



Monday Monday

Connecting the Dots with Karen Kaplowitz



*Helping you create and reinforce the habits of successful career building,
gleaned from my work as a business development strategist, trainer and coach*

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Do Coaches Matter? Jim and John Harbaugh, the first two brothers to compete as head coaches in the Super Bowl, drew a lot of media attention. The press scrutinized their very different styles and the impact of their rivalry on their family. But no one questioned either team's need for a great coach.

Law firms use many coaching models. Some rely on informal systems, with various constituents' serving as part-time coaches. Coaching may come from practice group leaders; other firm leaders; marketing, diversity and professional development staffs; and of course, partners who mentor other lawyers. Other firms are building formal coaching systems, especially in the area of business development. Some firms rely on outside support from the legion of coaches who have emerged in recent years; other firms are institutionalizing the function with permanent staff or hybrids. Firms with strong collaborative cultures often still thrive with traditional informal coaching. But if your firm is evaluating the sufficiency of your informal system or considering a formal coaching program, with permanent staff, outside coaches or a blend of the two, consider the attributes of professional sports' coaching programs for team sports and solo sports:

- Coaches work with top professional athletes throughout their careers; coaching is part of a program of continued growth, not an occasional infusion of skills training.
- Coaches provide feedback and analysis, and keep score.
- Coaches promote teamwork, enthusiasm and optimism.
- There is a head coach and other specialized coaches, all paid by the team, not the players.
- Most coaches have experience playing the sport themselves.
- Players often mentor each other but the teams still rely on their coaches to win.

Firms need to provide the most promising professionals with strong coaching support, whether the systems are formal or informal. Leaving people on their own to sink or swim, even with heavy incentives, will leave firms less competitive and vulnerable.

Example: A firm of several hundred lawyers decided to ramp up its investment in supporting partners in business development. The firm organized a multi-phase coaching program. In the first year, 40 partners worked one on one with coaches from a legal consulting firm; all were former lawyers themselves. The firm also assigned a marketing staff person to sit in on one meeting a month between the partner and the outside coach. The staff person had two roles: to help partners implement their new marketing initiatives and to prepare to take over the coaching and continue the implementation role after the first year. The staff people were selected based on their experience with the partner or her practice group. Partners were held accountable to execute on their plans; lawyers who did not follow through were dropped from the program. When the firm's revenues after the first year increased significantly, the firm expanded the program to additional lawyers, including associates.

How does your firm stack up in terms of the quality of your coaches, internal or external, who support your most promising and productive players? Are you providing the kind of sustained support to your top professionals that will lead to winning seasons?