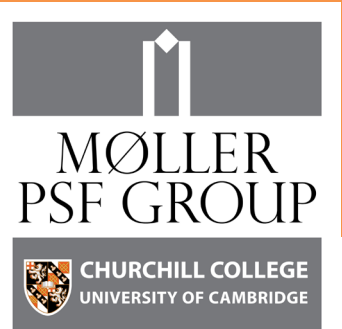


→ Any time, Any place Anywhere: Exposing the myth of 'Martini' coaching

By Sam Humphrey and Karen Dean,
winners of Best Article of the Year
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While it's important that coaches distinguish themselves from the competition, giving sense to coaching buyers of what they actually do as a coach, all too often the context in which the coaching will occur and the meaning this creates for all parties involved, is overlooked.

The perfect metaphor to explore this tension between setting yourself apart, yet being sensitive to context is 'Martini coaching', inspired by the famous advertising campaign in the Eighties for the alcoholic drink, with its strapline "Martini – any time, any place, anywhere."

The idea of coaches concocting their own cocktail has a rather nice appeal, the notion of mixing ingredients to create a unique refreshment is a fitting metaphor for the work of a coach.



Coaches are often eclectic in their approach and more experienced coaches will blend different tools, techniques, models, frameworks, philosophies and approaches to create their own coaching signature. Indeed, our intent with this article, aimed at internal and external coaches, and commissioners of coaching particularly within professional services firms (PSFs), is to challenge the myth that a coach can coach anyone, anywhere on any topic, so that we can stimulate new levels of competency for coaching in a professional service firm.

If you're a coach, we want to agitate your thinking about your level of operating. We've come across many coaches with a real depth of experience and expertise in coaching where their coaching capability is undoubtedly at 'mastery' level. However, a coach who has never, or rarely, coached in a PSF may find that their knowledge and experience of this sector is at a more 'novice' level.

Similarly, we meet professionals who, after years of working in a PSF, have undertaken a coaching qualification and/or agreed to be part of an internal coaching faculty and while they may be technically at a level of 'mastery', their knowledge and experience of coaching will be at 'novice' level.

The risk that sits around these positions is the coach not seeing and owning their blind spots, which may impact their effectiveness. Our experience has shown that being good at coaching is not enough to make you an effective coach in the PSF sector.

PSFs vs other contexts

A PSF is a collegiate partnership, which means the partners run the firm and do the work. You have to be an owner of the business to run it, you bring in the business and do the work. This model of operating is miles away from how a corporate business is set up, where the people who run the business are expert at running a business, not at delivering the work.

As Delong, Gabarro & Lees (2007) set out clearly, key differentiators of a PSF include its leadership model in which a PSF partner has to set direction, gain commitment, execute the work and role model how to do it. This producer/ manager dilemma has to be navigated daily. To illustrate the challenge, most law firm partners record and account for their time in six-minute blocks – what corporate leader would account for their day in six-minute chunks?

When it comes to the professional's typical characteristics, research shows that partners:

- ◆ Are intelligent
- ◆ Are analytical
- ◆ Are high achievers
- ◆ Are focused on task control and completion
- ◆ Have high need for real time feedback
- ◆ Are impatient
- ◆ Are autonomous...
...but want to be involved
...and have overloaded agendas.

Adapted from McClelland: 'How motives, skills, and values determine what people do', in D C McClelland, American Psychologist, 40(7), July 1985.



A corporate lawyer or a tax accountant want to practise law and accounting respectively – they did not choose those careers because they wanted to lead, manage, strategise, make tough commercial decisions, and/or deal with ambiguity and conflict. They wanted to execute technical mastery in their chosen field; applying their intellectual capability to finding the correct solution to tricky legal or tax issues. Thus, their key source of motivation is work execution and client service.

By contrast, it would be highly unusual to find a senior corporate leader who is not only keen, but capable of executing the work of most of the people who work for or with them.

Why does it matter?

Differentiating oneself in a crowded market is a challenge and it is interesting to note how coaches chose to label themselves – executive, life, impact, leadership, business – the list goes on. In the PSF market, there has been a growing trend to mirror labelling of coaches. Firms are making requests for specific types of coaches and/or coaching to sit on their preferred coaching supplier list: business development, maternity, transition, etc.

Coaches and buyers of coaching appear to be focusing more on the output of the coaching and less

on taking account of the context in which the coaching arises. Both are important in the delivery of the best outcomes.

Believing that models of corporate leadership map onto the PSF partner model can lead to difficulties or lack of connection between the client and coach. In corporate organisations, it is typical for a leader to share a vision and future direction, declare measures of success, set out expectations of roles and responsibilities and to have the mandate to make this happen.

This paradigm may influence the questions which arise in the coach and the way the coach prioritises interventions. This will not serve the PSF client well. The PSF partner exists in an autonomous, ambiguous, associative group of peers who wish to be left alone in their professional intent and yet who prefer to be involved with, and have opinions on, most activities within the firm.

The difference matters when remuneration and motivation are considered. While corporate organisations are measured essentially on return to the shareholders, PSFs are measured on profit per equity partner.

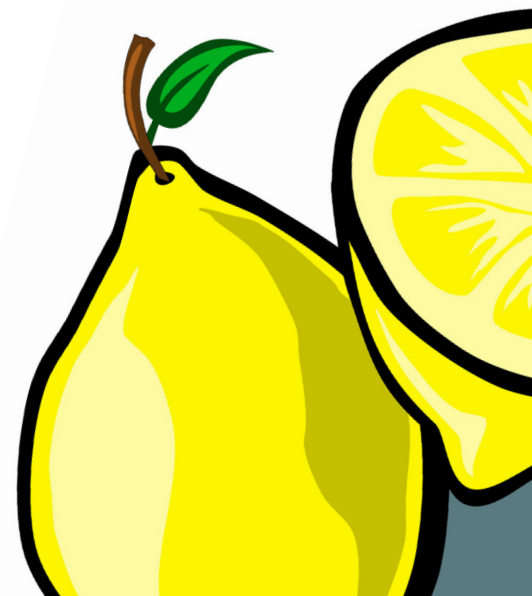
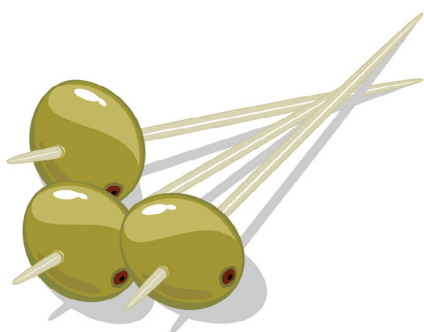
There is a personal conflict for a PSF partner who takes on leadership activities which divert them away from fee earning, yet demand high levels of responsibility and a potential dilution of their professional standing. Understanding this, with integrity, is essential for the coach to be potent in their work.

Credibility vs competency

Within the PSF market, credibility is vital. In a professional population, technical credibility is king. In an organisation filled with technically competent professionals, all looking to progress, standing out for the right reasons, is very challenging.

Although the coaching profession has standards and recognised competencies, the essence of the work is ambiguous. There is no right answer nor one solution. The work is an art as much as a science - for a professional, this can have little appeal and can be difficult to respect. So, a key issue is how to make the work - and the coach - credible.

Ethically, the coach needs to relate to the complexities, risks and conflicts of life as a partner, while staying objective and client-centred. This means following the thought process of the client, being guided by the client and increasing the client's awareness of how they relate to a particular circumstance or challenge. In addition to establishing deep rapport, there's the need to establish an equivalence of au-





What they say...

...about getting hired and being effective as a coach in the PSF sector

"Coaching within a partnership brings many additional complexities well captured in this article. Understanding the way distributive leadership works in a partnership model is critical to coach effectiveness... The clear challenge for us all is how can you know enough to understand how your client's world really works yet not so much that you find yourself caught in the same limiting assumptions as your client and their organisation? As [these authors show], systemic awareness is clearly a key component of a coach's toolkit"

Head of Partner Development and Coaching at a Big 4 accounting firm

"You can have all the coaching bells and whistles available, but if your fit isn't right for the firm, you won't be taken on as a coach... Coaches need to recognise that while they are working with some of the brightest people they will ever meet, some of the areas they need to focus on might feel quite basic. Too many broad based, open-ended questions may result in the partner questioning the practical value of the coaching.

***Nick Blandford, Senior Manager, Leadership Development,
Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer***

"Our internal coaches are becoming a real alternative to hiring external coaches. In a law firm, knowledge of the system enables an internal coach to navigate topics effortlessly external coaches need to pay attention to this if they want to present themselves as credible coaches in a PSF environment."

Lorraine Kilborn, HRD, Eversheds

"There is a personal conflict for a PSF partner who takes on leadership activities which diverts them away from fee earning, yet demand high levels of responsibility and a potential dilution of their professional standing. This epitomises the leadership dilemma and goes to the issue of how and for what, partners are measured, recognised and rewarded. Understanding this, with integrity, is essential for the coach to be potent in their work.

Sue Jenkins, Talent Partner, DAC Beachcroft

thority. The rapport will make a relational connection, but PSF clients also need a professional connection, built on authority and credibility mirroring at the very least those of the client.

As with all clients, coaches need to meet them where they are, and a PSF professional defined by their technical mastery will want to meet like-minded, like-capable

people. It is evidencing this in yourself as a coach that gives you credibility. And credibility is the card you need to play.

Terminology is a common stumbling block for coaches who have never worked in a PSF. Coaches will be ejected at first use of the wrong language, e.g., a law firm is not a company, and partners are not managers – they've lost most of

their 20s and 30s in order to get the title of partner and want it given the respect it so rightly deserves.

Telling stories is one of the ways a coach can evidence their credibility. Testimonials, references, any form of social proofing will help a professional connect the things they value to you. Hearing that you've worked with people like them, in a firm like theirs, on issues

What to consider

Sharpen up your commissioning

While the coaching profession has done a great job raising the skill standards of coaching, as experienced coaches, we continue to be surprised by the 'light touch' approach that exists in some recruitment of coaches to panels. The key question for any coaching buyer should be: how do I know this coach (internal or external) will add relevant, real and appropriate value?

The answer lies in the quality of thinking around the purpose coaching serves in the organisation - PSF or otherwise. Constructing a fit-for-purpose coaching infrastructure to deliver the outcomes you desire should include clarity on internal and/or external coaches, how you assess and select them, what supervision levels you expect of them, who give access to coaching, how you measure the results, and so on.

Sharpen up your coaching edge

A drive for coaching mastery matches the learning ethic in the PSF firm. It is best practice for a coach to have supervision from an experienced and qualified coach supervisor. In addition to the supervisor helping the coach work to the highest professional and ethical standards, be continually stretched in their professional development and well-supported when the going gets tough in the context, content or relationship with the client, there may be context-specific value-adds, for example:

- ♦ New coach: support in building confidence to coach
- ♦ Coach new to the PSF sector: knowledge by the supervisor of sector differences and the ability to weave this into the supervision
- ♦ Experienced PSF coach: challenge on how you work with the changing landscape of the sector
- ♦ Internal coach: challenge around your system blind spots.

Whatever the need, it will be important to think purposefully about your supervision and CPD to ensure you map a credible learning journey with multiple inputs.

like theirs, will all add to your authority. Coaches need to make it acceptable for the client to work with them.

The value of coaching

Professionals are facing an increasingly uncertain future. The impact technology is likely to have is fiercely debated – some believe the lawyer's intellectual know-how and

judgment can never be replaced; others believe technology will easily take on the technical legal aspects. What's clear is the increasing importance of relationships in the future. Obviously, relationships with clients are important, both in terms of quality and quantity, but quality relationships with juniors, peers and suppliers are growing in importance to be effective in getting work done.

The partner knows that their technical competency, professional knowledge and experience are essential for delivering solutions in service of their clients. Their intellectual agility and skill in presenting the right answer is fundamental.

Rather than to offer the right solution, the coach engages in their work to effect change in the cli-



ent, of that client's choosing. The change is often behavioural and is evidenced by their increasing impact and influence. The change for a PSF client may involve delegation, using time more wisely, or attending to their strategic business intent while delivering their work. Raising their profile in their chosen field is also important. Adding greater strategic value for their clients, therefore securing long-term relationships and accounts, is vital in competitive environments.

There are three conditions for therapeutic change: Potency, Permission and Protection (Crossman 1966). We suggest that the coach

might usefully deploy a similar framework while engaging with the client who wants to change.

Potency is all about effectiveness and credibility. If this condition is fulfilled, the client will trust the coach to be more powerful than the 'resistant forces' which might obstruct the change. This speaks to the demonstrated credibility outlined earlier. The client needs to believe in and respect their coach.

Permission is the way in which the coach models and actively supports the change in the client. The coach uses questioning and language to validate the change be-

ing possible. The client is affirmed in being capable of making the shift, which is of high value to the client. This is necessary to effect the change.

Protection is how the coach works with the client to mitigate the risks inherent in the change. Making it safe to change. The coach assists the client in thinking through how to manage the response of others and to feel good about the consequences of change.

While there is a shift professionally away from a heavy focus on technical capability in areas including training and ongoing CPD, there are hundreds of years of tradition pulling the PSF sector back to a known and comfortable professional homeostasis. There is a real opportunity for coaches to work systemically with PSF clients for change.

Coaching accelerates development of the individual in their professional aspirations. It offers time to think about what is important and how to lead in the firm. It delivers change for the client, fulfilling their greater potential.

Professionals now increasingly have to lead. Choosing a potent, experienced non-Martini coach who is mindful of the context and demands of PSF work, who partners with them in stepping up to the complexities of the challenge, and who provokes, stimulates and supports their growth could prove to be one of their most intelligent and transformative decisions.





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