Which lawyers need coaching?

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The National Law Journal
08-09-2012

The quickest and most effective way to turn a lawyer into a rainmaker is through business-development coaching. So how do you pick the right lawyers to coach?

To answer this question, I interviewed one of the top business-development coaches in the country, Cordell Parvin. He practiced law for 35 years, building a book of business worth more than $3.5 million, before leaving law firm life to start his own coaching business. “The lawyers who will be most successful in your coaching program are your lawyers whom you might think need coaching the least,” he said. “They are the most motivated and they get the most out of the program because they put the most into it.”

According to Parvin, the secret is finding lawyers with “fire in the belly.” There is no way to determine who qualifies based solely on their books of business, but the one key attribute of a solid candidate is motivation.

“I can’t motivate the unmotivated,” Parvin said. “I’ve taken a lawyer with a $200,000 book of business and helped him turn it into $2.5 million book, because he was motivated. I currently coach a lawyer who has a $5 million dollar book of business, and the coaching works because he still wants to learn. Those are the types of people I want to coach.”

Some marketing directors argued during a recent Legal Sales and Services Organization Conference that only lawyers with the largest books of business should qualify for coaching, but that hasn’t been Parvin’s experience. He worked with one group of new partners who realized fairly dramatic success through coaching. Only after observing their success were older lawyers with bigger books of business sufficiently motivated to undergo coaching as well.

“Every firm has three types of lawyers they put through coaching,” Parvin said. “First you have those who need it the least, yet get the most out of it.” Second, “those who get a lot out of it but are introverted — they may not say much, but they are very prepared and focused. Third, are those who the firm is wasting money on. If the firm did a better job of selecting, they would have fewer of these.”

Most firms don’t really understand coaching. “There are two kinds of law firms,” Parvin said. “Those that see my coaching as an expense and those that see it as a revenue generator.”
In fact, while still at his law firm, Parvin coached a group of lawyers and helped them substantially increase their books of business. What recognition did he get for this feat? A pat on the back.

Firms overlook coaching because it requires a long-term strategy. Parvin described consulting with one firm where, out of 400 lawyers, only about one dozen had individual business plans. Lawyers who claimed to really understand business weren’t running their own practices like businesses.

Who are the lawyers in your firm who could really benefit from coaching? Or doesn’t your firm believe in the value of business-development coaching?

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