

Foreword

By Neil Olson

I remember clearly when I first heard about “coaching” as a professional service unrelated to sports: it was during a meeting of my law partners in 1995. We had, for years, been bickering about “partner compensation” and we were discussing various compensation models presented to us by a very experienced (and very expensive) law firm consultant. The poor fellow had just completed a thoroughly researched and superbly delivered presentation outlining the pluses and minuses of several possible approaches to partner compensation and concluded with a recommendation that we should, given our size and industry, choose between one of two “best” options. The “Q & A” that followed was a thrilling (but for its brutality) serial cross-examination of everything even tangentially related to the presentation, the recommendation, and—more than once—the motives and competency of the consultant himself. In the end, after we’d utterly savaged the consultant, the only possible option left was the status quo. Still, the consultant persevered and suggested that we consider hiring a “coach” to help us see and better understand the dynamics of our firm’s culture—a culture that simultaneously had us continually arguing about partner profit distributions and utterly unable to discuss the matter without lawyering the situation to smithereens.

In the years that followed I found myself noticing the terms “coach” and “coaching” being regularly applied in business situations, and that the regularity was increasing. As I left that firm to start my own “shop” I read everything I could get my hands on about operating a professional services firm

(my “MBA” is from the “University of Google”) and became fascinated by coaching as a method of counseling or advising clients from the perspective that they might actually have the answers to their own issues (or be able to find them) and therefore only need to be appropriately encouraged, challenged, and held accountable. I spent time earning a “certification” as a coach and took courses in leadership, management, and finance. In time I began to better understand the consultant’s recommendation as a serious attempt to get us, as “partners” in a business (a law firm) to consider that *how* we were interacting was at least as important as what we were interacting about. (Looking back, it was probably much more). And as I left the practice of law in favor of a career as a business consultant and coach, I often wondered why it seemed so difficult for lawyers to view and take advantage of coaching in the same way that such a quickly growing number of highly successful, highly placed leaders and executives in the business world could.

The answer came as a result of many powerful and insightful conversations I had with the author of this book in 2007 as I was serving as national board president of Professional Coaches, Mentors, and Advisors. Andrew and I met and quickly became friends and colleagues, certainly in part because of our common history as lawyers. To a much greater extent, however, I simply admired Andrew. I particularly have been struck by his crisp, clear-thinking approach to coaching as a service and lawyers as coaching clients. “Lawyers,” I recall Andrew saying, “tend to approach most things as an issue needing fixing, and they use their legal skills to do the ‘fixing’ even when discussing nonlegal issues.”

Eureka! Andrew had hit the nail right on the head. He went on to say: “Thinking and acting like a lawyer is a tremendously valuable approach to problem solving when the ‘problem’ being solved is a legal one. It is often of less value in other areas such as the arena of relationships—professional *or* personal. A screwdriver, if you will, is a perfectly valuable and useful tool when one is tightening screws. It is not so useful if one is attempting to solve an algebra equation.”

So when I heard Andrew was considering writing a guidebook on professional coaching specifically for lawyers, I knew he was exactly the right person to do it. Andrew’s vast experience working with lawyers provides him with the insights and perspectives necessary to make this book practical and useful (dare I say essential?) to any lawyer wanting to understand coaching and how to best use it as a professional service. Andrew also has a somewhat unique perspective in that he sees great value in coaching as a style of business consulting that views the coaching client as capable of addressing his or her own needs, and often more in need of perspective and counseling than advice or direction.

Having now seen the “end product” of Andrew’s labor, I can say that I probably underestimated his ability to cogently distill and present the essential nature of coaching, the role of the professional coach, and how lawyers might best use coaching as a professional service. I think anyone (lawyer or not) will gain greatly from the ideas, distinctions, approaches, and resources detailed in this book, and I am certain lawyers will find the book invaluable. Andrew’s approach to writing, like his approach to coaching and to life, is direct, lucid, balanced, and—as can be seen here—grounded in the practical. As a mentor to me, Andrew has inspired me with his commitment to lawyers and to coaching. As a teacher to me, he has demonstrated a gift for making the complicated simple and understandable, if not downright fun! And as my colleague, he has shown unflinching generosity and uncompromising professionalism. Andrew has brought all of these character traits to this needed, timely, and highly valuable book.

And perhaps that is the true essence of what Andrew teaches all of us here—how to bring our very best to our work regardless of whether we think of our work as a job, a profession, or a calling. All deserve our best.

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