Law Firm Marketing

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Corporate coaching coming to a law firm near you

For years now coaching in the corporate world has been embraced as an effective way to support learning, growth and skill development. While it is still in the infancy stage in the legal profession, there is a growing trend towards supporting lawyers in business/client development through one-to-one coaching. In this article I will outline what I consider to be the most important parts of an effective client development coaching program — the participants, the content and the delivery.

The Participants

When you start out to create a coaching program of any kind, let alone a client development program, you must ensure that your first wave of participants will experience great results. To achieve this you must take care in choosing who participates. Self selection is always the best approach. It will avoid any perception of favoritism and/or politics.

With this approach you are more likely to have your participants committed to their own success when they themselves have asked for or have agreed to this form of support.

I strongly recommend that you get agreement from all of the participants on the desired outcomes they aspire to reach. This is paramount to measuring results/success.

If you don't know where you want to get to, you won't know if and when you have arrived. And if you want your program to succeed and continue you will have to be able to point to tangible as well as intangible results.

The participants should not be struggling in their careers but just the opposite, they should be well respected within the firm. Coaching should be considered or offered as a reward and never be used to punish someone or to support firing them. Consider that you are investing in the success of your people. Ensure all participants understand and agree to the time commitment and what it is going to take to be successful.

The Content

What you actually teach your lawyers in the program is equally as important as the people who take the program. It is our experience that while the main focus of a client development program is to help your lawyers to bring in new business, there are a number of overlapping skills sets that support that goal. The skills you are helping the lawyers hone

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are: time management, file management, client relationship management, service excellence, communication skills, presentation skills, how to work with other lawyers within the firm, how to work with staff, career planning and work/life balance.

These factors all contribute to the success of your lawyers and if they are happy and productive they are more likely to want to do more client development.

The content should be practical and easy to follow. You are not training your lawyers to become sales people, so they don't have to learn a new language. You are training your lawyers to effectively build relationships, and represent themselves, their services and the firm.

How You Deliver It

Whether your coaches are internal or external, the way in which the program is delivered is also a key to its success. The main points here I want to stress are: consistency, format, length of time, in-the-moment learning in real life and the tools you use to support the coaching. Regular and consistent sessions are the most effective as they act as constant reminders and hold the participants accountable to the process. We use weekly sessions for this reason.

The format we find best is a two-pronged approach. While we work with the lawyer to help them create their business plan, we also help them to decide on how best to move current relationships forward leading to new business. The business plan is theory and the contact list approach is action.

Rght from the start of a coaching engagement we encourage our clients to get into action. Each week the lawyer will be assigned homework to complete before the next call. The homework will take into consideration how busy the lawyer is and what the learning priorities are at that point. While the program should definitely have structure, it must also remain flexible to meet the unique and individual needs of each of your participating lawyers. In between the weekly calls we are available by e-mail to answer any questions or bounce ideas off of.

We generally have our clients commit to a six month time frame. This is because it is widely accepted that learning new habits and skills takes about that much time. Of course, there are always exceptions, again depending on the needs of the individual.

The learning should take an in-the-moment approach. By this I mean if the lawyer is going to an event, then the session should focus on networking skills. If the lawyer is giving a presentation, then the session should focus not only on how to become more effective at presenting, but also what to do before, during and after the presentation to develop new business. We have found the lawyers learn very quickly when they actually have a need and a way of practising this new approach. Every client will be different in some way. This in-the-moment approach ensures we are giving your lawyers exactly what they need, when they need it.

Finally, to support the program we use a guidebook which can be used as a study guide while going through the program and then as a reminder or reference guide once they have finished. We have various "Just in Time" tip sheets that are sent to the lawyers when they need it. And we use real life examples of what other lawyers have achieved when following these new approaches.

So remember, the people you choose, the content you deliver and the format you use to coach your lawyers are all equally important in contributing to a successful client development coaching program at your firm.

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