

October 2009 Bar Bulletin

Managing Workplaces: When It Pays To Bring in a Coach

By Amy J. Stephson

The benefits of having a mentor at work are well known. Less well known are the benefits of having a coach.

Mentors are guides who share their wisdom and connections with their mentees to help them navigate the workplace, develop their skills and achieve success. A coach helps the client achieve the same goals, but in a very different way: in coaching, the client and coach are partners and equals. The coach has definite expertise — in listening, asking questions, uncovering barriers, guiding the client's analytical process — but it's the client who has the answers. When coaching executives, managers and other employees, the coach also should understand workplace dynamics and systems, but again, it's the client who has the answers.

Coaches also help clients stay on track by working with them to set goals, plan and create structures for action. In addition, the very process of talking to the coach on a regular basis in itself helps the client remain accountable for moving forward.

So why would an employer hire a coach for an employee? (Or the employee hire his or her own coach?) One overarching reason: It's a cost-effective way to develop and retain employees. It's expensive to hire and train an employee, and even more expensive to hire their replacement and start the process again. It's also expensive to respond to the internal problems that employees with skill set and behavior problems can cause.

A coach gives the employee the one-on-one attention that training — which is one-shot and does not address specific situations and personalities — and even mentoring simply cannot match. It's also very convenient: after an initial in-person session, coaches and clients usually meet by telephone. With effective coaching, an employee can achieve needed change faster and better than he or she would if working alone. Certified coaches are bound by a code of ethics, thus ensuring sensitivity to issues of confidentiality, conflict of interest and the like.

Regardless of the level of the employee, coaching can help.

Executive Coaching

Top leaders face new challenges that require new skills. They need to inspire the troops, conceptualize at a higher level, build teams and engage with the outside world in new ways. Technical skills are no longer critical. This is true in all types of organizations: private, public and non-profit.

Many top leaders fail or limp along because they don't make the transition from manager

to leader. They fail to meet business objectives, have a personal style (abrasive, controlling, distrustful, fill in the blank here) that is counterproductive or they don't understand the larger organizational systems or culture. They're too cautious or too bold. Perfectionists who don't know how to delegate. The list goes on.

A coach can work with leaders on all of these issues, helping them understand where their strengths and weaknesses lie, what internal and external barriers they face, and what action steps are needed. Top leaders are usually very talented people and simply focusing on their challenges in a personalized manner can make a tremendous difference.

Management and Supervisory Coaching

Managers and supervisors face many of the same issues as top leaders and coaching can help them solve those challenges in much the same way. However, more so than those at the top, managers and supervisors also have to deal with human resources issues. Some say that parenting is the world's toughest job. They're referring, of course, to parenting children in the home. But they also could be referring to managing and supervising employees in the workplace.

The problems are many: poor work performance, difficult personalities, conflict, absenteeism, inability to work and play well with others. The problems also are time consuming. How many managers wish they could do their jobs instead of dealing with thorny personnel issues? How many supervisors want to get the work done and instead wonder, in the oft-quoted phrase, "Can't we all just get along?"

Many managers and supervisors do get some management/supervisory training. However good the training may be, though, it's not individualized and it's not ongoing. A coach, by contrast, can help clients understand the systems in which they are operating, develop their people-managing skills, and apply their skills and understanding to specific situations. The coaching need not be forever: Ideally, the manager or supervisor will internalize his or her learning and move forward on their own or with only occasional coaching sessions.

The Rest of the Crew

Why would an employer want to spend money to hire a coach for an employee who is not in any type of leadership position? Because it's an effective way to deal with a variety of difficult situations.

One common situation: employees who have significant job performance or behavior problems but who cannot be terminated because they're protected by civil service rules or a union contract. Or they recently filed an EEO complaint. Or their manager has not only failed to document the problems, but has given the employee good performance reviews.

Another: employees who can't be fired because they're too valuable to the organization (the rainmaker or technical guru) or because they're related to the boss. Finally, there may be employees who need help emerging from a bad period of conflict with co-workers or management so they can return to their former productivity.

In such cases, a coach can help achieve goals that both the employer and employee share. The employee can gain insights into their strengths, weaknesses and behaviors, and develop a plan of improvement. The employee has a sounding board who reflects back what they're saying and enables them to "reality test." The employee may make real changes in how they're functioning in the workplace simply because someone is paying attention to them and listening. In some cases, the employee may even decide the job is not a good fit and leave.

Coaching may not be a magic elixir that solves all workplace problems. But it is a valuable tool that can address a surprisingly wide range of workplace challenges.

Amy Stephson is a Seattle employment attorney whose primary focus is conducting independent workplace investigations. She is also a workplace coach and is certified by the International Coach Federation. Stephson can be reached at 206-223-7215 or amy@amystephson.com.

[Go Back](#)

All rights reserved. All the content of this web site is copyrighted and may be reproduced in any form including digital and print for any non-commercial purpose so long as this notice remains visible and attached hereto. View full Disclaimer.

[About KCBA](#) [Contact Us](#) [Directions](#) [Jobs at KCBA](#) [Donate](#) [Publications](#) [Lawyer Referral](#) [Volunteer](#)
[Opportunities](#) [Foundation](#) [Other Links](#) [Site Map](#) [Staff Login](#) [Members Login](#) [Webmaster](#) [FAQ](#)