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Ontario law society launches Coach and Advisor Network

DONALEE MOULTON

Traditionally as part of their day-to-day work, young lawyers turned to more senior members of their firm when they needed answers to thorny legal questions and guidance on building a successful practice. Times have changed. Today client demands for rapid-fire service, the growth of large national, even multinational law firms and increasing numbers of people entering the profession have combined to make informal mentoring much more difficult.

Most law societies in Canada have put in place a formal mentoring program to fill the gap. Now the Law Society of Upper Canada (LSUC) has gone a step further and launched the Coach and Advisor Network (CAN), the country's first program for lawyers and paralegals that brings together formal mentoring and coaching for members. "We are a regulator that is required to ensure competence. This is a way to ensure and enhance competence," said LSUC treasurer Paul Schabas in Toronto.

"The law society recognizes we need to be proactive in providing member supports," he added. "We see the complexities of practice."

In recognition of those complexities and the weight they place on lawyers at all levels of practice, the law society's new initiative, launched in the fall, is intended to be short term, lasting on average about three months. Participants will begin with a 90-minute session followed by a series of five 30-minute sessions on alternating weeks. During that time coaches will help newer lawyers implement best practices while advisers will assist with substantive and procedural law inquiries on client files. "It's



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CAN is designed to cultivate a collaborative learning community within the legal professions where coaching and advising are integral aspects of a competence culture of lifelong learning.

Paul Schabas
Law Society of Upper Canada

designed make it easy for lawyers and paralegals to access the kind of help they need when they need it," said Schabas.

It's also intended to help the profession as a whole, he added. "CAN is designed to cultivate a collaborative learning community within the legal professions where coaching and advising are integral aspects of a competence culture of lifelong learning."

Already CAN has 65 approved coaches and advisers, all volunteers, who will, at least initially, focus on helping lawyers in areas with the greatest need for support including sole practitioners, lawyers new to practice and racialized members. Lawyers will earn CPD hours for their participation.

Participants can also expect other substantive benefits, said Jane Hustins, a partner with Fire Inside Leadership, a coaching and training firm based in Dartmouth, N.S. "Coaching allows lawyers to better navigate the complexity of client service and firm life. It leads to better professional/life balance, more overall efficiency without compromising quality outcomes and greater fulfilment personally."



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Once a plan is in place, then it's about execution. Oftentimes without the coach holding them to account they will not get the work done.

Gary Mitchell
Business development coach

Stellar outcomes, of course, must be built on a solid coaching foundation. That starts with a plan, one that identifies a proven process and lays out achievable goals. Lawyers need to understand what will be changed, and ideally better, about their world at the end of the coaching period. "Once a plan is in place, then it's about execution," noted Gary Mitchell, a business development coach for lawyers who is based in Vancouver. "Oftentimes without the coach holding them to account they will not get the work done."

Lawyers being coached need to commit to the process to reap the greatest benefits. That commitment starts by showing up and opening up, said former lawyer-turned-coach Tsufit, who goes by just a stage name. "Lawyers always think the practice of lawyering is an emergency because their clients do. Don't cancel. Relax. Come prepared to think differently."

Successful coaching will dig deep, but this can only happen if participants are transparent about their world and their needs, noted Hustins. "[The lawyer] must be willing to bring

real and practical situations to the coaching conversation so that the learning is applied and is a specific goal." Then, she noted, that learning has to be put into practice.

When issues arise, reach out, advised Mitchell, author of *Raindance: The Business Development Guide Book for Lawyers*. For lawyers to get the most out of the program, they must be proactive, he said. "[B]ring issues and questions to the calls, reach out in between if [you] need to brainstorm or have an issue that shouldn't wait until the next call."

The LSUC, which has established a dedicated coach and adviser unit within its professional development and competence department, is focusing its CAN program on the business of lawyering in the broadest sense. Four areas of competency are being highlighted: assessing risk and identifying strategies to avoid claims and complaints; implementing strong practice management systems; building on communication and associated skills; and enjoying collegiality within the professions.

At present, the LSUC's coaching program is offered only from legal professional to legal professional. That is a deliberate approach, said Schabas. "We are not now set up for non-lawyers from outside the profession. The focus now is on competency-related issues. An evolution might be other kinds of coaching."

It's a smart direction to move in, said Tsufit. "If someone's sole time is spent lawyering they may not have the experience and perspective outside this area...There is a perspective that is different when you're not currently mired in the profession."

The seeds for the LSUC's coaching network were sown by the law society's mentoring and advisory services proposal task force. Eight years later CAN was launched. The lengthy process required examining numerous options and approaches. "There was a wide range of opinions around the room," said Schabas. "Ultimately everybody came together with a focus on competence and support."

For law societies across Canada looking at launching a similar initiative, the LSUC treasurer has this advice, "Give us a call."

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