



Anne Scoular is co-founder and managing director of Meyler Campbell, a comprehensive business coaching consultancy. She was formerly a diplomat, then a Citibank-trained international banker

Managing your work/life balance

Anne Scoular believes a happy lawyer is a profitable one. Could UK law firms be using coaching more strategically?

As a professional business coach, I have sat across the table from coaching clients in a wide range of industries, at all stages on the career path. Lawyers consistently sound the most miserable.

Despite what some in the profession will tell you, if you want to succeed in one of the UK's leading law firms, you work hard and you work long hours – 'having it all' is a fallacy.

This hard fact affects different people in different ways. Inevitably, there are those for whom this kind of working life is incompatible with their personality or personal goals; others need guidance, new tools and occasional readjustments to meet these challenges; and there are those who love it, who thrive on it and wouldn't change it for the world. Coaching can have a key role to play in providing support and guidance in each case, but coaching in an organisation needs to be managed carefully and treated as a valuable business tool.

How does coaching help?

Coaching helps people to face facts. With clients imposing Sunday night deadlines, managers waving billable hours targets in front of you and the pile of urgent documents starting to block your office window's dawn view of the Thames, it is difficult to stop and rationally think about the 'big issues'.

In a coaching session there is no escape. Once issues are raised, the coach will drill down until they have got to the bottom of them. Sometimes these

Level-headed people then generally take a deep breath and say 'right, that's my decision', and get on with it. Energy and motivation levels are renewed. The neurotics will keep moaning, of course, but they would anyway.

Occasionally however, the decision goes the other way: 'I don't want to have this marriage break up the way the first one did; I want to see my kids grow up; I don't want to get ill or worse.' This doesn't necessarily mean they leave. Everyone's solution is different – which is why this issue can only be tackled individually, through confidential coaching. Some people resolve to get home early two nights a week or commit to exercise, others come up with different strategies for reducing the impact the job is having on their personal life. Different people have widely varying solutions.

Inevitably, for a small minority, the realisation dawns on them that they never really wanted to be a lawyer, it isn't them, and they want out. From the firm's perspective, on the face of it this can seem to be an undesirable outcome. However, my argument is that they were probably unsettled anyway. If they reach that conclusion in a healthy way, by having a coach bring these fundamental issues to the surface, the individual is more likely to leave in an orderly and constructive way. It should be noted that there are ethical issues here for the coach: it is improper to continue working with a client who has decided to leave the firm, and take the firm's money for it. The precise procedure, should this arise, needs to be agreed in advance with the purchaser.

For some individuals, the problem is different: they don't want more leisure time. Work comes first and success, financial reward and adrenaline are everything... and so their assistants aren't going to have a work/life balance either.

I met one senior partner in a top firm who is a world leader in his field, utterly obsessive and absorbed in his work, regularly works till 4am, but chews through assistants and partners, burning them out. In his case, the solution isn't coaching: he likes the way he lives and therefore wouldn't engage with the coaching process anyway. Ultimately, it's a management task either to buffer the assistants as best they can, or to decide his behaviour is no longer acceptable and manage him out.

Who would benefit from coaching?

Coaching can be of value to most people, at all stages in their career. This is why it needs to be managed strategically by the firm. It's not possible for everyone to have as much coaching as they might like, or find useful; it's just too expensive.

With the pile of urgent documents starting to block your office window's dawn view of the Thames, it is difficult to stop and think about the 'big issues'.

issues are just vague feelings of discontent and when the issue is out in the open, it disappears – it's wistfulness. When the individual is actually challenged and the alternatives and solutions are explored, they concede they actually want the big money, to have three kids in private school and they like the cut and thrust of it after all and don't really want to change.

It can be useful just having talked it through. Even if their decision (to trade off personal time for large earnings) has been implicit to date, it becomes explicit: they recommit to the choice they've made.

One way of managing this is to focus the investment on situations where coaching can be of obvious immediate benefit. This often coincides with periods of change.

Coaching is an effective investment if it helps a key fee-earner or partner through one of life's 'crunch times'. Perhaps they are newly married or have young children at a time when they are experiencing the greatest pressure at work. Maybe they are a partner in the firm and have reached the mid-way point in their career and, with 20 more years or so in the workplace, they feel the need to clarify or realign their priorities and values – maybe even re-energise or recommit.

However, it is important to be aware that some people are not suitable candidates for coaching. These include anyone who has permanent or current psychological issues. Current issues might be coping with shocks such as bereavement. In these circumstances, people are just not up to the cognitive effort coaching requires, and if they need support, it should be provided through quite different means (such as, in this example, a brief programme of bereavement counselling). Other issues where organisations shouldn't waste their money on coaching include those with personality disorders (a psychopath or narcissist for example!), or individuals who are not willing to be coached. Though this area hasn't yet been sufficiently researched, it seems to some coaches that certain healthy personalities are also not suited to coaching: for example, people who would prefer just to be taken through a structured form of training, rather than challenged to find the answers for themselves.

What can an organisation do?

Large professional services firms are huge buyers of coaching. However, law firms generally are still lagging behind their clients in the way they manage coaching at an organisational level, although firms are now

taking steps to redress this. This seems illogical as, in my experience, nowhere do coaches have more value to add than in the law firm environment. Along with investment banks, this is the place in the business world where intellectual assets are what makes the firm money. Hence, on the work/life balance issue (to take but one example – there are many other perennial coaching issues), coaching should be available for individuals looking to air issues before they reach crisis point or to discuss ways of balancing changes in their life with what is expected from them at work. Keeping the asset in peak fee-generating condition makes sense!

Conclusion

From my point of view, the message couldn't be simpler. Many of your colleagues, and the people earning the money that keeps your business afloat, are miserable. For many of them, discussing the issues in a totally confidential, structured, external session can help enormously. Most issues raised across the table in a coaching session can be discussed, clarified and solutions found. Where there is a more major issue, the individual and the organisation benefit from the problem being aired and constructively, confidentially discussed. In a law firm, the demands on an individual's working and personal life can be significant and it is for this reason that coaching is becoming an integral part of many law firms' people development programmes.

Coaches have access to the minds of an organisation's young stars and most senior people. I constantly see and hear of individuals and teams who have, through the clarity coaching engenders, transformed their teams and businesses. It should therefore be managed and controlled professionally, and treated as a valuable business tool.

Anne Scoular

www.meylercampbell.com

HOW CAN AN ORGANISATION MANAGE ITS COACHING?

Coaches should be chosen in the same way as any other professional supplier. Central control is vital if the money is not wasted. And it is big money: £500 an hour, or fixed-fee contracts of typically £10,000 to £25,000 for six months, up to £150,000 for a year for the most senior-level work. It's particularly important since there is no central standards body in the coaching industry yet, and is not likely to be for five years or more.

Small organisations proliferate – AC, EMCC, ENTO, Apecs, SGCP, ICF – but none has the membership to back their often grandiose claims, so buyers need to use their own judgement.

I believe there are some key processes that should be put in place to ensure coaching is correctly managed in an organisation:

- adding up the numbers on current coaching in the organisation – the amount of coaching that you didn't know about might come as a surprise!
- getting a grip on it, and managing it centrally;
- creating a formal selection process for prospective coaches;
- creating and running an assessment centre to choose a short list of approved coaches;
- in each instance, matching the coach to the coachee and to their specific needs.

