

# Unlocking the Secrets to Executive Coaching

By Kristie D. Prinz

Have you ever watched another attorney with envy and wished you could be as successful as he or she was at a particular skill such as rainmaking, public speaking, or writing? Did you then brush the thought aside, thinking that you would just never be able to do that particular skill so effectively, perhaps because you just weren't by nature a rainmaker, a public speaker, or a writer?

If so, it may never have occurred to you that the attorney you admired wasn't naturally gifted in the particular skill you envied, either. In fact, he or she may have shared your feelings of inadequacy at one point in time, before hiring an executive coach to assist in developing the very skills you would like to be able to emulate.

Executive coaches are a resource available to professionals in a variety of fields; nevertheless, the use of executive coaches remains a well-kept secret in the legal profession. Yet, in an increasingly competitive legal marketplace where effective mentoring can be difficult or even impossible to find inside the workplace, many attorneys are finding that building a solid relationship with an executive coach is exactly what they need to get ahead in their careers and to take their practices to the next level. Particularly in the case of women attorneys, who continue to find themselves bumping up against the glass ceiling at many law firms, hiring an executive coach may prove to be the essential step to breaking through and fulfilling the career aspirations which had initially motivated them to enter law school.

The decision to hire an executive coach, however, should not be taken lightly. While hiring an executive coach can jump-start a career, it can also be a drain of time, money, and other resources, particularly where the executive coach's background is not a good fit with his or her client's needs. Moreover, not every attorney will work well with an executive coach, and some may just not be in the right place in their personal or professional lives to fully take advantage of what an executive coach has to offer.

In the following article, I will unlock some of the principal secrets to executive coaching, examining not only what an executive coach can do for you and your career but also some of the potential pitfalls of the relationship. I will also provide some strategies for getting the most out of the relationship.

## *I. What is an Executive Coach, and Why or When Should You Hire One?*

If you are not already working with an executive coach, you may be asking yourself: what is it that an executive coach does and why should I ever consider hiring one.

While it is difficult to assign a single definition to an "executive coach" simply because there are so many different types of executive coaches, the role of a coach is consistent—to provide advice and guidance that empowers a professional to achieve his or her goals.

Executive coaches can come from a variety of backgrounds: a few of the more common examples are marketing, business, public speaking or speech therapy, and even psychology. While some lawyers have gone on to become executive coaches, it is most common to find coaches with backgrounds in other professions.

You may hire an executive coach to work with you on developing a personal brand or a nationwide marketing strategy, building or increasing the size of a book of business, creating a national or international reputation in a particular area of practice, or even on becoming a well-regarded public speaker. You can also hire an executive coach to assist you in transitioning into a different line of work or different area of practice, or to make other types of life or career changes. You can even hire an executive coach to assist you in managing difficult relationships with clients or employees, or in developing a particular style of leadership.

You might wonder how an executive coach's role differs from that of a mentor. As you might suspect, the roles of mentor and executive coach can overlap at times. The key distinction, of course, is that you employ an

executive coach to be your outside advisor and to take the time to work with you in order to make you successful. In contrast, the mentor will often be an internal advisor who will spend whatever time he or she has to try to counsel you on how to make the firm successful, which may or may not in return result in your own success.

Another important distinction between the two roles is that an executive coach is likely to have a much broader perspective than will a mentor. Executive coaches often work with attorneys or businesspeople at numerous firms or organizations, often in different cities and states, and so they have experience and insights to offer that go beyond those of a mentor, whose perspective is likely to be much more limited to the particular firm or firms where he or she has worked.

Thus, an executive coach's guidance can compliment the guidance of a mentor.

If, however, as in the case of many younger attorneys—and particularly in the case of women—you have never had an effective mentor, an executive coach can fill in the gaps, and then give you guidance above and beyond what you would otherwise have access to, thereby leveling the playing field with the peers who had effective mentors and potentially even enabling you to develop skills that exceed them.

At what point in your career should you consider hiring an executive coach? My advice would be to start thinking about hiring one as early in your career as possible.

In my case, I hired executive coaches to work with me after the sudden collapse of the large firm where I had been working, during my sixth year of practice. I realized that I had both clients and a number of contacts but no office to work in, and I needed help to move forward with my career and to develop the kind of practice and reputation I needed that would sustain me, regardless of what happened to the organization where I was working. Hiring and working with executive coaches has opened the doors to a whole new set of opportunities for me that never seemed possible before. If I could go back and do one thing differently, I would have begun working with executive coaches at a much earlier stage in my career.

Developing a relationship with an executive coach can be beneficial, even if you end up waiting until you are at a senior associate or partnership level to initiate the relationship. Now that I am privy to the use of executive

coaches in our profession, I know partners at a variety of different stages of their careers—all very successful—who work with and maintain a relationship with executive coaches. I plan to do the same as I progress in my career.

Now that you understand what an executive coach is, I will reveal to you some of the potential benefits of developing an executive coaching relationship.

## *II. Potential Benefits of Working with an Executive Coach*

You might be asking yourself how anyone has the time or energy to work with an executive coach, given the increasing demands of firm billing requirements and other firm commitments, not to mention the outside demands of personal or family lives. More importantly, you may question the real value of working with such a coach if you are basically satisfied with where you are in your career and you aren't trying to make any significant personal or professional changes at this point in time.

In fact, you can benefit from working with an executive coach, regardless of your current personal or professional circumstances.

First and foremost, working with an executive coach can enable you to shave years off the normal learning process by tapping into the coach's accumulated knowledge and expertise regarding which strategies, methods, and actions have worked and which have failed for other attorneys who have had the same or similar professional goals. Likewise, an executive coach may be very knowledgeable about some of the latest thinking in the industry or some of the strategies and methods being employed in other professions, and may be able to offer fresh ideas and suggestions that are not already being implemented by other attorneys. Clearly, tapping into such expertise can dramatically reduce the learning curve, and provide access to resources to build and grow your practice and career far beyond what you would otherwise have had access to within the confines of your own firm or legal organization.

Second, working with an executive coach can provide you with the tools and resources to accomplish your objectives. Perhaps you are looking to become a strong public speaker at a national or even international level, but you have stage fright every time you get up in front of an audience. An executive coach can work with you on your presentation skills to become a better speaker and get over your stage fright, assist you in lining up speaking engagements,

help you to choose venues and presentation topics, and meet with you to prepare for the presentation. Alternatively, perhaps you are looking to develop expertise and a national reputation on an area of practice for which your firm is not known. The executive coach can work with you to create a plan on how you will make your goal a reality on everything from developing the expertise and clients for the practice, getting publicity and recognition for the group, and setting up presentations in the right venues and getting articles in the right publications in order to develop your reputation in the practice area.

Third, working with an executive coach can help you to maintain your focus on working toward your objectives. Regular meetings with an executive coach can keep you on track for implementing your goals, when you might otherwise lose sight of them—because they get lost in the hustle and bustle of your daily life or because you just get discouraged and start feeling that they were overly ambitious goals in the first place. An executive coach can keep you motivated even when you are buried under stacks of work and are struggling to find time for some sort of personal life outside of the office, or when you just start feeling like you will never accomplish your objectives. Most importantly, an executive coach can help you to break your objectives down into manageable steps and to help you see all that you've accomplished when you are most in need of the support and encouragement to continue working toward your goals.

Given so many potential benefits from working with an executive coach, it is evident that an executive coach can serve an important role in a successful attorney's career. Before going out and hiring such a coach, however, you should understand some of the potential pitfalls of the executive coaching relationship.

### ***III. Potential Pitfalls of Working with an Executive Coach***

While working with an executive coach can advance a career, it also has some potential drawbacks.

Without a doubt, the key disadvantage to working with an executive coach is the cost in terms of both time and money. Unless you happen to work at a firm that provides financial support to professional development efforts such as coaching, hiring an executive coach will be an added business expense that you will have to cover out of your own pocketbook, and working with an executive coach can be pricey. The hourly rate of an executive

coach can range anywhere from One Hundred Dollars (\$100.00) to Five Hundred Dollars (\$500.00), with the average rate falling somewhere in between. Moreover, you will have an obligation to attend whatever meetings you set up with this coach, either in person or by telephone, and you will have to find the time to complete whatever assignments he or she makes to you. So, the costs in terms of time and money are not insubstantial, and will require a significant investment of both.

A second disadvantage to working with an executive coach is that, by paying someone to keep you on track with your goals, you may be exacerbating the stress and pressures you already are under to be productive in terms of billable hours or to successfully balance your career and family life. If you already feel like you have too much on your plate or too many demands on your life, hiring an executive coach may leave you feeling even more stressed or out-of-balance—perhaps achieving the opposite result of pulling you farther away from achieving your goals instead of closer to accomplishing them.

Along the same lines, a third pitfall to working with an executive coach is that, by working with someone to map out your goals and objectives and work towards them, you may end up feeling discouraged and dissatisfied or like you just cannot measure up to the goals that you and your executive coach had set for your career and life.

Finally, a fourth pitfall to working with an executive coach is that you have to be motivated and maintain that same level of motivation throughout the relationship to get anything out of it. So, if you lack the time or energy or enthusiasm to put into the relationship, or you simply lack the level of commitment that will be necessary to accomplish your objectives, then you will most likely find the experience to be a complete waste of time and money. Working with an executive coach requires effort above and beyond what might otherwise be required of you, and without the motivation to expend such effort, the relationship is unlikely to be successful or productive.

If you are not dissuaded from hiring an executive coach by these potential pitfalls and you are contemplating such a relationship, you should consider two issues. First, are you the type of person who will be able to work with an executive coach? Second, if you answered “yes” to the first question, what type of executive coach should you hire and

how do you find him or her?

**IV. Will you be able to Work with an Executive Coach?**

Even if you decide that your career and practice would benefit from working with an executive coach, and that the positives to working with a coach would outweigh the negatives, it is important to consider whether or not you are the kind of attorney who will be able to work well with an executive coach and take advantage of the relationship. Making this type of determination about yourself obviously requires some soul-searching and honest self-reflection.

A few questions you should ask yourself are as follows:

- Am I the kind of person that can receive and learn from suggestions, feedback, and constructive criticism about my practice and career?
- Am I the type of person who is open to developing a partnership with someone other than a practicing attorney, and to listening and implementing his or her suggestions and ideas, and performing the tasks which he or she assigns me?
- Am I the type of attorney who will make the relationship a high priority, and attend scheduled meetings and perform the assigned tasks, even when there is other billable work to be done?
- Am I the type of attorney who thinks that there can be value in obtaining an outside perspective on what will work or not work in my practice and career?

If the answer to each of these questions is “yes,” then working with an executive coach may be for you; however, if you are one of the many attorneys out there who answers one or more of these questions with a “no” or a “maybe,” then working with an executive coach may not be a good fit.

Making the decision to hire an executive coach can be a very positive career move, but it is not the right answer for every attorney. It makes sense to evaluate whether you will really benefit from such a relationship before you take the step of investing in one.

**V. Finding the Right Executive Coach**

A key consideration to make when considering whether to hire an executive coach is defining what type of coach will best meet your needs. To make this determination, you need to first understand what kind of help you are looking for, and then decide what type of

executive coach would be most suited to provide this type of advice.

Also, you may need to consider whether you need to work with several different coaches to obtain the full spectrum of advice you are seeking.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the first step in finding the right coach is to define your objectives. You have to decide what you are looking to accomplish in hiring such a coach. Are you looking to develop your own client base? Are you looking to develop a reputation as an expert in your field? Are you looking to transition into a new area of practice? Or are you hoping to simply conquer your public speaking fear so you can stand in front of an audience? Without a clear sense of the goals you are trying to accomplish with the relationship, it will be difficult to know what to look for in a coach.

After you have defined your objectives, the second step is to examine what type of coach or coaches will best fit the criteria you have established.

As previously mentioned, executive coaches come from a variety of backgrounds, and they each bring a different set of skills and expertise to the table. For example, an executive coach with a marketing background may be able to best advise you on how to most effectively market your legal skills, distinguish yourself from other legal professionals, develop a brand for your services, and build your reputation in that profession. In contrast, an executive coach with a business or law background may be able to best advise you on how to most effectively develop a book of business, sell your skills to potential clients, or become a rainmaker.

On the other hand, an executive coach with a background in public speaking or speech therapy may be particularly adept at advising you on how to become a more effective public speaker, whereas a coach with a psychology background may be most effective at providing you leadership or management guidance, advice on balancing work and life, or assistance in planning a career change or transitioning into a different area of practice.

So, in selecting the right coach, you need to understand the scope of his or her expertise, and then to decide whether tapping into his or her skills is going to help you to accomplish your objectives. Or, in the event that working with one coach only partially accomplishes your objectives, you will have to decide if a combi-



nation of coaches would help you achieve them all. In my case, I decided that working with two coaches was the best approach.

The third step in finding the right coach is to actually locate the coach you are seeking. If you are not already working with a coach, you are probably asking yourself where in the world you find such a person. Surprisingly enough, executive coaches are not that hard to find when you start looking for them.

As with most things, a good first place to start is to ask for a referral. Talk to colleagues at your firm and other firms, and perhaps even with businesspeople you know, and ask for suggestions. Also, depending on the type of coach you are seeking, you may be able to work with a coach who is based outside of your own geographic area, so you shouldn't be afraid to expand your request for referrals to include attorneys or businesspeople in other parts of the country, either that you met through conferences or perhaps that you have become acquainted with by way of a list serve. I found my coaches through such referrals—one came through a local representative of a legal publishing company and the other came from a female attorney working in another city who I met through the American Bar Association. Neither coach is from my own immediate geographic area, although one is within driving distance of my office. I work with the other coach by regularly scheduled conference calls.

If finding a coach by way of a referral is unsuccessful, you may want to seek out organizations that may have connections with executive coaches. For example, an organization that is geared for entrepreneurs may have executive coaches as members or, in the alternative, may have members who have worked with executive coaches and can make referrals. Likewise, a marketing organization—perhaps even an organization geared toward marketing or business development for legal professionals—may have members who are executive coaches or who can make executive coach referrals. Similarly, an organization that teaches or trains businesspeople in public speaking is likely to have members or teachers who are executive coaches or, alternatively, members who can make referrals, and the same is true about organizations geared toward psychologists, who may be able to refer former colleagues who have become executive coaches. I recently discovered, for example, an organization that can provide public speaking and vocal coach referrals, after taking a semi-

nar through that organization, which trained executives in effective public speaking techniques. I have considered hiring one of these coaches at a future date to assist me in further developing my public speaking skills.

Of course, if all else fails, you can likely open the phonebook or search the Internet for potential executive coaches. You should just do your homework ahead of time, and if possible, obtain background information on the coach and get references from past clients, so that you can ascertain his or her expertise and level of skill before you commence the relationship.

Regardless of how you find your coach, you should ask for a phone or in-person consultation prior to commencing the working relationship to establish a comfort level with that person and confirm for yourself that there is a good fit. If you discover in that consultation that the person has no expertise in the skills you are looking for, or that you simply would not want to work with that person, then you will have saved yourself time, money, and energy before investing anything further in the relationship.

#### ***VI. Strategies for Managing the Executive Coaching Relationship***

In the event you decide to take the plunge and hire an executive coach, you may discover that the new challenge lies not with finding objectives to meet with the coach, but instead with keeping some sense of perspective regarding the relationship.

Indeed, I have found myself in working with coaches that it is easy to start feeling overwhelmed as the tasks to accomplish pile up, and the list grows longer and longer of ideas and suggestions that I need to implement. Even though I am highly motivated, I sometimes get frustrated with my own progress as I find myself making repeated excuses as to why I still have not been able to get around to accomplishing a particular task that I was supposed to accomplish months earlier.

Ironically, I have discovered that my coaches have a very different perspective on my progress, and actually are quite amazed by how I am doing, despite the fact I am unable to get around to accomplishing everything I set out to do.

Given this dichotomy in perceptions, it is evident that maintaining a sense of perspective is an essential element to effective management of the executive coaching relationship.

## executive coaching

Working with an executive coach is a process, and you are not going to be able to accomplish your objectives overnight.

I have found that one helpful strategy for dealing with this issue is to keep a journal on both what you discuss with your executive coach and what you have accomplished each month in furtherance of your objectives. It is helpful to review both before a meeting, and to reflect on what you have accomplished since the last meeting. I regularly find that, regardless of how busy I have been since the last meeting, I always have accomplished more than I initially remember, even if those listed accomplishments were not on my to-do list from the previous meeting.

Another challenge to managing the relationship is keeping the focus on your objectives. Since coaches often work with multiple clients, it is important to remind them of your objectives at each meeting, and to keep those objectives fresh in your mind as well. Listing those objectives in a journal can be helpful again in accomplishing this purpose.

Of course, objectives are unlikely to stay completely static. As you grow as an attorney and continue working with the executive coach, your goals will probably change and evolve as well. So, it is important to reflect regularly on your objectives and update them as appropriate. Also, you need to convey them to your coach and keep him or her apprised of your evolving objectives.

Along the same lines, you should periodically reflect on your current goals and where you are in the process of meeting them in order to evaluate whether or not your coach continues to fit your needs. It is logical that as you continue to grow in your career, you may outgrow your coach or discover that you require new expertise that cannot be provided by your current coach. Thus, to effectively manage the relationship, you need to periodically evaluate whether you continue to work with the right person.

Ultimately, what you should keep in mind is that the “real” secret to executive coaching is to understand where you are going and what you want to accomplish in life. Without a firm grasp on that knowledge, the best executive coach in the world will be unable to assist you. Making the most of the executive coaching relationship requires having a clear sense of self and your own goals and ambitions—with those tools and the help of the right executive coach, anything is possible.



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