

SUIT UP, JOHNSON, YOU'RE GOING IN

BY RHONDA BEASSIE

Whether you call them life coaches, career counselors, or business development consultants, personal improvement trainers are increasingly being employed by attorneys. Coaching aficionados say:

When I graduate from law school and get a ... life coach, I will have a much easier time keeping track of things.

— Second-year law student

I'm just waiting on my bonus check to hire a business coach and make plans to get out of this firm.

— Five-year attorney, mid-size firm

Having a coach is a status symbol, like having a personal trainer or driving the right car.

— Eight-year attorney, senior associate, mega-firm

I have a life coach who is helping me figure out what I really want to be when I grow up.

— Nine-year attorney, former large-firm associate, current contract attorney while exploring the next path

Skeptics think coaching is merely “the latest over-priced, under-regulated, pseudo-scientific sop for the angst-ridden me generation.”¹ If that is so, why are attorneys, who are known for their logical, analytical, problem-solving abilities, paying personal mentors? And what exactly are they getting in return?

Who Are the Coaches?

A professional coach is a confidant, advisor, strategist, and sounding board to help guide in making decisions, managing relationships, and taking actions to advance in either a personal or professional arena. While this article considers coaches, advisors, and counselors collectively, many in the training business draw a bright line between coaching and counseling. Coaches profess to offer forward-looking, project-oriented processes directed toward positive change. According to the coaching industry, “counselors” offer their clients help for men-



tal/emotional problems through review of past experiences before pursuing personal/professional goals.² Counselors often have formal education in the process of listening, providing feedback, and advising. However, as of the 79th Legislature, “career counselors” are no longer certified or regulated by the state of Texas.³

Without state oversight, coaches/career counselors may be highly educated professionals with an aptitude to train others, or they could be anyone with a shingle or website.⁴ Therefore, careful coach selection is critical. Initial factors to consider in searching for a coach are a successful background in a prior career and an investment in the profession of coaching. Such an investment (beyond a website and phone line) should include coaching or counselor education/training and affiliation with a professional coaching/counseling association.⁵ Ask a prospective coach for client references and take a test drive before engaging his or her services. Since personal chemistry and trust factors are vital to the success of the coaching experi-



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ence, many coaches will offer a free trial session so coachees can gauge their comfort level before committing to the process.⁶

Who Hires a Coach?

Lawyers who pursue coaching tend to fall into two categories. The first group includes those reaching for the next step in their legal career. Attorneys seeking to work toward partnership, begin a new practice area, start a solo practice, or expand business/income should consider a coach with a successful legal and business background. “It helps to have an understanding of practice and law firm politics” when coaching a legal client, explains Debra Bruce, a Professional Certified Coach and Houston attorney with 18 years of law practice experience.⁷

Most hire Bruce initially for assistance with a specific business goal. However, the coaching engagement is often extended as clients discover additional areas where they can improve. “Once attorneys learn to establish relationships necessary to

build business, they then need time management and communication skills to handle the life changes the new business brings,” Bruce says.⁸ Like many of her clients, Dallas attorney and coachee Mike Bassett originally contacted Bruce to discuss marketing. In over a year of coaching, the focus has shifted from greater business expansion to greater personal fulfillment. Through guided reflection on personal objectives, Bassett now routinely takes actions that improve his work/life satisfaction. “Coaching is not for the faint of heart,” Bassett warns. “It is a self-discovery process that requires significant readjustment.”⁹

The second group of attorneys ripe for coaching includes those planning to leave the legal profession. Many disenchanted with practice are uncertain of how to move on. Seeking the assistance of a counselor who specializes in career transitions with experience and contacts in multiple disciplines may give these clients the broadest view of opportunities available. Dr. Helen Harkness, a career counselor in Dallas, has been helping lawyers transition to non-legal careers since 1978. She estimates that 25 percent of her total clients have been attorneys.¹⁰ With more than 25 years of counseling practice, Harkness has the breadth of experience to help lawyers explore any potential occupation.

While Harkness has guided many successful attorney career changes, some of her lawyer clients are not prepared to give up the money and prestige associated with being a lawyer. I spoke with one of her clients, a senior lawyer at an international firm who has worked with Harkness for more than two years. While the client has not found a new career path, the search has helped reconcile her to her current position — at least for now. Even without a tangible change, she feels the time spent in career counseling has been valuable.

How Does Coaching Work?

The coaching process usually begins with personality profiles. Common assessment tools used are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Strong Interest Inventory, and DiSC Profiles. This process also helps a trained coach to communicate with a client in a manner most comfortably received by his or her personality type and have a better sense of the client’s values and personality when considering coaching objectives. After generalizing personality, the next step is defining the client’s goals. Goal definition may be a linear process for some who clearly know why they hired a coach. For others with only a vague sense of unhappiness, establishing goals is a more lengthy counseling process, which explores current situations, values, attributes, and alternatives. For instance, the attorney above who is figuring out what to do when he grows up has been in



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coaching for four years and counting. In contrast, Janet Moore, founder of Houston-based International Lawyer Coach, Inc., reports some clients with specific objectives have attained their coaching goals in as little as two weeks of intensive work.¹¹

Once the goals are determined, the coach meets with the client regularly, usually by telephone, to review progress and discuss suggested actions. The coach/client relationship will determine the nature of the follow-up. Bruce has one client who goes so far as to call her “mom” and wants to be “nagged.” Clients are given exercises and homework centered on self-reflection or research into the path pursued. In addition to the assessment, goal-setting, and feedback functions, one of the most important services a coach provides is personal contacts/resources. A quality coach should have multiple professional contacts or the ability to create connections that will be helpful to the client. For example, Harkness retains an extensive library of videotaped interviews with professionals from a variety of fields who discuss their careers and how they found their path.

Coaching is a luxury, but as Bruce says, it may be “a kind of luxury that is essential” for many lawyers. As more attorneys discover the personal/professional benefits to coaching, the demand for educated, sophisticated coaches will continue to grow. “And whatever critics say, coaching works. If it didn’t, it would be an American fad that disappeared in six months.”¹²

Notes

1. Anna Moore, “After Just An Hour of Coaching, You Walk Away Knowing Exactly What You Want and Believing You Can Do It,” *Observer Mag.* (England), Jan. 22, 2006, at 24.
2. *Id.*
3. Tex. Occ. Code Ann. §2502.001 (Vernon 2006) (repealed June 18, 2005).
4. See, Elizabeth Cohen, *Need a Change? Hire a Life Coach; With Guidance, You Can Switch Careers or Even Run a Marathon*, Press & Sun-Bull. (Binghamton, N.Y.), June 12, 2005, at 1F (noting how a third grade teacher is a life coach on weekends and evenings).
5. See generally, International Coach Federation, www.coachfederation.org/ICF/For+Current+Members/Coach+Training/For+Prospective+Students/ACTP/ (last visited Oct. 25, 2006) (listing accredited coach training programs).
6. NALP Career Paths for Lawyers Comm., *Exploring Career Changes: Services Available to Attorneys in Transition*, www.nalp.org/assets/317_exploringcareerchanges.pdf (last visited Oct. 24, 2006).
7. Telephone interview with Debra Bruce, Debra Bruce Executive Coaching, in Houston (Oct. 11, 2006). See also, www.lawyer-coach.com (last visited Oct. 18, 2006).
8. *Id.*
9. Telephone interview with Michael Bassett, The Bassett Firm, in Dallas (Oct. 17, 2006). See also www.thebassettfirm.com (last visited Oct. 28, 2006).
10. Interview with Dr. Helen Harkness, Career Design Associates, in Dallas (July 19, 2006). See also www.career-design.com (last visited Oct. 24, 2006).
11. Telephone interview with Janet Moore, International Lawyer Coach, Inc., in Houston (Oct. 17, 2006). See also, www.internationallawyercoach.com (last visited Oct. 19, 2006).
12. Moore, *supra* note 1.

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