

‘Deep Coaching’: Untangling the Most Difficult Knots

By Dr. Bonny J. Forrest

Applying psychological frameworks to help high-achieving performers get unstuck and move forward.

Jack, a partner in a major U.S. firm, is in his early 50s and, by any reasonable standard, highly successful. He has built a loyal following of prestigious and lucrative clients, works very hard, and is in the next-to-top tier of his firm’s compensation system. But his firm is not happy with him, and he is not happy with the firm. (This description combines aspects of several coaching engagements. It does not describe a specific person or firm.)

His relationships with several other partners in his practice group are strained. According to the group’s leader, the others complain that he has been harshly critical of their work when they collaborated and sharp-elbowed when it came to allocating credit.

Associates have also complained about Jack’s abrasiveness. And the group leader has a complaint of her own, as she told Jack in what turned out to be an unpleasant conversation: At this point in his career, Jack should be working hard to expand his business so he can pass on more work to others — but, she thinks, he’s focusing too much only on his own interests and beginning to coast.

Matters come to a head when another very successful partner threatens to leave for a competing firm, potentially taking clients with him. The reasons he cites are primarily money-related, but he also says that he finds relationships among the group’s partners unpleasant and hopes to find a home where everyone gets along more easily.

The group leader tells Jack that he has to play his part in resolving the tensions in the group and, for that purpose, should

work with a coach. But, after Jack learns that coaching hasn’t been suggested for anyone else, he refuses. The head of the firm then insists, and Jack acquiesces — unhappily.

What’s going on with Jack? Can coaching help? If so, what kind of coaching, and how can a coach overcome a seemingly solid wall of resistance?

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Over the past decade, law firms have come to recognize the importance of skilled coaching as a part of their talent-management strategy, and several have taken the next step of establishing positions for internal coaches (see Jim Moore, “Is It Time to Add a Coach to Your Team?,” *PD Quarterly*, May 2016, page 20). At the same time, the newer generation of partners is more open to coaching and more likely to expect hands-on support for their careers.

But different needs require different kinds of coaching — and, sometimes, different types of coaches. Typically, law firm coaches define their role as helping a person to work out for themselves the best way to address the challenges they face, or how to define their goals and take the next steps in their careers.

This coaching requires an uncommon set of skills, including the ability to:

- meet individuals where they are, not where you think they should be;

- ask intelligent questions that lead them to work out their own solutions;
- listen patiently and empathetically;
- bring enough of oneself to a conversation so that it feels like a conversation that is honest on both sides; and
- refrain from trying to solve people's problems for them, which can sometimes be particularly difficult for lawyers who become coaches.

Coaches with these skills have done a tremendous amount of good for individuals and their firms. But there are some problems, such as Jack's, whose roots lie too deep to be reached by the usual forms of coaching. Sometimes, the cumulative stresses of a high-pressure practice combine with aspects of an individual's personality and history, along with the dynamics within a group, to form a knot so intractable that it requires psychological insight to understand and psychological training — along with tactful persistence — to untangle.

"Deep" coaching can also help in another kind of situation: when partners in leadership positions have trouble living up to their responsibility for creating healthy cultures and, in the process, working effectively with all the personalities in a group. That requires a set of skills many do not possess.

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Sometimes, they can develop these skills if they are helped to understand what they should be doing and how to do it. Sometimes, however, the development stalls for reasons that may not be obvious. For example, the partner's sense of who they are, the identity in which they take pride, can get in the way, especially if they pride themselves on their "strength" or "control." Or they may fail to recognize the triggers that cause them to react badly in some interactions, or they may respond

to criticism or conflict out of deep-rooted insecurities to which they are largely oblivious. This article will address mainly the scenario where a partner's interactions with others warrant immediate intervention, but the model it discusses applies equally to leaders and other lawyers struggling with the interpersonal demands of their roles.

This type of coaching is not therapy. Therapy takes place in the context of a one-on-one relationship in which the individual — not the firm — is the client, and the focus is usually on the individual's welfare, not necessarily the impact of their behavior on others. If therapy is necessary at all, it should be left to an individual's own therapist. In "deep" coaching, although the coach may use some techniques also used in therapy and, of course, is concerned with the individual's welfare, the client is the firm, and the goal is to help the individual function more effectively within the firm.

Although the situations suited to "deep coaching" will be fewer than those suited to other, more familiar forms of coaching, this form of coaching can deal with problems that are too deep-rooted to be easily addressed by the other forms. Often, these problems are not only debilitating for the individual; they also create painful tension, if not outright dysfunction, in a group. Although there is no clear demarcation between this type of coaching and other types, it supplements them in three ways.

Exploring Personal History

First, deep coaching applies the coach's training as a clinical psychologist to spot, and then help individuals bring to the surface, issues that have their roots in the person's history but can powerfully affect how they are now behaving and responding to others. It is not uncommon, for example, for partners working with a coach to realize that they have been unconsciously replicating in the workplace the dynamics of their relationships with parents or siblings.

Or, for another example, it is not uncommon for partners to realize that they have locked themselves into a definition of what it means to be successful that is internally contradictory, leaving them constantly at war with themselves.

In theory, a “light bulb” moment of this kind could lead someone to decide they would prefer a total change of career. In fact, however, among the highly successful professionals who normally engage in this kind of coaching, that seldom happens. They like what they do and take pride in it, and want to continue doing it. The coaching enables them to practice at the same high level but with more satisfaction, less stress, and stronger relationships with their colleagues.

Exerting Pressure

Second, although this form of coaching also relies on an individual’s desire and ability to solve their own problems, it is more willing to exert some pressure — tactful, skillful pressure — to help a person recognize and face up to aspects of their behavior or imbedded assumptions that they have trouble seeing on their own. This does not mean taking the deep dive involved in therapy. Instead, this coaching focuses on the specific aspects of an individual’s personality, upbringing, and history that affect how they behave and interact with others as they work.

Exploring Group Dynamics

Third, a “problem” attributed solely to one person’s behavior can arise in part from a dysfunctional dynamic within a group or among two or three people. If the coaching is to be effective, it must address that interpersonal dynamic rather than focusing only on the individual.

When psychologically trained coaches deal with complex issues, they can bring to bear some of the frameworks in which

they have been trained. Four frameworks are often particularly useful in coaching high-achieving and highly intelligent lawyers and other professionals. The paragraphs below are intended not to do justice to the frameworks, but only to outline how they can be relevant in coaching.

Framework 1: Attachment Theory

Attachment theory helps a coach recognize how a professional’s patterns of behavior toward others can reflect the patterns of attachment — or disengagement — within their family as they were growing up. Without our realizing it, those early patterns can affect how we respond to others long after we become adults.

For example, if a person grows up with a parent who is uncaring, dismissive, or unpredictable, that can result in adult behavior that others perceive as hostile toward authority or untrusting of colleagues. If a person spent their childhood taking on the role of responsible, caring adult for a dysfunctional parent or sibling, that may lead them as adults into subordinating their interests to another person’s too quickly and too often.

Psychological cause-and-effect is never that simple, of course, and it takes patience and skill — and trust between the coach and coachee — to tease out whether repeating old patterns of attachment might be one cause of someone’s problems with working relationships. If so, and if the person can be led to recognize those patterns and change them or manage them better, then a knot that is painful both for the person and their colleagues can begin to untangle.

“Working with a coach has helped me identify how the dynamics of my family have played a role in how I approach my career. Understanding these dynamics has allowed me to make better decisions when I am faced with stressful situations at work.” – a CEO of an investment advisory firm

Framework 2: Group Relations Theory

Group relations theory can help in two ways. First, to recognize that issues attributed solely to an individual's behavior may arise, at least in part, from the complex interplay of individual personality with the dynamics within the group. For example, if a partner is perceived to be a perpetual malcontent, that unhappy situation may result from the intersection of the partner's instinctive reaction to authority with how decisions are made, and the authority exercised in the group.

Individual issues may also become entangled with the distribution of informal emotional and psychological roles in the group. If one person in a group becomes identified as the "container" for emotions of anger or fear or discontent, it may become difficult for the group as a whole to deal with those emotions even when others are experiencing them — and, of course, it becomes difficult for the "container" to break free of others' perceptions of them.

Second, group relations theory can help identify and address patterns within a group that increase tensions, diminish trust, and get in the way of its effective functioning. Often, those patterns emerge when a coach looks at how decisions are made and authority is distributed in the group, how a group's partners communicate and interact with each other, or how disagreements are handled (or avoided). Addressing these patterns can be critical to the health of the group as a whole, because "derailing" behaviors can keep the group stuck. In these situations, the coach is usually working with the group's leader but as a coach for the group, not only the leader.

"Leadership can be pretty lonely. A good coach provides a leader with a much-needed sounding board and reality check. She can identify weaknesses and strengths among individuals and groups and help you achieve greater effectiveness individually and collectively." – a group leader in an AmLaw 50 firm

Framework 3: Cognitive Reframing

Cognitive reframing or restructuring helps a person recognize, and then modify, the assumptions and instinctive responses that are triggered by certain situations — for example, when they are challenged or criticized, when they judge themselves to have failed, or when they feel marginalized. This reframing can provide concrete and specific help with the behaviors or interactions that have made coaching necessary. Reframing can also be a useful exercise for leaders in understanding how they can approach difficult conversations or deal with disruptive behavior more effectively.

"I came into professional relationships with a set of assumptions that I discovered may not always be true. And once I started to shed these assumptions, I opened up to how others might perceive the relationship differently and I learned how to build that relationship more effectively." – a law firm partner

Framework 4: The Lens of Culture

Through a multicultural framework, a coach takes into account the ways in which the experience of minority lawyers within a group may be shaped by the difference between the lens through which they see the world — a lens shaped by such factors as culture, race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation and by the development of their individual identity within those contexts — and the "lenses" of their colleagues. This framework is sometimes critical not only for coaching individuals, but also for working with groups.

For the individual, the difference between "lenses" can result in their feeling isolated, consistently misunderstood, or forced too often to accommodate to the majority's expectations. These stresses can be exacerbated if this individual is struggling with the persona they want to present to their colleagues, or if there is a clash between their sense of identity and the values of their families, as is sometimes the case with second-generation immigrants or first-generation professionals. For some indi-

viduals, working through these issues helps them deal more effectively with recurring situations that otherwise leave them too tired, distracted, or angry to function as effectively as they could.

For groups, a multicultural framework can lead to more productive conversations about the racial and gender issues that arise from lenses different enough to produce mutual difficulties. Even when a firm has put in place processes to guard against unequal treatment and has provided diversity, equity, inclusion, and unconscious bias training, the differences between how individuals see and interpret the same events can still be problematic if they are not discussed openly and fully understood. At times, this will require implementing “bias interrupters” within a group.

Opening the Door to Coaching

If high-performing professionals are asked to work with a coach, especially after 10 or 20 years as a successful partner, they often resist. That is not always the case. Sometimes, individuals find the situation so painful that they are anxious for help. Sometimes, they have been working with a therapist because they are depressed or anxious, and they welcome what the coach can do to complement that work. And, sometimes, they want help dealing with obstacles that seem to have blocked their careers.

Often, however, they have agreed to coaching only because they have been pressed by the firm’s leadership — not the best starting point for successful coaching. In that situation, how can a coach open the door so the experienced high-performing professional can begin to engage?

The critical step — which requires the patience to establish rapport (and, sometimes, a thick skin) — is to join with the coachee to create a “holding environment,” as clinical psychologists are trained to do with their patients. That is a conversational space where the person comes to understand that noth-

ing they say will expose them to blame, dislike, or anger, that the coach can see the world from their perspective, and that they have formed an alliance built on trust and a mutual goal.

At the beginning, the person may be angry or fearful, or both. Often, they recreate in their interaction with the coach the same dynamic or patterns that led to the coaching in the first place, giving the coach first-hand experience of the behavior that needs to be changed. The coach’s task is, in neuropsychology,

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logical jargon, to calm their amygdala: to move them past the “fight-or-flight” stance and the need to defend their behavior to a place where the coachee trusts the coach and is willing to be vulnerable. Until then, nothing the coach says will be fully heard or processed.

Although creating this environment typically takes several conversations, one step toward it can be asking the person to describe their role models over the years. Without directly confronting the behavior that necessitated the coaching, this discussion leads into an exploration of whether some aspects of what they learned from those models may have outlived their usefulness and whether they have trouble living up to other aspects.

Another step can be an assessment such as the Hogan Team Report, when it is used not to “diagnose” a personality but to spark a discussion about the person’s own perception of their personality and values. A Hogan Team Report can be used to help a group or team understand how the personalities of its members interact, perhaps in ways that keep it from performing optimally.

Among others, one reason for working hard to create a safe environment is that it gradually allows a person to explore parts of their personality they have tried to disown, repress, or exclude from their understanding of who they are. Over time, this kind of avoidance can distort a person's behavior and create a degree of unhappiness or constant tension that affects their work and their relationships.

Once some trust has been built (and it will be an ongoing process), another critical step is to provide on-the-fly or "just-in-time" coaching. The roots of a problem may lie deep, but the problem will show up and often cause the most damage in specific communications and actions, especially when a person is under stress. This spur-of-the-moment coaching occurs, for example, when the coachee is about to engage in a difficult conversation, or has just emerged from one, or is about to send a difficult email or respond to a contentious one. Often, the individual — especially a leader dealing with difficult issues in a group — just wants someone they trust to take a second look at an email before they send it.

The goal for this in-the-moment coaching is often to help the person create a different, more productive cognitive "frame" for the situation, by surfacing and then modifying the assumptions they are making. That reframing can relieve their own anxiety or anger and help them to communicate more effectively with the other person. On-the-fly coaching also occurs when someone is experiencing so much stress or anxiety that it blocks their performance, and they need some quick help with cognitive-behavioral techniques for returning to an even keel.

While a coach will also speak or meet with the coachee regularly for longer and broader conversations — typically once a week — the on-the-fly coaching is often where the most important work is done because it helps the person recognize and begin to self-correct destructive patterns of behavior, especially those caused by stress. This coaching requires, of course, that the coach be constantly on call, even across distant time zones — just as a lawyer is constantly on call for a client in

need. But it is in these moments that some of the most critical insights emerge.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal for this type of coaching is no different from the goal for other types: helping someone clarify their goals, understand the obstacles that are getting in the way, and then get unstuck and move forward. Typically, however, the candidates for "deep" coaching face issues that are unlikely to be resolved through the more familiar forms of coaching. And, usually, they contribute significantly to a firm's practice and economics. This form of coaching can thus be a high-value addition to a firm's options for helping its lawyers succeed.

"Coaching is the best way I have found to get unstuck. A highly qualified person who I trust is helping me take a step back to focus on my career while eliminating a lot of the daily noise that tends to get in the way of making the best decisions. Along with this we have been able to identify and overcome the obstacles that I face when I am trying to accomplish my goals." – a partner in an AmLaw 50 firm

About the Author



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