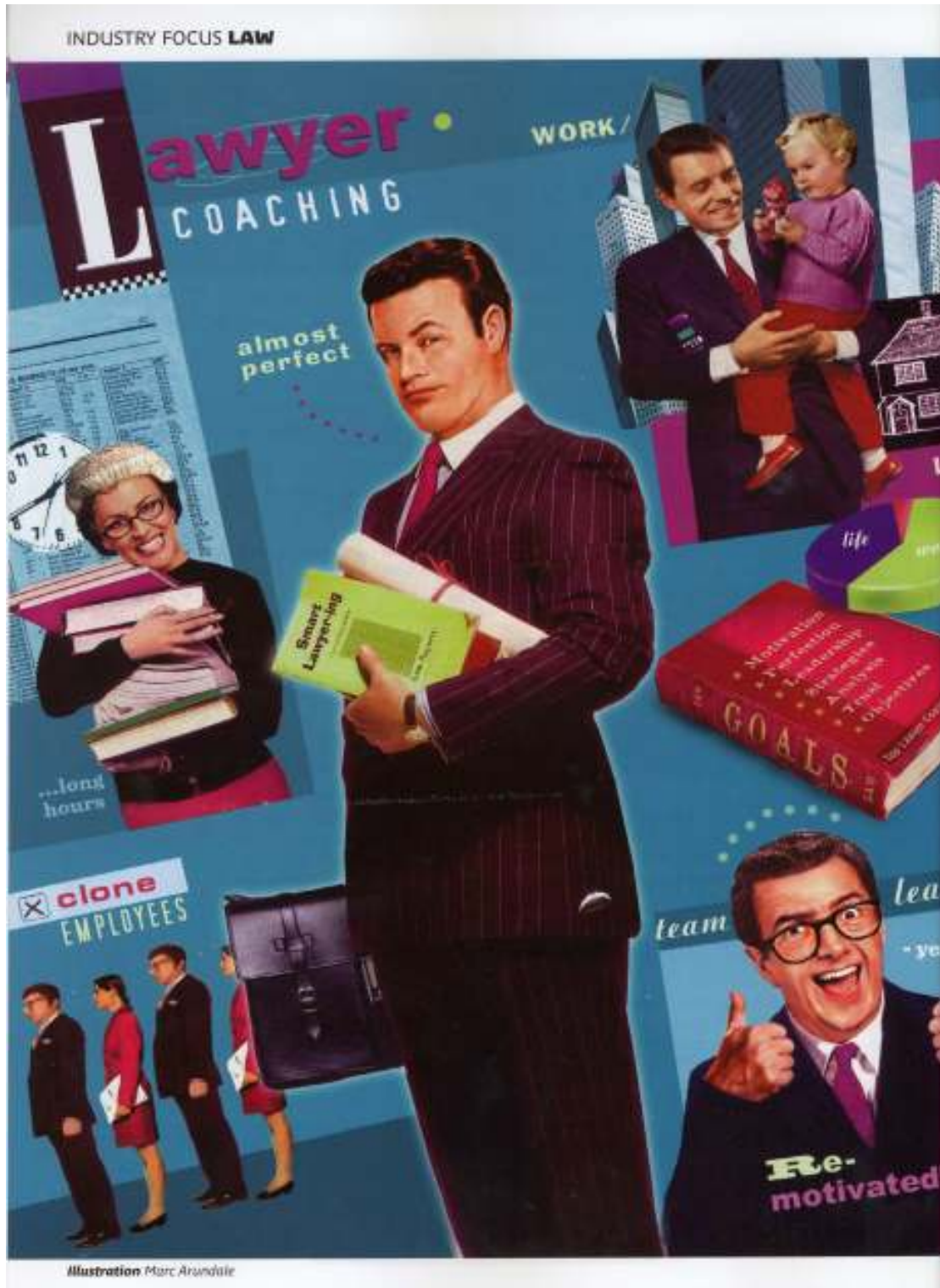


# Coaching at Work

Bath Consultancy Group

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By Kate Hilpern

# THE CASE FOR COACHING

The sceptical, highly pressured legal profession needs coaching more than it realises – and while the jury may still be out for many law firms, the verdict is looking more and more positive

**W**est coast woo-woo" is how the legal sector has traditionally perceived coaching, according to Richard Bentley, coaching solutions director at Results Coaching Systems. "One partner summed it up when he said: 'As lawyers, we are taught to take the emotion out of everything, and here you are telling us to put it back in,'" he explains.

But attitudes are catching up with other sectors, too. The *Law Gazette* reports that the top 100 law firms are now spending an estimated £4.5 million on coaching annually. More and more provincial firms are jumping on the bandwagon and, while partners are the most likely to have a coach, growing numbers of associates and assistants are receiving coaching and indeed mentoring. Meanwhile, business coach Hannah McNamara reports that barristers are also turning to coaching and mentoring.

Initially, lawyers saw coaches privately – and often secretly for fear of it being seen as remedial – but an increasing number are now assigned coaches and mentors by employers.

## The evidence

"There is still a long way to go, but I think there is much more understanding generally that it can accelerate the effectiveness of law firms," says Mairi Eastwood, managing partner at executive coaching firm Praesta. "This is partly

## Just the facts

- The top 100 law firms now spend an estimated £4.5 million on coaching annually (*Law Gazette*)
- 87 per cent of law firms have four or fewer partners
- There are currently 131,347 solicitors and 1,476 barristers practising in the UK
- 80,575 of these work in 8,926 private-practice law firms. The remainder work mainly in commerce, industry or the public sector
- 35.7 per cent of private firms are registered as partners or sole practitioners

Source: *The Law Society/Bar Council*

because HR directors in law firms are seen as high-quality people and can therefore get buy-in. Also, I think there is much more knowledge and talk about what coaching is achieving in other sectors."

Law firms are also beginning to recognise that coaching may be particularly beneficial in their sector. "It is often the highest billers and the lawyers who are most effective in their market who are promoted into leadership roles, but more often than not they have no prior experience of leadership or management," explains Eastwood.

Potential ramifications of this are a lack of appropriate delegation - which can stop the team leader concentrating on the issues required to help them progress further - and a culture of expecting team members to be mini-clones and copy their style rather than encouraging people to find ways of achieving results that might work better for them. "Coaching is ideal in helping leaders to get round these problems," Eastwood says.

She adds that many roles in law firms are notoriously lonely. "Having somewhere to reflect and talk through strategies and challenges in a supportive way is important," she says, pointing out that in professional services firms there can be a lot of criticism and not much gratitude. "This can be very wearing, so it's useful to have some support from someone without an agenda - like a coach."

Gladeana McMahon, head of coaching for consultancy Fairplace, says that when lawyers are made partners, they are often expected to schmooze with clients - no mean feat for someone who has been promoted for their technical ability, rather than their networking skills. "A lot of lawyers are fundamentally introverted. Coaching can help them find ways to make small talk right through to building and maintaining relationships," she says.

The typical culture at a law firm has a number of key features, notably high levels of pressure and low levels of work-life balance. Robin Johnson, managing director of OvationXL, which offers law firms business performance coaching, believes these are the best starting point for bringing about constructive change in lawyers' working lives.

"We've been working for the past two years with individuals that work 80-100 hours a week, often seven days a week. When we start to



**e**ffective\*  
**C**oaching

### Why should law firms be using coaches?

- Many younger recruits are demanding greater work-life balance
- The increase in non-solicitor based businesses setting up in the legal market means that many clients are looking for a more business-focused, less traditional approach from firms in this sector
- In an increasingly competitive market, lawyers are expected to market themselves more proactively and to lead in more innovative ways than by example alone
- There is a greater emphasis on cross-selling - for example, a divorce lawyer introducing their client to a commercial lawyer in the same firm
- To recruit and retain staff
- To offer interest and development in the absence of promotion opportunities
- To help establish meritocracies rather than hierarchies
- To move away from a culture that seeks to "clone" employees in the style of leaders to one that helps people to seek and find their own answers
- To develop skills other than technical competency, such as entrepreneurial, leadership and networking skills
- To offer professionals used to having to "seem perfect" a safe environment in which to reflect and think through the alternatives

## Case study: Thring Townsend

"The nature of the legal business is that top lawyers are often great technical people, but that's as far as it goes," says Thomas Shepherd, managing partner of the 300-strong Thring Townsend Solicitors, which has offices in Bath, Swindon and Bristol. "But the marketplace is changing, and being the same as we always have – that is, just having great lawyers – is no longer enough. So three years ago we decided to develop the range of skills that a more entrepreneurial business might have. In other words, we decided to try to become less risk-averse and conservative and more motivational."

Shepherd decided coaching would provide the solution. "In fact, I knew exactly what I wanted and since it didn't necessarily fit any one provider's offering, and we didn't want one brand of coaching, we interviewed a lot of coaches, and we still work with a pool of coaches rather than one single provider."

Thring Townsend started off providing external coaching and bespoke training to 30 solicitors. "All were very good at doing their own thing, and we've ended up with them being very good at bringing out the best in the people around them too," Shepherd says.

This was no mean feat, given that there was some initial resistance. "I suspect some felt that hiding behind their technical expertise was enough, so there was some fear involved. Others weren't too sure what difference coaching and mentoring would actually make."

The next step was to get these solicitors to mentor the next group down and roll it out across the whole firm, for which Thring Townsend provided bespoke training. "When I ask solicitors questions now, I get a coaching question back, which is exactly what I wanted," he says.

The bottom line has improved too, although Shepherd admits that it's hard to say whether the coaching and mentoring is responsible. But he says the firm has improved in other ways as a direct result: "First, solicitors are getting much better at cross-selling, which is the holy grail of law firms. Second, our target recruitment market

at senior level is increasingly attracted to working here. And third, we have converted our firm from a hierarchy to a meritocracy. So coaching and mentoring has affected performance, recruitment and the working environment."



dissect what's going on, we generally find there is a huge amount of wasted, unfocused, disorganised time. By tackling these things through coaching, we have enabled lawyers to work fewer hours and achieve higher results."

Even where the long-hours, high-pressure culture itself can't be changed, Anne Scoular, managing director of business coach trainers Meyler Campbell, believes coaching can help. "Despite what some in the profession will tell you, if you want to succeed in one of the UK's leading law firms, you work hard and you work long hours," she says. "This hard fact affects different people in different ways, and coaching can enable people to face it. It can be useful simply to talk it through. Even if their decision to trade off personal time for large earnings has been implicit to date, it becomes explicit: they recommit to the choice they've made."

Occasionally, she points out, the decision goes the other way: "People decide: 'I don't want to have this marriage break up the way the first one did; I want to see my kids grow up; I don't want to get ill – or worse.'"

This doesn't necessarily mean they want to leave, says Scoular. "Everyone's solution is different – which is why this issue can only be tackled individually. Some people resolve to get home early two nights a week or commit to exercise; others come up with different strategies for reducing the impact the job is having on their personal life."

### The proof

The need for an understanding of cultural issues in legal firms is one of the reasons that the sector prefers to use coaches and mentors with a proven understanding of the area, believes Scoular.

"You don't even get through the door unless you can name a few big law firms you've already worked with," says Aparna Uberoy, coaching practice head at Blue Edge Consulting.

Also, while there are some differences between types of lawyers, they are a unique breed, with characteristics that can be testing for coaches and mentors who are unfamiliar with them. Lawyers can be highly sceptical and are trained to grill people, for example. Even coaches and mentors well used to the sector report that they have to work extra hard, especially in the early stages of the relationship, to gain credibility.

Russell Hobby, associate director at the Hay Group, says that another personality trait of

lawyers is a reluctance to disclose problems. "There is this belief among high-flyers that they should be perfect," he explains. "They've built their career on being the perfect performer, and the idea that they might have weaknesses as well as strengths is not an easy one to acknowledge."

William Garnett, head of employment law at Bates Wells & Braithwaite, adds: "The difficulty with all lawyers is that they never admit there's anything they don't know. Also, there's quite often a feeling that they went through hell to get from the bottom to the top and that everyone else should go through that as well if they want to succeed."

For Deborah Simmons, a coach for London Coaching Associates, the fact that she previously worked in the city as a banking and finance lawyer – latterly with Allen & Overy – earns her kudos. "It not only means I can analyse well myself, but I have an inbuilt understanding of these issues. Above all, when lawyers are dismissive of certain elements of coaching, I can say: 'I've been there and done it,' which helps to gain their trust."

Like most coaches and mentors who work in law firms, Uberoy doesn't believe there is any single psychological theory or model that should take priority. "But I do find that motivational theories are very helpful at the beginning of the intervention," she says. "It's about working out what drives people to do the work they do and to put up with the hours. This has a twofold benefit. First, having this knowledge helps both the coach and lawyer to develop goals for the future. Second, it means you can adjust the style of the coaching to suit the person."

### Judge and jury

For Gil Schwenk, principal consultant at the Bath Consultancy Group and an executive coach with Lifetrek, one of the unique things about law firms is that they tend to be partnerships. "This has a unique political aspect to it, compared with a more typical management structure in a corporate organisation. It means that consensus decision-making is a key feature, and I find that this comes up in the coaching conversation on a fairly regular basis."

Chris Howe, chief executive of performance improvement specialists ChangeMaker, adds that the billability aspect makes law firms stand out too. "Any moment not spent on billable work is a moment wasted. It means

## Case study: Cameron McKenna

By Liz Hall

As CMS Cameron McKenna, in keeping with other leading law firms, can only promote a small percentage of its senior lawyers to partner level, it lives with the threat of its best people either leaving or failing to engage fully once they realise they might not make it.

The law firm is also vulnerable to losing some of its best assets because of its position just below the "magic circle" of top firms. In a bid to strengthen its ability to retain senior lawyers and to offer greater development opportunities, it brought in consultancy Right Management to put together a multi-faceted coaching programme for all lawyers with five years' post-qualification experience.

The scheme has been deemed a "tremendous success", according to Tony Wright, head of learning and organisational development at CMS Cameron McKenna. A team of 10 senior partners in the commercial department who have been through the first wave of coaching training are already acting as internal coach mentors to junior lawyers.

"This is a huge step because it demonstrates that the whole thing is becoming central to the way our partners work.

"We wanted to make sure that our senior lawyers were getting lots of support in their current roles and to plug the gap in those thinking about becoming partner, so it's a bit of a retention tool. It's very difficult to make the link but the feedback is that we are forward-thinking."

### Retention tool

The business first brought in Right Management in May 2005 to create a senior solicitor development programme offering one-to-one coaching to about 150 senior solicitors.

Apart from acting as a retention tool, the move signalled a step towards changing the culture so lawyers did not feel they must have all the answers. This is a tough call for any professional, but especially in the legal profession.

"We are trying to encourage other ways of working," says Wright. "It informs supervisors that they don't have to be in telling mode to get things done, which is the traditional lawyer mode. It's a bit of a shift to give people the idea that we can empower people to think about a problem themselves. Part of this shift has been to give juniors the experience of being coached themselves."

Following the success of the initiative in the UK, the firm is now rolling the programme out further afield. The 1,500-strong company has operations in the UK, Central and Eastern Europe and Hong Kong, and the programme has been extended to each of the firm's seven European offices, including in Prague, Budapest and Moscow.

"We are trying to extend the movement of coaching to our partner community on a couple of fronts: one-to-ones with known development issues, and as a default way of managing their team," Wright says.

The original project kicked off with coaches from Right Management explaining their individual approach and philosophy to the learning and development team and to the practice heads, to maximise commitment to the "new way". The coaches, in turn, were briefed on the issues and culture of the firm.

A 360-degree feedback profiling exercise was carried out, supported by external coaches, who worked with the professionals, who tended to be in their late twenties, on putting together personal development plans. Feedback from those being coached allows the success of the programme to be assessed against a quantifiable benchmark.

The coaching aims to help individuals focus on their own development and support needs in the company; to build an action plan that sets objectives and works to initiate change in key areas identified by their coach; and to resolve conflicts.

"There will always be some resistant people, but we wanted to encourage our senior lawyers to focus on their own development," says Wright.

One-to-one coaching was supported by a half-day coaching workshop with six to 10 participants per group. To date, more than half of the firm's partners have been on the workshop, which aims to help employees understand what coaching means and to grasp the basics, such as the Grow model.

Simplicity has been key, as has emphasis on the fact that coaching isn't just about formal sessions. For a field in which time is money and time seems always to be in short supply, this can be a revelation. "We try to keep it as simple as possible, showing people how to steer a two-minute conversation by the coffee machine, perhaps using the Grow model – but we are not being prescriptive," he says.

Wright adds that one of the main benefits is being able to offer lawyers the opportunity to have the kinds of conversations in a confidential setting that they would not normally have.

The company had a "mixed experience" in the past with coaching, says Wright, but a recent review gave positive feedback: "There has been far more take-up of this programme than of any other – between 90 and 100 per cent – and lots of peer promotion."

Ultimately, the success of the programme will be based on quantifiable changes in three key areas:

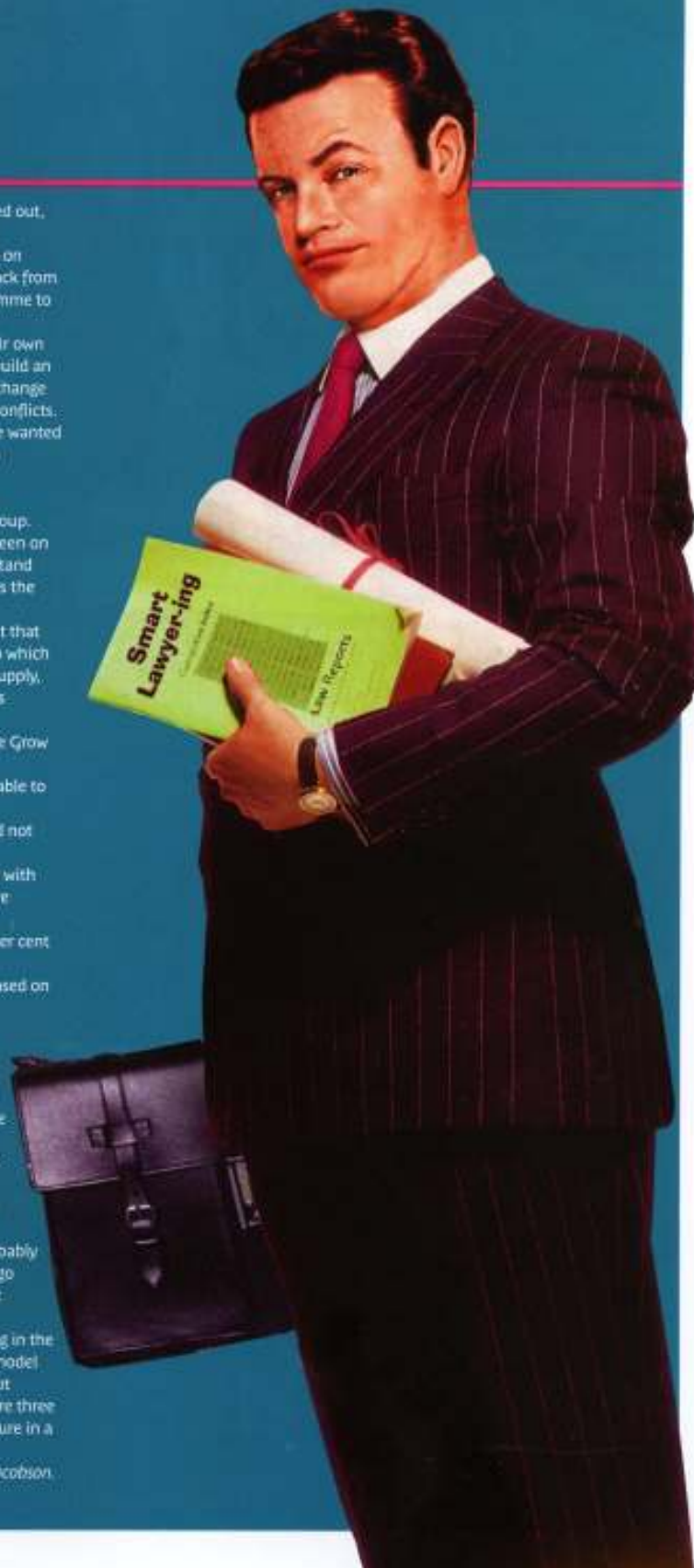
- a higher level of self-awareness;
- an ability to look at one's strengths and weaknesses;
- an ability to take control of personal development.

There is still lots of work to be done, Wright says: "I wouldn't say all the supervisors have changed. Some might default 75:25 to a more directive style."

There are times when a more directive style works best, he adds. "Lawyers are often faced with clients who want something in 'next to no time'. If someone has a history of drafting decisions or experience of some element of the judiciary process, there will probably be little point in sitting down and discussing how to go about this. There often needs to be more direction at junior level."

All in all, though, Wright feels the business is moving in the right direction. "Giving people exposure to the Grow model has sent out a powerful message," he says. "We are a lot further towards having a coaching culture than we were three years ago, and we are engaging the partners of the future in a way that looks and feels different."

● *Other law firms in the news: mentoring at Browne Jacobson. Visit » [www.cipd.co.uk/coachingatwork](http://www.cipd.co.uk/coachingatwork)*



## INDUSTRY FOCUS **LAW**

coaches have to work hard to persuade them that coaching isn't time wasted."

Nevertheless, he believes growing competition in the legal market is driving a need to increase skills in areas such as customer management and the development of lawyers. This, in turn, is making coaching more attractive to legal firms.

"I've also found that law firms use coaching to help retain high-quality young talent," Howe says. "They spend a huge amount of time and money recruiting the best of the best, but some of the younger ones are thinking: 'Staying here will mean sacrificing my life for 14 years, being treated relatively badly, working all hours and, if I'm lucky, I'll be made a partner.'"

In particular, generations X and Y are being more forthright about wanting better work-life balance, he says. "This group of people have become used to getting positive reinforcement during their education, which they don't find in the more traditional law firms."

### Summing up

Among the legal firms leading the way with coaching are Allen & Overy, Wragge & Co and Cameron McKenna. It is more difficult, according to Howe and many other coaches in the field, to pinpoint the main coaching and mentoring providers. "It's such a diverse market and it is still very much evolving," he says.

Weedie Sisson, HR director at Sacker & Partners, an 85-strong city law firm specialising in pensions law, decided to introduce coaching when the firm hit rapid growth. "As everyone got busier, the first thing to go was day-to-day support and interaction. I felt coaching would be a tailored, effective and long-term solution to filling that gap."

Sisson put herself on a business coaching course with Meyler Campbell and then coached a few partners. She then brought in two external coaches to work with the most senior partners. "We've since been able to implement a wider programme not only for the partners, but for the associates and assistants as well," she says.

Like many legal firms, Sacker & Partners measures the results on an ad hoc basis. "We feel it's too early to measure against the bottom line, but one partner I've been coaching has been promoted and women back from maternity leave say they have new zest. Meanwhile, many clients say they have more courage to tackle difficult issues in a more constructive way." ■



### Case study: Rix & Kay

Sussex-based law firm Rix & Kay is using coaching to enable its partners and teams to deliver the objectives it has set for each of its departments, using a balanced scorecard. "It's a decision that we made four-and-a-half years ago, and one that required huge commitment in terms of time and money. But we have found it incredibly useful in terms of keeping up with our ambitious growth plans," says Bruce Hayter, managing partner.

Hayter was clear from the start that he wanted to create a coaching culture across the 110-strong firm. "One thing we identified was that our partners need to coach their team to enhance performance," he explains.

The company turned to coaching and training provider Fairstead Development to introduce the 15 partners to coaching and help them to work on their business skills. "For lawyers who are not recognised as being great businessmen, it was an eye-opener," he admits.

Two one-day sessions introduced psychological theories such as transactional analysis, and coaching concepts such as the Grow model.

The next step for Rix & Kay is to run a three-day leadership development programme to promote change. One of these three days focuses on coaching. Initially, explains Hayter, 10 or 12 executive board members will attend the programme in September, after which it will be rolled out.

Hayter believes one of the reasons for the success of coaching is that, historically, solicitors have operated in isolation. "What we needed to get across was the benefit of working in teams. And if we were to work in teams, we needed people to get a grip on how the other team members operate and to understand what influences and motivates them."

Hayter decided he wanted all the firm's coaches to be internal rather than external. "I felt this would ensure consistency. If we're all doing it together, everyone is getting the same message."

Rix & Kay has been monitoring the results of the coaching programme and feeding back to the firm as a whole via a series of meetings. "There have been significant improvements since we introduced the coaching. The business is growing, with turnover up again this year. Recruitment is also getting easier because we're recognised as a firm that people want to join."

Hayter admits some solicitors were initially sceptical. "But we got over that fear factor quickly because we were all in the same boat," he says.