

Considerable confusion exists about coaching, mentoring and sponsorship. Many people refer to coaching and mentoring interchangeably. While both processes provide personalized professional development, require special interpersonal skills and have a significant impact on a lawyer's career, there are some important distinctions between them. Coaching is also distinct from sponsorship, which is an advanced form of mentoring. Let's examine these processes and clarify their similarities and differences.

Coaching

Coaching deals with performance. It is *functional* and *results-oriented*. Coaching helps someone become more productive and effective at a specific set of functions, tasks or practices. A coach helps you identify and set goals in a particular area (or function) and develop a plan to achieve those goals. Then the coach gives you support while you implement your plan and achieve your desired results. Because you check in with the coach as your plan moves forward, the coach also keeps you disciplined and focused.

Lawyers who receive coaching usually fall into one of three categories: new or existing leaders who want to optimize their leadership effectiveness; high potential lawyers who want to achieve their highest level of performance; and under-performing lawyers who must improve their performance or change certain behaviors in order to stay in the firm and on track. A large and growing number of coaches today help partners and some high potential associates with areas like business development, leadership development and leadership optimization. Firms also hire specialists to provide coaching in areas like communication and presentation skills, writing, time and work management and team management. Many firms also provide transition coaches for lawyers returning to work after taking leave for the birth or adoption of a child.

A few firms have coaches on staff but most firms hire outside coaches to work with particular lawyers on an as-needed basis. These coaches are *paid* specifically to provide coaching services. Mentors, sponsors and supervisors might all act as coaches when they help someone improve performance or set career goals, but if the issue involves adopting new behaviors or changing problematic behaviors, law firms and individual lawyers usually hire outside coaches.

Coaches can help lawyers recognize barriers to top performance and develop strategies for overcoming them, or identify counterproductive behaviors and develop techniques for changing them. While coaches hired as skills experts (e.g., in presentations or writing) use their expertise to offer advice and guide a lawyer's skill development, most coaches act more indirectly. They help individuals look inside themselves to find solutions and achieve desired results. They are trained to use powerful questions that help individuals discover their strengths and deploy them to achieve their career goals. Some coaches are certified to administer psychometric assessments, helping lawyers increase their self-awareness. They might conduct interviews with co-workers, or study the lawyer's performance evaluations, to collect feedback for the lawyer. Then they help the lawyer process this internal and external information and use it to enhance performance.

Mentoring

Mentoring is broader in scope and purpose than coaching, and is based on a deeper, more meaningful relationship than coaching. It is *relational* in nature and *career-oriented*. Both the quality of the mentoring relationship and the factors that determine quality – trust, mutual respect, and mutual learning – are critical to the mentoring process. Mentoring covers more wide-ranging career issues than coaching because it deals with mentees' overall professional development and advancement, not simply performance goals. Although mentor and mentee might

spend time on improving performance, the relationship usually expands to larger and longer-term personal and professional career issues. Mentors often employ coaching as one of their tools, along with confidence building, role modeling, counseling and advocacy.

Within a law firm, mentors are predominantly lawyers with greater career experience and expertise than mentees. They act as mentors both informally in the usual course of work and through formal mentoring programs that have particular objectives and guidelines. They are *not paid* to be mentors; it is expected of them as part of their responsibility to the firm and its lawyers. However, given the time constraints and billing pressures in law firms today, many mentors lack the time to devote to mentoring and do not make it a priority. Consequently, firms are filling in gaps by hiring coaches to help with certain performance aspects of development, leadership and rainmaking. Coaching that targets specific areas where performance can be improved or optimized may be narrower in scope yet more effective than inadequate mentoring.

Mentoring is especially important, however, for career advancement. Unlike coaching, mentoring has a role in knowledge transfer and skill development. (Skill-focused coaching is an exception, as noted above). While coaches do not need to be lawyers, mentors within a firm usually are. They therefore play an important and direct role in helping lawyers become better, more highly skilled legal practitioners. Because they have relevant work and career experience, mentors are more likely than coaches to use their own experiences, insights and advice to help the mentee learn and progress. Coaches can help lawyers create a plan that calls for developing certain skills and getting certain work experience, but mentors can teach and model the specified legal skills and create the work opportunities needed to achieve those goals.

Another reason mentors are so valuable is that because they are lawyers in the same law firm, they know about the firm's decision-making processes and political dynamics. They can give mentees inside information about firm management and politics that enable associates and junior partners to develop and execute smart career advancement strategies. They can offer insights into client relationships and make introductions to business contacts. Mentors can welcome lawyers into firm networks, make them feel appreciated, and promote a sense of inclusion and camaraderie that heighten engagement and personal identification with the firm. Most significantly, mentors are part of the firm. They can transmit firm values, culture and professionalism to young lawyers and future leaders.

In sum, mentoring and coaching are both important for professional development. Coaches can be very helpful in mapping out performance goals and supporting lawyers as they execute plans and strategies. At a time when accelerating development is of paramount importance, coaching is a useful resource for improving effectiveness and productivity. But for purposes of learning, engagement and career advancement, coaches cannot replace the importance and value of mentoring by an established lawyer in the firm who takes an active and personal interest in helping a younger lawyer succeed.

Sponsorship

A sponsor is a strong advocate who has power and influence and uses that advocacy to produce positive career results for you. Sponsors publicly endorse your qualifications and take risks on your behalf, arguing that you should move up to a higher compensation tier or urging their partners that you are ready for equity partnership or a significant leadership position. They alert you to opportunities and appoint you to key posts. Sometimes they call in favors, put pressure on colleagues, or put their reputation and credibility on the line for you. Partners become sponsors when they perceive special value in you and actively help you advance. It can occur for any number of reasons: they might see you as a natural successor, as having rainmaking potential that could benefit them, or as having expertise necessary to support their clients. Sponsors and champions may not guarantee success, but they make it easier and improve your odds of receiving a coveted leadership appointment, a fatter paycheck or a new client.

When we talk about sponsorship today, it is basically mentoring at the highest level. Sponsorship is the same as the traditional concept of mentorship: a prominent and wise individual takes you under his wing, supports and protects you, and promotes your career success. Current conversations about sponsorship call attention to these traditional notions of how powerful people can help others succeed in a law firm (or any organization). They also direct attention to a critical factor in sponsorship: the sponsor must be someone with power who purposefully champions the other lawyer's career.

The importance of sponsorship was underscored in a 2010 publication that found men enjoy greater career benefits from mentoring than women do.[1] The research data showed that women are promoted less often than men because mentors actively sponsor men for promotions far more often than they sponsor women. Both women and men get career advice from mentors, but advice consists of words and good intentions. Sponsorship involves taking action on another's behalf to advance their career interests, and having sufficient clout to produce results. Because mentors do not sponsor women, women do not receive the same career benefits from mentoring that men do. In response, some law firms are starting initiatives to increase sponsorship for women and diverse lawyers. These programs generally target a group of mid- to senior associates or junior partners who are paired with one or two influential partners. Relationships tend to focus on creating high quality work and business development opportunities for the junior person. Most sponsorship programs are in the pilot stage, but early experience shows the need for very careful pairings and oversight. Although similar to other mentoring programs, sponsorship demands more of mentors, requires more focused effort from those being sponsored, and considerable ongoing involvement by program coordinators.

[1] Herminia Ibarra, Nancy M. Carver and Christine Silva, "Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women," *Harvard Business Review*, September 2010; Nancy M. Carter, Ph.D., Christine Silva, "Mentoring: Necessary But Insufficient for Advancement," *Catalyst*, 2010

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