



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

Volume 18, Issue 1

February 5, 2024

Do Coaches Matter?

In 2013, Jim Harbaugh, the San Francisco 49'ers' coach, and John Harbaugh, the Baltimore Ravens' coach, made history as the first two brothers to compete as head coaches in the Super Bowl, and inspired me to [write](#) about the importance of coaches. 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.

The Harbaughs are back in the news, Jim as coach of Michigan's College Football National Championship team who is returning to the NFL, and John as coach of the Ravens who made it to the NFL's final four playoffs. I too return to the subject. One thing has changed: law firms have greatly expanded their use of coaches. Law firms still 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 staff; and of course, partners who mentor other lawyers.

Many firms have built formal business development coaching systems. Some firms rely on outside support from the growing ranks of external coaches [like me]. Other firms have created permanent coaching staff or hybrids. Firms with strong collaborative cultures often still thrive with traditional informal coaching. 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, I recommend that you consider the attributes of professional sports' coaching programs for team 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.

Law firms, like sports teams, 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 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.

As you watch the game this week, ask yourself 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? Enjoy the Super Bowl!