

**Just like athletes,
Lawyers can benefit from (business development) coaching**

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Professional athletes rely on their coaches – experienced individuals who help them hone their performance skills, create focused competition strategies and maintain a high level of motivation over the course of a career.

Similarly, a good coach can help any lawyer who is thrown into the competitive arena of business development.

Business development skills are rarely taught in law school. If these do not come naturally to you, a coach can help.

Business development strategy is hard to formulate in the daily scramble to produce quality work for your clients. If such focus does not come naturally to you, a coach can help.

The motivation to engage in business development activities runs hot and cold. It may be sparked by a good article, speaker or training session, but can be difficult to maintain. If you find it difficult to stay motivated, a coach can help.

A panel consisting of two attorney coaches and one coached attorney discussed business development coaching in a presentation at the monthly meeting of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain), held June 14 at Fogo de Chao restaurant in downtown Denver.

Panelists included Mark Beese, president of Leadership for Lawyers (www.leadershipforlawyers.com); Karen Samuels Jones, a real estate partner in the Denver office of Perkins Coie LLP (www.perkinscoie.com); and Bob Weiss, president of Alyn-Weiss & Associates (www.themarketinggurus.com).

What is attorney coaching?

Business development coaching and business development training are often confused. They are quite different. Coaching involves a confidential one-to-one relationship between an attorney and a coach, and involves scheduled interactions over a course of time (often a year). Training usually takes place in a group setting, with little follow-up.

“When more than one lawyer at a firm is being coached at the same time, there is some benefit in combining coaching with training,” said Beese. “Monthly group sessions can address general concepts and expectations, offer cross-selling opportunities and provide a venue for sharing success stories and asking for advice.

“Individual coaching sessions – either in-person or by phone – can focus on the development of individual business development plans and the skills, strategies and motivation needed to implement those plans,” said Beese.

At the same time, coaches need to understand the realities of legal work. “Even lawyers who develop the best of habits will drop these habits when they get busy,” said Beese. “A coach knows when to step back, and then re-engage when the time is right.”

“Under normal circumstances, I like to handle most of my own business development efforts,” said Jones. “For example, I usually answer all of my own ‘cold’ phone calls. But when I get really busy, it is helpful if our marketing group can screen calls and take good notes. When things calm down, I pick up right where I left off.”

All too often, lawyers are exposed to a lot of random information about business development – but do not know where to start. “This is where a coach can add value,” said Weiss. “Where does the lawyer want to end up? What is the first step he or she should take to get there? What comes next, and next, and next?”

The coaching function can be provided by an internal expert (in the case of many large law firms) or an outside consultant. There are pros and cons for each.

Inside coaches often are more aware of institutional culture and cross-marketing opportunities. Since they are on-site, inside coaches are more available for casual “drive by” consultations and advice on projects that require a quick response.

On the other hand, inside coaches are more likely to get bogged down in conflicting responsibilities and putting out fires -- and therefore have less time for scheduled appointments. The lawyers at a firm tend to perceive an internal coach as an employee who should take direction from them rather than giving it to them. Lawyers often feel uncomfortable discussing personal issues with an employee.

“Attorneys will always take a paid consultant more seriously than a salaried staff member,” said Weiss. “An outside coach has much more bandwidth and is bound by a confidentiality agreement,” said Beese. “He is focused on just one thing. He schedules time for appointments and also for appointment preparation.”

Who can benefit from attorney coaching?

The panelists agreed that the best candidates for coaching are senior associates and junior partners who need to learn how to build and maintain their own books of business, and also new laterals who need help with the transition to a new firm culture. Many firms also hire a coach when their long-time rainmakers near retirement or become ill, leaving the firm suddenly bereft of rainmaking talent and a pipeline of new business.

“Not all good lawyers are good candidates for business development coaching,” said Weiss. “Half of the lawyers at any firm will be ‘below average’ in business development skills and potential, and realistically should be given some other support role to play. A good writer, for example, could write a speech for a rainmaker to deliver.

“In addition, law firms have an unfortunate tendency to select their ‘problem children’ for coaching,” said Weiss. “Even with the best of coaching, it is unlikely that these individuals will ever succeed. Instead, law firms should select attorneys at the right stage of career development, who have innate ability and a true desire to do what it takes under the direction of a coach to develop new business.”

“Coaching candidates must be willing to make a time commitment of 10 to 15 hours per month,” said Beese. “No one should be forced to participate. In fact, it’s a good idea to make your lawyers apply for the ‘privilege’ of business development coaching.”

A good coach will work with each individual attorney to arrive at a customized goal that lies at the intersection of that lawyer’s personal and professional interests and abilities.

With this goal in mind, the coach will help the lawyer determine a plan (the specific tactics and activities that support those goals) and a timeline for each. To be successful, tactics and activities must fall within a particular lawyer’s comfort zone. Finally, the coach will meet regularly with the lawyer to monitor “homework,” offer suggestions and support, amend the plan and timeline as necessary, and set new goals going forward.

Jones has worked with three different business development coaches over the course of her career – including both Beese and Weiss. “Each coach brought something different and valuable to the table,” said Jones. “Also, you sometimes get into a routine. Changing coaches can get you re-energized and keep you up-to-date with strategies that work for marketing.

“When I started with a coach, I was told it would help me find more business – and it did,” said Jones. “What no one told me up front was how much work it would be, and how that hard work would lead to positive changes in not only my practice, but also my life.”