

When and Why to Call a Coach

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How Will a Coach Help Me Make Changes?

Wanda, a seven-year lawyer with an intellectual property practice, called me one day wondering if I could help her. She was a bit hesitant as she began to describe her situation. She had left her old law firm eighteen months ago just before it imploded. She was relieved to be free of the turmoil that she had encountered there, and her solo practice was already growing. I remarked that this sounded like an easy transition and asked what prompted her call.

In an almost apologetic tone she explained that she really wasn't sure. For the last four months she had felt a vague yet pervasive sense of dissatisfaction with her practice. She couldn't put her finger on what exactly it was. It could be the new administrative demands of running her office, or the feeling that she had to be available to clients 24/7, or something else altogether. She wasn't sure, and not being sure frustrated her. She felt things would be better if she could just get to "the next level . . . whatever that is." She was clearly confused and stuck. She felt something needed to change, but what? She asked me if coaching could help. I told her yes.

Lawyers Call Coaches to Help Them Make Changes

If you're reading this book, the chances are that, like Wanda, you're a lawyer who is curious about coaching and is stuck,

confused, or dissatisfied with some aspect of your professional life. Lawyers call coaches for a wide variety of reasons. Some of the most common situations are listed below. One or more of them may apply to you.

1. I'm questioning my choice of law as a career.
2. I'm wondering if my current firm is the right place to be.
3. I'm trying to figure out how to be a more effective lawyer.
4. I'm trying to determine how to get better performance from my staff.
5. I'm looking for more clients and better clients.
6. I'm at a stage of my career where I have management and leadership responsibilities that I don't know how to handle.
7. I'm contemplating the best way to wind down my practice and move toward retirement.
8. I'm confronted with a serious transition like the merger, sale, or dissolution of my firm—and maybe I'm the person who is initiating those changes.
9. My situation and choices aren't entirely clear to me: all I have is a persistent feeling that my practice could and should be more satisfying, productive, dynamic, or profitable.
10. I have a sense that my professional and personal lives would be far better if I only knew exactly what I should be doing to improve them.
11. I know exactly what I want to do, and I've made changes several times before only to eventually revert back to my old ways of doing things.
12. I've come to the conclusion that my old way of doing things has taken me as far as it can, but I have no idea what new actions to take to ensure the success and sustainability of my career.

Your life and career don't have to be in crisis for you to identify with one or more of these typical situations. Things don't have to be horrible for you to feel the need for change. Your life and career may be very satisfying overall, but you may still sense that a few areas are ripe for improvement. You may find yourself contemplating or actually making changes and beginning to think that some professional support and guidance might save you a lot of time and hassles. You may wonder whether coaching is the kind of help you need, and if you're at that point, you likely have a few other questions going through your mind.

- What, if anything, does coaching have to offer me?
- What exactly is coaching?
- Is it worth the investment of my time, energy, and money?

This book will help you answer those questions and put you on a faster track to making the changes you want and need to make.

Making Changes in a Perfect World Would Be Simple

Before explaining the benefits of coaching for lawyers, it's useful to stop for a moment and look at how people (including lawyers) actually go about making changes and decisions. Let's start by putting to rest the idea that change is easy. Life would be blissfully sweet if making changes were simple. In an imaginary perfect world, we would instantly recognize what we needed to do and then effortlessly make those changes. We wouldn't have to think too hard and long; once ideas for change popped into our heads, we would just act on them. Follow-up would be a smooth and satisfying process. We wouldn't have to deal with messy things like dilemmas, trade-offs, and win-lose situations. Once we made whatever changes we felt necessary, we would intuitively know we had succeeded. And as we basked in the glow of our success, we would have no fears of reverting back to our old way of doing things. It would all be effortless, frictionless, simple, and sweet. In this imaginary world of wishful thinking, all New Year's resolutions would be kept, all diets would be successful, and all coaches would be unemployed.

At its heart, coaching is about helping people make changes—changes in their circumstances, their behavior, and even their attitudes and beliefs.

Making Changes in the Real World Can Be Challenging and Complex

Occasionally making changes *is* that easy, but for the most part making changes in the real world is much more challenging and complex, especially when it comes to big changes. That, in short, is why coaching exists. At its heart, coaching is about helping people make changes—changes in their circumstances, their behavior, and even their attitudes and beliefs.

Our lives and professional circumstances are always changing, and we are constantly faced with the need to adjust to those changing conditions. It can be something as mundane as finding a new route home because the crosstown bridge is closed, or as complex as changing our marketing efforts to attract clients in a down economy. As elevated as our professional lives may seem, we are still tied to a basic biological and economic imperative: adapt or perish. We make changes because we want something to be different in the future and we want to have a future.

Making changes starts with making decisions about how we will do things differently in the future. We decide we will start doing some new things, stop doing some old ones, and continue doing others. This may

sound pretty simple, but as Bill Watterson (creator of the comic strip “Calvin and Hobbes”) put it, “The problem with the future is that it keeps turning into the present.”

Hitting a Moving Target—the Problem with the Future

Because the future is seldom, if ever, exactly the same as the present, we’re left to make predictions about it. We could all make wiser decisions if we were prescient or owned a working crystal ball, but since neither is likely to happen anytime soon, we instead rely on guesswork. It may seem sarcastic to characterize our predictions as guesswork, but often that’s what they are. Some of our guesswork is very well founded—it’s tough to argue against predictions based on the laws of physics, for example. But people have a habit of confusing their opinions and expectations with predictable and observable facts. What we want to see happen often turns into what we earnestly believe will happen, and so we buy into our own predictions without bothering to question them. Will Rogers put it best when he said, “It isn’t what we don’t know that gives us trouble; it’s what we know that ain’t so.” Certainty isn’t always helpful.

Emotions Color Our Predictions About the Future

Some of our guesswork—especially when we’re highly educated professionals—is based on extensive data and thorough analysis. As comforting as the idea of an entirely rational world may be, most of our predictions are also the products of our emotions, intuitions, and gut feelings. Though many people still believe the decision-making process can be totally objective and logical, current neuroscience studies have demonstrated that the emotional centers of our brain are highly involved in all decision making, including activities as seemingly unemotional as solving mathematical equations. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, our emotions play an enormous role in both our predictions about the future and our decisions about how we are going to deal with it. And if that weren’t enough, recent studies have also shown that people are generally very poor judges about what will make them happy in the future. [Daniel Gilbert. *Stumbling on Happiness*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York 2006.] Our predictions about the future are seldom perfect, and our decisions about how we will change in the future are seldom simple.

A Simple Model of How We Make Changes

Before we can fully appreciate how coaches help people, we need to look at how people make changes. When lawyers, other professionals, and people in general make changes, they usually follow what amounts to a four-step process. With simple and routine changes, this process is often done without reflection or even awareness. It is as much an emotional process as it is a cognitive one. As problems and the need for change grow more complex, we tend to take a more deliberate approach, perhaps even documenting our thinking in writing.

See how this four-stage model works with a change you're either contemplating or in the process of making. Start by identifying where you are in the four-stage process and then answer the questions for reflection that appear in the appropriate box or boxes below.

- 1. Acknowledge that change is needed and/or desired.** We usually start with a sense that things aren't working well, we're dissatisfied, or we could be more productive or profitable. Most of the time we have a general idea of what we need to do. For lawyers it may be: "I need more money"; "I'm not getting enough done"; "I'm overly stressed"; "What will it take for me to find good employees?"

Stage 1 Questions

- Is something in my life and/or practice bugging me, broken, or in need of improvement?
- Do I want to change it?
- Is there anything else that would make my law practice more satisfying?

- 2. Identify what those specific changes are.** Once we tune into the general sense that we need to change our circumstances or way of doing things, we narrow our focus and move on to the challenge of figuring out exactly what we're thinking about changing. At this stage, we get specific about the results we're looking for, our time frame for achieving them, and their relative importance and urgency.

Our answers to these questions give us clarity about the results we're after; the next step is figuring out how to get those results.

Stage 2 Questions

- *What one or two changes will have the most positive impact on my life and/or practice?*
 - *How will they make my future different?*
 - *How urgent and important are these changes?*
 - *How quickly do I want or need to make these changes?*
 - *When would I like to be finished making them?*
 - *What specific changes do I want or need to make?*
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- 3. Decide what steps are necessary to make those changes.** At this stage of making changes, we try to identify what specifically we need to do to get the results we're after. We ask ourselves questions that help us identify and map out the tangible actions we need to take and the shifts in attitudes that must accompany them.

Once we answer those questions, we may have a plan for moving forward.

Stage 3 Questions

- *What do I need to do to make these changes happen?*
 - *What tangible actions will I need to take?*
 - *Where do I start? What do I do first? What's the right order?*
 - *Will I also need to change the way I look at and think about things?*
 - *If I've failed to make these changes before, what have I learned to do or avoid doing?*
 - *What do I need to do differently so I will be more successful than the last time I tried to make these changes?*
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- 4. Take new actions to implement the desired changes.** If we are persistent and disciplined enough to make it through those first three stages, we then move on to taking new actions in pursuit of our goals. During this implementation stage, we ask ourselves questions that monitor our experience and progress.
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Stage 4 Questions

- *Is what I'm doing working and moving me toward my desired results?*
- *If I have a schedule, am I staying on it?*
- *What things am I having trouble with?*
- *Is there anything I continue to avoid doing?*

- *Have I lost momentum and enthusiasm?*
- *Do I need help, and if so, whose help could I use?*
- *Is all this work really worth it?*

Some of us work this stage in an orderly and formal manner, while many of us simply jump in and see what works. Because we are human, we tend to take and stick with those actions that are within our comfort zones. Unfortunately, those are not always the actions that are the most urgent or needed.

Making and sustaining changes is seldom as easy as following a recipe or completing steps A, B, and C in a set of assembly instructions. The four-step model proffered above should not be understood as an entirely rational and dispassionate process. Our emotions and intuitions play a huge role in how we make decisions, and many behavioral scientists and neuroscientists now believe our emotions play the *larger* role in our decision making.

As we go through the trial and error process of taking actions and seeing if they work, we often find that making changes isn't as easy as it first seems. Knowing what changes we need to make is one thing; actually being able to make, let alone sustain, those changes is another. We may find that grit and good intentions by themselves are not enough.

How Coaches Help Us Make Changes

It is important to be clear about the role coaches play. True coaches (as we will see later) don't tell their clients what changes to make, and true coaches don't force their clients to make changes. (Those roles are better left to consultants and drill sergeants, respectively.) True coaching isn't giving advice; it's helping clients while *they* make changes. The best coaches not only understand how people make and sustain changes but also know how to guide and support their clients throughout the process of making changes. In doing so, they save their clients considerable amounts of time and energy.

Coaches Help Us Identify the Right Issue to Work On

Sometimes we know exactly what we would like to change in the future, but other times it is difficult to get specific or identify the right issue to work on. Coaches can be extremely helpful in the first phase of making changes, when clients are trying to get beyond their general sense of dissatisfaction ("Things could be better," "I'm not happy with . . .," "I'd like to do a better job of . . .," "I really need to change the way I . . .," etc.). Through the coaching conversation, clients get a clearer picture of what the problem is and what needs to change. These conversations typically focus on the apparent problem as well as the larger context surrounding it.

The way clients first perceive a problem or opportunity is not always the most accurate or useful way. Often the problem a client first reports is a manifestation of a different or larger problem that is actually a higher priority. Coaches help clients think through the problems or opportunities they're encountering and, when necessary, look at them from a different perspective and reframe them. By using a coach, clients end up spending their time on the most important issues and working on changes that will yield the greatest benefits.

Coaches Help Us Figure Out Exactly What to Do

After a coach has helped a client clearly define his or her problem and desired changes, the conversation can move smoothly to setting the client's goals. "Goals" are simply what a client wants to be different in the future. When people don't spend sufficient time clearly identifying their problems, they usually end up with ill-defined and conflicting goals. Fuzzy problems lead to fuzzy goals, and there's nothing more frustrating than working hard when it's not sufficiently clear what you're working toward. It's like running ten miles down the wrong road and then discovering you're now farther away from your desired destination than when you started.

There is more art and science to setting goals than most people realize. Goals need to be more than a statement of our dreams, hopes, and wants. Good coaches help their clients craft goals that are realistic and attainable. They also need to be specific and measurable enough so that it's obvious when a client has been successful. Goals work best when they're tied to a timeline. For example, setting a fuzzy goal of losing fifteen pounds feels a lot different than setting a goal of losing those pounds over the next ten weeks. Without time constraints, it's difficult to feel any sense of urgency.

When we go about making changes, our goals are usually multiple. We seldom have a single, isolated goal that is wholly independent from other changes we need or wish to make. Our goal of losing fifteen pounds in the above example may go hand in hand with related goals to exercise three times a week, bring an organic lunch to work, and buy new clothes for the office. When multiple goals are present, we need to pay attention to their timing and relative priorities. For example, it doesn't make sense to buy new clothes until after the fifteen pounds have been shed. Business and career goals are, of course, far more complicated, and coaches are invaluable in sorting out the importance, urgency, and interrelationship of a client's goals. Good coaches help clients avoid taking a "Ready, Fire, Aim" approach to making changes.

Coaches Offer Guidance and Support as We Make Changes

Once a client's goals are clear and prioritized, their coach can help them figure out exactly what they need to do to attain those goals. Usually this

means identifying the specific, observable actions that a client will take. Sometimes this also means identifying related changes in a client's attitudes or beliefs. These may be one-time tasks or a set of daily, weekly, or monthly practices. Coaches help clients compile this list of behaviors and practices into an overall action plan that functions as a road map for the desired changes. It lets the client and coach know how much progress is being made and whether it's in the right direction.

Action plans are very helpful in promoting follow-through and success, but they are not infallible guides. As the Scottish poet Robert Burns noted, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." No matter how detailed and well thought out our action plans may be, they can end up being misleading or a hindrance. As mentioned earlier, the future has the irritating habit of changing without notice or regard to how hard we've worked on drafting our plans. When external conditions change, it's necessary to make midcourse corrections. For example, a lawyer whose goal is making partner may want to revisit that goal when it looks like her firm stands a good chance of breaking up.

Midcourse corrections are also necessary when clients experience internal changes. In putting in the long hours necessary for her goal of partnership, that same lawyer may realize that a less hectic lifestyle is actually more important than the prestige of making partner. Her goals and action plan should change accordingly. When we are in the midst of making changes, it can be difficult to see the larger picture and the need for midcourse adjustments. Good coaches function as independent thinking partners and second set of eyes in these situations—they help their clients see both the forest and the trees.

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Coaches Motivate and Hold Us Accountable

Often a coach's most important function is in holding his or her client accountable. It is far easier to make changes when we actually write them down, and easier still when we articulate them to someone else. When clients enter into coaching relationships, they are in effect asking their coaches to hold them responsible for making the desired changes. It is one thing to disappoint oneself, another to disappoint one's coach. This alone often motivates clients to push themselves and stretch outside their customary comfort zones.

Good coaches provide other positive forms of motivation. Making and sustaining changes can be frustrating work. Progress isn't always steady and easy. It's not uncommon for clients to take two steps forward and one step back. Conflicts—both *interpersonal* and *intrapersonal*—may arise and

sidetrack best efforts. In these situations, coaches provide much-needed feedback and motivation. They help clients appreciate how much progress they've already made, think through alternate strategies, and offer encouragement. Often what clients need most is a reminder that they're not alone and they have the ear and support of someone who has worked through these changes before.

Even the Best Coaches Have Limitations

Coaching isn't a panacea, and coaches aren't miracle-working wizards. No matter how skilled the coach, success is still largely a matter of a client's attitude and efforts. A good coach can't make up for a disinterested or lazy client. A good coach can, however, get the best out of a client and help him or her become more motivated and adept at making changes.

Like all good things, what clients get out of coaching is commensurate with what they put into it. Coaching requires commitment and work from both coach and client. If you're looking for a quick fix or the proverbial "silver bullet," coaching probably isn't right for you. Don't expect your coach to have a crystal ball or a magic wand or a winning lottery ticket to hand you. What your coach does have is a keen understanding of how people make and sustain changes, as well as a set of tools to support and guide you while you make those changes. Your coach can be your trusted navigator as you move from "something needs to change" to "knowing what to do" to finally arriving at "I've done it!"