also be open to constructive criticism, to follow the process



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wherever it may lead you and to change your attitudes, habits and behaviors, particularly when they are self-defeating or destructive. You should bring your goals and desires to the process, rather than expecting your coach to tell you what they should be. Good coaches are not focused on their own agenda or on that of the organization paying for their services. Instead, they should only think about you and what you are trying to accomplish. In addition, coaching is not meant to dwell on

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the past. Although it can be helpful in figuring out what has and has not worked for you, coaching should be focused on creating a present and future that you desire.

Picking the right coach is critical to a successful experience. There are many who claim a great track record and proven techniques. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to discern whether this is actually the case until you start working with one. Like all of us, they each have their strengths and weaknesses, some of which may or may not complement your own.

For this reason, it is often better to start by speaking with individuals you know who have successfully worked with executive coaches, who can provide you with some insight into the process and who may be able to give you good referrals.

It is important to interview those coaches whom you are considering and to get a clear idea of their personalities, working style, what they envision for your coaching experience and the types of professionals with whom they typically work. I am a firm believer that you need to both like and respect your coach. Otherwise, they are unlikely to get to know you in a way that is necessary for the process to truly work.

Finally, you need to figure out your budget and what type of a coach you can afford. It is important to consider the frequency with which you intend to meet with your coach as well as the likely overall duration of the process. You should budget for some extra sessions in case unexpected issues come up requiring additional sessions.

While working with a coach may stretch your budget, the benefits are often dramatic and long lasting and well worth the investment. It is a truly transformative experience that invokes positive changes in the way you see your career and life and the way that others see you.