

Do Lawyers Need a Coach?

By Cynthia (Cindy) Pladziewicz

The latest data on associate attrition arrived last month, and the results are sobering for new lawyers. The data, contained in the National Association of Legal Personnel's Update on Associate Attrition, comes from over 150 law firms. For the first time in the survey's history, "downsizing" was the most-cited reason for associate attrition, accounting for nearly one-third of associate departures. Compare that to 2008 when downsizing accounted for 4 percent of departures and associate hiring was 39 percent higher, and the picture becomes clearer. Fewer new lawyers are making it to the starting line, and for those new lawyers who make the initial cut, the window of opportunity to succeed may be getting smaller.

Are lawyers like athletes? In today's ultracompetitive legal environment, is a coach the key to succeeding? Ask Brendan Lowrey. Lowrey, a senior associate at Thompson & Knight, participated in the firm's associate coaching program. He also played competitive soccer throughout high school and captained his college soccer team.

Not surprisingly, Lowrey's descriptions of best coaching practices in the sports world sound just like the best coaching to be found in the professional legal arena. According to Lowrey, his best soccer coaches expected more from their players than those players thought they could deliver. They encouraged, built excitement, and held the team accountable to each other. But they also remembered to make it fun. They got to know their players and their players' abilities. But here's the salient point: The best coaches didn't focus on the physical; they understood that winning was mental. In Lowrey's words, his best coaches helped players "develop the skill of knowing where to be on the field, how to get there, and what to do next with the ball--before the ball was ever passed to them."

Associates are trained to be great technical lawyers. Far more than in preceding generations, today's associates can find answers to legal questions with lightning speed. Most know how to dress the part, behave with proper business etiquette, and find directions to the meeting on their smart phones. We teach them the right questions to ask in a deposition and how to populate a closing checklist. But still, over the past year the pavement has been littered with associates carrying expensive diplomas out the door in moving boxes. So how do law firms quickly engage and utilize the talented associates they have worked so hard to bring to the playing field? And if you are an associate reading this, how do you find your winning zone and do all you can to avoid being one of those hardworking, talented associates whose law firm career is cut short?

You have to focus on the mental--and coaching may be the way to get there.

The good news is that coaching is readily available to everyone. The very nature of coaching is that it is individualized and adaptable. It's just as useful at the beginning of a law career as it is at the end. In fact, the arc of coaching's utility can be tracked through

the “eight Rs”: recruitment, retention, raising the bar, remediation, reinvention, release, return, and retirement. These are the basic milestones that lawyers tend to cross in their careers, although most lawyers won’t face all eight. And one of a coach’s first jobs is to determine where in the continuum the coaching client falls, because determining that point helps define the individualized goal.

For associates, coaching usually addresses retention, raising the bar, remediation, or some combination of the above. The usual goals are: keeping the associate at the firm, increasing the associate’s engagement in her practice, enhancing the associate’s skills, and advancing the associate’s track through the firm to partnership. These things ensure not only the associate’s personal and professional development, but the longevity of the firm itself. But should firms rush out and hire professional coaches for each associate? Not necessarily.

Fortunately, there are a variety of coaching options available. In addition to hiring one of the many accomplished and effective external coaches in the marketplace, firms are increasingly hiring or training internal coaches, finding great coaching talent among their partners and attorney development pros. Group coaching provides another cost-effective alternative. Many individual lawyers whose firms don’t provide coaching choose to pay a coach out-of-pocket. And for those on a tight budget, consider contacting a coach training program accredited by the International Coach Federation to obtain referrals to coaches-in-training who work on a reduced-fee basis.

For firms looking at coaching options, what’s the best approach? External and internal coaching approaches differ in several key areas, and those differences should be weighed to determine whether they may impact the desired goals positively or negatively. Internal coaches, assuming they are not new to the firm, will be familiar with the culture, the associate’s colleagues, and challenges particular to that firm but may be conflicted between serving the best interests of the associate and the best interests of the firm, the coach’s employer. Using an internal coach who is already on the payroll may avoid the additional cost of an external coach, but the associate may feel uncomfortable opening up to a fellow employee of the firm, and his or her candor, an essential element in lawyer coaching, may not be forthcoming.

External coaches, on the other hand, may engender a greater feeling of confidentiality but will probably have far less institutional knowledge and understanding of a firm’s culture than would an internal coach. An external coach may naturally make assumptions about the associate’s workplace based, not on reality, but on experiences in other firms with which the external coach has worked. An external coach may have no preconceived notions about the associate, but his services will come at an additional cost, which some firms in this economic environment are unwilling or unable to bear.

Whatever the coaching option though, it’s critical to understand the basic tenets of coaching and helpful to use a template. I’ve developed a useful system that I use in my own internal coaching practice that I call “LOVE GOOD LAW.”

LOVE GOOD LAW is an acronym to guide coaches and lawyers through the essential steps, where each word represents one of the three stages of coaching. LOVE is the first stage, where the coach and lawyer gain an understanding of who the lawyer really is. The letters stand for “learn,” “outcomes,” “values,” and “empathy.” It’s easy to allow the opinions and pressures of others to color our views of ourselves. But it’s simply not possible to coach effectively unless the coach really understands the client and reflects that understanding back. That’s true whether the coach is internal or external. The coach and lawyer also must know what the endgame is--clearly define what outcomes he or she wants to achieve through coaching. An important part of knowing yourself is understanding your values. And keep in mind through the entire process that a good coach will be empathic--seeing the world from your perspective, really understanding your point of view.

In the GOOD stage, the coach and lawyer set and refine the goals--and this is really the essence of coaching. The letters stand for “goals,” “options,” “obstacles,” and “direct action.” Goals are related to the outcome, but they are not the same. The outcome is a definable destination, but the goals are the tools you will use to get to the outcome. These are specific and measurable, and you will want to write these down and keep track of your progress. For each goal, work with your coach to give yourself options on how to achieve it. Anticipate obstacles that you will have to overcome to reach those goals. And further, break down your goals into direct actions that you can take today, this week, this month.

Finally, in the LAW stage, the coach and lawyer, armed with a clear direction and goal in mind, reflect on what the lawyer has learned, develop a self-directed method for accountability, and refine a path forward. The letters stand for “learning,” “accountability,” and “what’s next?” This stage is all about accountability. Without accountability, it’s too easy to create a plan that is never implemented, and without implementation, your effort will be wasted. The LAW stage takes the lawyer through this accountability process. What did the lawyer learn about himself? How can those insights be applied in other areas of the lawyer’s life and career? How will the lawyer hold himself accountable to completing the direct actions, attaining the goals, and realizing the outcome? What should the lawyer do next?

A coach and lawyer following the LOVE GOOD LAW method will progress through all the stages. It’s a good way to “see the ball” in your mind and decide where you want it to go before it even reaches you. And what did Lowrey, our soccer player, think about the associate group coaching he participated in at Thompson & Knight? His experience was that, through coaching, he knew up front the importance of integrating career development and business development into his day-to-day thinking, always asking how to add value for clients. “It set me up in advance to succeed and pushed me outside my comfort zone.” Coaching provided insight, encouragement, deadlines, and expectations that motivated his group, and in the process, the associates met people in the firm they might not have otherwise encountered. “It opened me up to lawyers across the firm, on other floors, in other practice groups, and in other offices.”

Every great team needs a great coach. And, according to Lowrey, practicing law really is, at it's best, a team sport. "At a firm, you build a common purpose with your teammates. You build relationships working under stress to achieve common goals and overcome common obstacles; you share your successes together, and you weather failures together. If you pull together as a team, the sum is greater than its parts."

[Cynthia (Cindy) Pladziewicz, J.D., Ph.D., is chief development officer at Thompson & Knight LLP. She can be reached at Cynthia.Pladziewicz@tklaw.com]

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