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MIND YOUR BUSINESS

The case for business development coaching

BY PAUL R. MANUELE

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WEST HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA - JULY 15:
(L-R) Brett Goldstein, Jeremy Swift, Juno Temple,
Jason Sudeikis, Cristo Fernández, Brendan Hunt,
Moe Jeudy-Lamour, and Hannah Waddingham
attend Apple's "Ted Lasso" season two premiere

In the third season of the Apple TV series *Ted Lasso*, star striker Jamie Tartt wants to reclaim his place as the best player on the pitch. He doesn't know exactly what he needs, only that it's something more than what even the best teamwide coaching—and the world's most enthusiastic head coach—can deliver. Determined to push his development further, he asks assistant coach and

at Pacific Design Center on July 15, 2021 in West Hollywood, California. (Photo by Kevin Winter/Getty Images)

former star Roy Kent to coach him individually.

Personal coaching has become ubiquitous in our competitive culture. High school students work with personal coaches to prepare for travel teams, standardized tests and college admissions interviews. People hire personal coaches to perfect their golf swing, learn to dance and navigate life's everyday challenges. In the corporate world, personal coaching has moved from a niche perk to a mainstream investment in performance and leadership.

The growth of business coaching

Business coaching is big business. In the United States alone, the business coaching industry has increased from about \$16 billion in 2020 to about \$20 billion in 2025, according to data from IBISWorld.

No independent research has yet measured the impact of coaching within law firms. In other industries, however, companies that invest in coaching find that they're getting their money's worth. Research from the FMI Corp., a consulting and investment banking company, found that 87% of executives surveyed believe executive coaching delivers a high return on investment.

Supporting research from PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Association Resource Center, commissioned by the International Coaching Federation, reported an average ROI seven times the cost of employing a coach, with some organizations reporting returns as high as 49 times.

Law firms are behind the curve

Unlike other industries, personal coaching rarely happens in law firms. What happens instead is group training. It usually works like this: Dozens of lawyers gather in a hybrid meeting space to have lunch and learn how to develop business via PowerPoint. The session is led by a consultant

who explains the current thinking on business development (e.g., focus on relationships), introduces a framework for the business development process, and shares messaging strategies to maximize client engagement.



It's all good information, and many leave the room inspired and resolved to do better. But after a week, no one will be doing anything any differently. Which was not unexpected, and why a month later, the consultant is back to reinforce the teaching—with a different PowerPoint but to the same effect.

The problem with group training is that it is rarely followed by the kind of one-to-one coaching that helps individuals apply their training to the real world. It's as if the Ted Lasso character came into the room with his winsome smile and irresistible charm and gave a pep talk on the importance of relationships and teamwork. But no one asked Roy to follow up Ted's remarks with a practical program to translate those ideas into action.

The false economy of group training

One-to-one coaching delivers something that group training cannot—namely, personalization, accountability and real-time feedback. But faced with competing priorities and no precedent of spending on coaching programs, firms default to group training, which is considerably less expensive. They rationalize that the in-house business development team can provide individual coaching as needed.

But as Rocky the flying squirrel used to say to Bullwinkle, "That trick never works." The in-house team supports the entire lawyer population and cannot provide that level of individual support. Training without coaching is why most business development programs check the box without changing behavior.

Top business development coaches charge as much as \$5,000 per month for individualized coaching, often with a three-month minimum engagement. At that rate, a firm could spend \$30,000 in six months for one lawyer. That sounds like a lot, but a single new client matter can exceed that amount many times over. When group training is followed by one-to-one coaching, it's an investment. When it isn't, it's entertainment.

The coaching generation

Young lawyers entering the profession today expect individualized attention and frequent feedback because that's how they've always learned. They've had private sports training, academic tutoring and one-on-one instruction in music and the arts. Firms that provide coaching will attract and retain this talent. Firms that don't will struggle to compete for it.

Nearly every firm's website describes its commitment to some form of "investing in our people." The examples usually include mentoring, CLE programs and firmwide training. They rarely if ever mention personal coaching, which suggests they rarely if ever offer it.

Some firms have begun adding coaching roles or programs, though the approaches vary widely. A few have created "coaching" positions, but these typically sit within career development teams rather than business development. Others offer coaching only in group settings, which lacks the personalization that makes one-on-one coaching effective. And some firms reserve coaching for underperforming lawyers—a well-intentioned move that nonetheless stigmatizes coaching and makes lawyers less likely to seek it out.

Meanwhile, some partners have concluded that coaching is worth paying for themselves when their firms won't. That should be a red flag for firm leadership (if they become aware of it). The risk is that lawyers who feel they have to fund their own development will begin to feel that they're on their own. Extending coaching to lawyers who would benefit from it signals—to those lawyers and to the market—that this is a place where talent is supported, not merely managed.

Firms that want to explore business development coaching should run a pilot. Offer coaching to this year's cohort of newly elevated partners (or lateral hires or associates on the cusp of partnership) and to last year's cohort. Including both groups helps control for differences in practice type, market conditions and experience.

To assess impact, compare originations of this year's coached cohort with last year's comparable cohort who did not receive coaching and measure how last year's group now performs with coaching relative to the previous year when they did not receive coaching.

Run the pilot for 24 months to produce a more robust dataset and reduce the influence of short-term fluctuations. Structured this way, the pilot provides credible evidence of whether one-to-one coaching produces a measurable and sustained lift in originations.

The payoff

Firms that embrace one-to-one business development coaching do more than boost revenue. They build a culture where lawyers are confident and equipped to drive their own growth.

By the end of the third season of *Ted Lasso*, Jamie Tartt has become more focused, more self-aware and a far better teammate. As he grew, the team grew with him—embracing tactical changes that could only take hold in a culture built on trust in one another, belief in their ability to succeed together, and the freedom to be themselves on the pitch. Jamie's one-to-one work with Roy was an important part of that broader transformation. Law firms have a similar opportunity to strengthen their teams and unlock individual potential. The question is whether they'll act before their competitors do.

Paul R. Manuele is the founder of PR Manuele Consulting, where he advises law firms and individual partners on business development strategy and execution. He works with lawyers to grow their practices, helping them turn ad hoc business development efforts into consistent habits.

Mind Your Business is a series of columns written by lawyers, legal professionals and others within the legal industry. The purpose of these columns is to offer practical guidance for attorneys on how to run their practices, provide information about the latest trends in legal technology and how it can help lawyers work more efficiently, and strategies for building a thriving business.

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