WHAT HIGH PERFORMING GROUP LEADERS DO:

COACH PARTNERS ONE-ON-ONE

Whitepaper by Patrick J. McKenna

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By Patrick J. McKenna, Thought Leader and international renowned author

One of my more memorable career achievements was being hired to conduct leadership training for the in-house Legal Department Heads at a pioneering technology company called Intel. What made this experience especially extraordinary (and ironic) is that a good part of my first day's instruction covered the importance and logistics for conducting one-on-one coaching. The ironic aspect of this was how I was first introduced to the importance of leaders engaging in coaching – through reading (High Output Management published back in 1983) the work of Andrew S. Grove, co-founder, Chair and CEO of . . . Intel.

Leadership is about behavior and one of the most critical skills for any leader is in being a good coach. Almost everyone can benefit from the straight talk and support of someone you can turn to for a bit of guidance or just talk to about an issue, either when you're lost or stuck in old patterns can be enormously helpful, especially when this person is someone who knows you and someone you can trust enough to reveal your blind spots and vulnerabilities.

Are you constantly fighting fires or having to deal with various performance issues? Engaging in constructive one-on-one discussions can help you catch interpersonal conflicts or underperformance issues before they've exploded. As a leader you still have to follow through on what you learn, but knowing about a problem when it's first developing can make it much easier to address than when you have to triage later.

As a practice or industry group leader you have numerous colleagues who have career aspirations. They want to grow, build their skills, try new things, get acknowledged by their colleagues and in the marketplace. If you don't have the conversations with your people about this growth, they may just revert to autopilot, inadvertently doing the same old schtick day to day. Without regular one on ones, these conversations often get lost in the shuffle and only surface during annual reviews which are then quickly forgotten and never acted upon.

One of the great benefits of engaging in one-on-one coaching is that you set aside time for a colleague to talk about them.   And you should not underestimate the impact of how showing that you care and that this individual is important can have on morale, commitment and trust in you as the group's leader. The more you get to know your people, especially through one-on-

one conversations, the more you will know how to motivate each partner uniquely.

There are other benefits to engaging in one-on-ones. And you don't need to be the one who is always offering counsel, especially to some more senior member of your team. Perhaps one of your team members is thinking about some new initiative and wants some unfiltered feedback before they invest a lot of time in it? You making the time to arrange a one-on-one with a few of the more critical thinkers in your group may be the perfect way to both convert this individual's semi-baked idea into one that has impact as well as develop buy-in from a few key supporters.

There are many challenging dimensions to coaching: how to initiate it; when and how much to get involved; when to back off; what to say and what to leave unsaid; and how best to follow up. Successful practice leaders learn how to straddle the line between "too little" and "too much" coaching.

I. Getting Ready to Coach

In a very proactive manner, high-performance group leaders will make it a habit to ask themselves on a weekly basis, who on their team might need some attention:

- Is anyone in noncompliance with our group standards?
- Is anyone struggling?
- Who needs help, even if they're not struggling?
- Who needs energizing?
- Who needs recognition or appreciation? (and don't overlook your Star performers)
- Is there anyone I haven't had coffee or lunch with recently (or otherwise paid personal attention to) in a while?
- Is anyone doing things that are disrupting the group?
- Who do I have the least solid relationship with?
- Are the juniors being looked after?
- Are there any conflicts going on between group members?

Meanwhile, in more of a reactive mode, spending time on coaching is what is required when some partner in your group:

- is unclear on where they want to go with their careers such that they are just cruising along doing the same old shtick;
- asks for advice, assistance, feedback or support;
- is taking on a new task or responsibility;
- appears frustrated or confused;
- seems indecisive or stuck;

- is performing inconsistently;
- expresses a sincere desire to improve;
- performs below acceptable standards; or
- has a negative attitude that is impeding their work and the work of others.

It is also important to know when not to coach. Unless you are able to qualify and exceed the following conditions, you are probably not going to be able to provide effective coaching. You need to critically examine – do the people you are seeking to coach:

- consider you their trusted advisor?
- feel confident that you can help them to visualize and articulate their dreams?
- know you like them? (and do you actually like the people you are coaching?)
- view you as being someone who cares about others?
- see you as someone investing time toward building a strong relationship with them?
- feel comfortable admitting their flaws to you?
- see you as someone who would act and offer advice in their best interests (and not to make you look good)?

II. Some Preconditions to Being Effective

• Developing Rapport

In a coaching relationship, the focus should be on your colleagues' professional goals and how they can be achieved. Your aim as coach is to create a level of rapport that encourages this individual to communicate honestly about their performance. If you have established good rapport you will feel comfortable and relaxed in each other's company to the extent that you can talk frankly and openly without either side feeling defensive.

Now, if you don't really know this individual, then you will need to build a foundation for the coaching relationship. You need to allow sufficient time for the coaching process and this aspect should not be hurried. Any attempt to rush it carries the danger of being seen as artificial, something you need to avoid at all costs. This is also true of the often-cited advice from coaching trainers that you should mirror your colleagues body language and speech patterns. If you are not skilled in this activity it can come across as false and potentially annoying, which will be detrimental to why you are conducting the coaching, especially if you work together.

The safest course of action is to talk about something that is work-related and about which you believe they have a genuine interest in or at least an opinion about. In the coaching meetings, after an initial greeting, open the conversation with a remark that lets your colleague know that you are genuinely interested in them and what they have to say. Then follow this with a question that leads the conversation into the aim of the coaching.

Remember to actively listen and display your interest in what your colleague is saying and avoid doing too much of the talking.

• Active Listening

To be an effective coach you must show that you are genuinely interested in the other person and what they have to say and want to help them develop their competencies and achieve their career aspirations. Therefore, in any effective one-on-one discussion, you need to hear precisely what is being said to you so that you have a clear understanding of the issue being conveyed. The principle of active listening is your disciplined ability to prevent distractions breaking your concentration during your discussions.

The amount of eye contact you have with your colleague during your one-on-one; your use of non-verbal signs like nodding and smiling; together with verbal confirmations ("interesting, tell me more") are just some of the ways people assess how well they are being heard. One key element of active listening is your competence and attentiveness in being able to accurately paraphrase back to your colleague precisely what you have heard them say. Doing that confirms your understanding; helps develop rapport and empathy with the individual; and communicates your impartiality and comprehension.

To have effective communication you need to observe all the conscious and unconscious signs displayed, enabling you to discern the true meaning behind the spoken words. By truly listening you are able to form questions that serve to probe deeper into the essence of the subject and stimulate your colleagues' thinking process.

III. A Few Coaching Challenges to Keep in Mind

Most professionals view themselves as rugged individualists making autonomous decisions, charting their career and mapping out their futures. When we offer these same professionals some coaching assistance, we tend to base our perceptions and prescriptions on our own behavior, performance, personality and sense of what we believe appropriate. So, some of the built-in mindset challenges that may affect your coaching abilities include:

• How first impressions can stick

Your perceptions color your reality and are actually capable of altering your relationships. Once we form a first impression of an individual, we strongly resist changing that impression. Further, once we have formed that first impression we then tend to rationalize the individual's characteristics and behaviors to fit our preconceived impression.

We tend to package all information that we collect about an individual. Most of us have a menu of favorite labels we use to describe different people. After some observation we select one of those labels and assign it to the person.

If your overall impression of someone is positive you will likely have a tendency to discount some of their faults. Similarly, if your overall impression of a person is slightly negative, you may tend to overlook their positive traits. While many of the traits, characteristics or behaviors associated with a particular label might fit this particular individual, others will not. But, because we tend to hold the bundle together as a convenient whole, we tend not to closely scrutinize the attributes that may not fit.

Most of us would have a difficult time reconciling a negative impression of someone with outstanding performance in certain areas. Instead, we attribute lower performance in all areas, even though some actually may be inaccurate, in order to make sense of our overall impression.

We may acknowledge an individual's weaknesses in a key area but rationalize them because we like this person, and the person has strengths in other areas. But, if those weaknesses are found in critical areas, they may have a significant influence on our overall impression.

• ***How we tend to view failure differently, depending on who is failing***
We tend to blame our own personal shortcomings on factors in our environment, while we tend to blame the failures of others on the individual.

When we have fallen short of expectations, we are likely to summarize our behavior as "having had a bad day," or helping others understand just how "the circumstances had changed." Alternatively, in the very same situation, if the failure were the result of someone else's action (or lack thereof), we could just as easily be talking about how "he does not have sufficient experience to handle the responsibility," or how the management of this matter suffered from "his obvious failure to properly communicate."

• ***How over time, many seem to just naturally rest on their laurels***
Over time we all tend to develop a level of performance that becomes comfortable.

As professionals master their craft, they typically try to achieve a comfortable level of performance as expressed by hours spent at the office, hours billable, new client volume generated or any combination of familiar metrics. As we increase our knowledge and skill doing an effective job for clients becomes more routine and less stressful than when we first began in the profession. Eventually we reach a level of competence where we feel we have mastered our job and then begin to coast at a comfortable level.

Professionals who would never have been satisfied with average grades at law school now consider being average, in their personal performance metrics as compared to other partners, quite acceptable.

This may be where the concept of ‘resting on one’s laurels’ had its origins. Professionals will then attempt to justify how they continue to perform at the same levels, if not at a higher level than they did in previous years. As we become more senior, we also tend to believe that we have paid our dues and should not have to continue to make payment. We look forward to a time when we are able to produce excellent performance without exerting too much effort. This might work except for the fact that things change – our skills become passé and our competencies become commoditized. Meanwhile, the more senior we are, the more people’s expectations of us increase. The older we are the more people expect that we should know and the more we know, the more we are expected to excel.

Many believe that the simplest way to increase someone’s contribution is to have them work harder, put in more billable hours and exert greater effort. But increasingly, with seniority, the expectations of more hours leads only to extreme anxiety, potential burnout substance abuse and irritable behavior. The only way to help these partners increase their contribution is to help them work smarter rather than harder.

• How we need to find agreement on what needs changing

We cannot change something when we half-heartedly agree to work on it. Too often people feel that they need to work on changing something that someone else wants to see changed. This attitude represents compliance, not commitment.

Consider this. Identify the one skill that, if you were able to perform it with a high level of proficiency, would guarantee that you were perceived as a star player and make a significant difference in your career success?

Now look back to your last performance review and see if that same skill was identified such that it is something that you are currently diligently working on improving?

In spite of our current fad to believe that we can effectively multi-task, the truth is that we all face real limitations on how many different issues we can successfully tackle at any one time. It is highly improbable that you can juggle a half-dozen different priorities. Whenever we try to address more than one or two important things at the same time, we end up making no significant progress with any of them. Therefore, you can only help someone to the extent that you can assist someone to prioritize and focus on one or two of their most critical issues.

People would genuinely like to achieve everything that is on their agenda and everything that they aspire to achieve. The painful truth is that past experience leads us all to believe that little change will actually take place. We are optimistic about what could be achieved but highly skeptical about our personal resolve and discipline to actually follow though. To the extent that you can get your partner to accept changing or accomplishing just one important issue and to the extent that you can accomplish even a modest win, the other issues yet to be addressed, become insignificant.

• How helping develop strengths can often trump fixing weaknesses
Developing a moderate strength into a profound strength would have a far greater impact on performance than fixing something that was slightly below average.

The process of progressing from unacceptable performance to acceptable performance is far more straightforward and understandable than going from acceptable performance to outstanding performance. It is usually very clear what needs to be done to remedy an underproductive partner. Skill weaknesses and behavior problems are observable and the solutions often easily identifiable. But the process of gravitating to outstanding performance is a lot harder to quantify.

Imagine if we were to make a list of the most important skills, areas of knowledge and activities that any practice group leader should engage in. Imagine then that we classify our list into three categories – critical, necessary, and nonessential. Now imagine that have all of the partners in your firm rate all of the group leaders based on this model. Research shows that highly rated leaders are excellent at a few things and good or average at most other things. Meanwhile, profiles of the lowest rated leaders do not show them to be terrible at anything. Their profiles only point to below acceptable scores in one or two, albeit, critical areas. The poor showing of these leaders has tarred them with a negative performance rating on other skill areas.

The question then becomes if you only did one or two things exceptionally well, which one or two things would make the biggest difference or have the most significant impact on the way those partners in your practice group perceive your contribution.

IV. Steps To One-On-One Coaching

As a Team Leader, in order to be effective, you should be making an effort to invest time to initiate and confer with each individual member of your group. The best way to prioritize these communications is to schedule regular one-on-one coaching meetings into your calendar and make investing the time with your colleagues a priority.

1. Inform Your Group
A sudden meeting invite for a one-on-one coaching meeting could be uncomfortable to a

colleague, if they weren't expecting it. You want to have them understanding the purpose of these meetings — not making up excuses to avoid getting together with you

There are a couple of ways to accomplish this.
One is to have firm leadership may it clear to the partners that they are expecting all of their practice and industry leaders to devote time to meeting one-on-one with each partner as part of their responsibilities.
They need to know that the primary reason for those meetings is that they are intended to:

a. debrief on client assignments (what are we each learning that could be of value to the others on the team);
b. solicit valuable feedback (what could we be doing differently both in our group and in the firm);
c. explore new or different marketable opportunities (how could we be developing the "go-to" reputation in certain targeted niches); and
d. identify and assist with individual or career issues or challenges that any partner cares to raise.

You might also, as team leader, raise the subject at one of your regular meetings and tell everyone what to expect. Make it clear what these meetings are for the partners, and that some of the partners will be expected to hold the same kinds of meetings with the group's associates. You can explain that it's a meeting for the partners to talk about what's on their mind, give them coaching, share feedback both ways, and talk about their career aspirations and development. It is recommended that this explanation come by way of a face-to-face discussion and not by circulating some kind of memo or email – as at the core this initiative is about improving your group's overall communication and performance.

2. Schedule Time

One of your major priorities as a Team Leader is to set aside at least one-third of your allotted leadership time to meeting with your group members and primarily partners. Access your calendar and schedule the times to conduct your coaching. The topics that you choose to discuss with each member is likely to be different but scheduling the time for these discussions is critical.

Ideally, you should never go more than a month without meeting with one of your partners. Too much can happen in a month to not check in. And you should schedule a full half-hour to meet (and initial coaching meetings can often take a bit longer). You can always end early, but you never want to be engaged in discussing a pressing issue only to run out of time because you have a scheduling conflict.

And unless you have an unusually erratic schedule it usually helps both you and your colleague to know these discussions happen on the same time and day each month, so that everyone can expect and anticipate the meetings. And as some of your partners may very well practice in other geographic locations, a focused one-on-one by videoconference is always preferable to not talking for months.

In addition, you will likely need to schedule some time weekly, at least initially, to meet with those who represent a new lateral addition to your group; or placed in a new role (perhaps an associate who has just been promoted to partner); or perhaps even some individual suffering a personal or performance issue that needs remedial action. Do this even if everyone else only has monthly meetings.

You can always adjust the frequency of meetings with each partner as their personal situation and comfort level changes. You overriding priority is to ensure each member of your group has the support they need to thrive and be even more successful.

3. Create a Shared Agenda

Whether you're just starting out or have been engaged in informally coaching colleagues for some time, planning ahead with an agenda can have an important impact.

To get the most of the 30 minutes you have for each of your colleagues, you need to think about what you want to discuss in advance of getting together. By formulating an agenda for each of your coaching meetings, you can ensure that you sit down knowing what you'll be covering. And in developing that agenda, you should reach out to each partner to ask them what they might want to include in your discussions. It only makes sense to ask your partner to include the most important thing that is currently on his or her mind. To make sure that happens, ask them to send you a couple of brief bullet-points on anything they want to discuss. Then if they come to you mid-week with something they would like to discuss, that might be better referred to your coaching discussion, simply encourage them to "add it to our agenda."

At the risk of being repetitive your agenda could include some or all of these four items presented as the primary reasons for these one-on-one meetings:

- debrief on client assignments (what are we each learning that could be of value to the others on the team);
- debrief on client assignments (what are we each learning that could be of value to the others on the team);
- solicit valuable feedback (what could we be doing differently both in our group and in the firm);
- explore new or different marketable opportunities (how could we be developing the "go-to" reputation in certain targeted niches); and
- identify and assist with individual or career issues or challenges that any partner cares to raise.

The more effective coaches: Focus on specific actions rather than generalities or platitudes. For example, in conversation with one of your partners you can be specific and observe, “the associates seemed to really appreciate your examples and counsel on how to effectively deal with a client who comes across as overly demanding. May I ask that you do more of that as the associates really benefit from experienced guidance?”

4. Talk About Their Growth and Development

Consistent with the item noted above, one of the most motivating and transformational one-on-one coaching topics you can chose to pursue with any of your partners, is about their career aspirations – and it needs to be about their personal career goals and not what anyone thinks they should be focusing more attention on for the betterment of the group or the firm. Keep in mind that when you tap into someone’s core passion, drive and interests, you unleash their greatest motivations.

Now, if someone isn’t ready to talk about
their career aspirations, don’t force it. Help those partners in your group ready to discuss it and revisit this discussion from time to time. If they see others on the team excited by what is being discussed in their meetings and growing as a result of your help, it’s a safe bet that they will come around.

And if they are already one of your team’s star performers, you need only inquire of them what support they may need from you or what resources they do not have that they could utilize to exceed what they are currently achieving.

The more effective coaches: Inspire others
Be seen as a positive catalyst for change and personal growth. Wherever possible try to offer or direct your colleague to relevant sources for good ideas, inspiration and direction. The best coaches radiate energy and enthusiasm. Your goal is to build confidence and self-esteem, which in turn encourages even greater efforts.

5. Determine Some Questions You Might Want to Pose

To spark a healthy, productive discussion you might want to think through which questions might best stimulate your partner to talk about their goals, aspirations, views and concerns. Good questions are a key ingredient to making the most of your coaching discussion. The right question can help uncover a critical problem or help identify an unexplored opportunity you would never have heard about in any other way. Here are 30 questions in 7 different areas that could help your one-on-one efforts:

- *Introductory Questions*
    - What is the most interesting development that has happened for you since last we spoke?

- Tell me about what you have been working on lately that's exciting?
- What is the most important thing we need to discuss today?

• *Quick Review of Last Month's Performance*

- How do you feel about your billing performance last month?
- At what point in the past month were you most frustrated with or discouraged by your work?
- What's the most important thing you accomplished in terms of results?
- What skills do you have that you think are underutilized?
- Can you help me identify a situation where I could have helped more, but didn't?

• *Specific Career Goals*

(Make sure your colleagues are progressing in the areas that matter most to them)

- What are your specific plans to enhance your professional knowledge and build your marketable skills over the next two years?
- Do you feel that we are doing enough to help you enhance your professional knowledge and build your marketable skills at a pace you would like?
- What goals have you set for how you aspire to see your career grow?
- What big questions do you have about where your career might be going, given the extraordinary pace of change in our practice area?
- How do you feel about the progressing you are making in the areas that matter most to you?
- Which professional career or development goals do you feel like you are not able to focus on right now? And why?

• *Any Personal Issue or Problems*

- Is there anything that you are struggling with?
- What's most challenging for you right now? Where are you stuck?
- What can I do to help you get the kind of feedback you want?

• *Queries About Team Performance*

- (Ask questions about what improvements they might want to have the group consider, can help uncover what your colleagues are seeing and get great ideas to spark higher performance)
- What do you like the most and what are you proud of about being a member of our group?
- What are we not doing as a team that we should be doing?
- Do you feel adequately supported by other team members and how do they help you when you need it?
- Do you feel that everyone is pulling their weight on the team?

• *Client opportunities*
(One of the biggest opportunities for improvement)

- What client opportunities have you had recently to learn something new and that might potentially be transferable to other client situations?
- Are there any kinds of client matters that you would really like to work on if you were given the opportunity?
- What is one thing that we would be crazy not to do in the next quarter to improve how we are serving our clients?

• *Elicit Feedback to Help You in Your Role*

- I'm interested in getting your feedback on how I can improve as the PGL. For example, I'd welcome hearing about how I could do our team meetings better.
- What is your favorite thing that I do as the PGL of our team that you believe I should definitely keep doing?
- Can you help me identify a situation where I could have helped more, but didn't?
- If you were me what changes would you make?

The more effective coaches: Foster collaboration. Listen carefully for any hints of conflict and competition. Help you colleague to see opportunities where competition could become cooperation. Reinforce any examples of cooperation between various members of your team, as well as between groups.

6. Be Sure to Make Good Notes

Don't trust your memory when engaged in your one-on-one discussions. Research shows that when we take notes, our brain organizes the information we're hearing, which helps fix the ideas in our memory. That said, it is advisable to ask your colleague for "permission to take a few notes" assuring the individual that the notes will remain confidential.

Taking notes helps ensure that you are less likely to miss something important or find yourself back at your desk thinking, "now what did George say about that?" It can also help you spot patterns in your various discussions – such that you might find that you are hearing similar messages coming from different partners in your group; or perhaps very conflicting messages about how your different partners are viewing a particular message or event. And remember, you can't really prepare or follow up on important discussions at your next coaching meeting, if you do not have some good notes to review.

And during these one-on-one meetings, always remember to use your active listening skills to repeat back to them what you believe you heard, that was important to them from your meeting. By repeating back the notes you're taking, your team member can clarify anything they feel you may not have fully understood. It can also give them one last chance to think of anything else that was on their mind.

7. Identify Actionable Next Steps

Even if your coaching session covered some difficult topics, the goal of the meeting is to help resolve them and make things better for your team member.

As you listen to your partner's answer to your question, allow several seconds of silence before you ask a follow-up question or give feedback. In that way you will ensure that this individual has said all they want to say. You need to also be patient to allow your colleague to present the whole picture so that they expose the level of their concern, their knowledge and the extent of their ideas on how to address any issue facing them. It is essential that you, as a coach, curtail any natural tendency you may have to rush in with suggestions or solutions. If you do not do this, you will be unable to avoid acknowledging your own emotions during your communication.

The best outcome is to end each meeting by coming up with action items for both of you to make progress on and be accountable to for next time. By setting actionable next steps, you are working together on solutions. This technique leaves your colleague in no doubt that you are giving them your full attention and sends a powerful double message—firstly, that you are there to support them in whatever they are doing; and secondly, that you are paying attention and expect them to follow through on any commitments they make.

This will also help strengthen your relationship with your colleague by building trust that when they come to you with a problem, something is done. This avoids those meetings that sound like a broken record – lots of talk about the same thing, but no real progress being made.

8. Commit Your Next Steps To Writing

It's important to get next steps in writing. Whether it's taking action on their idea or being clear about a performance improvement issue (which needs to be documented for HR), it clarifies next steps, and creates a mutual agreement to make progress. Consistent follow ups keep both you and your team member accountable to making progress on what you discuss. Make the most of these one-on-one meetings so your conversations aren't just endless talk.

Done right, your one-on-ones are the single most powerful investment you can make in your team. They can help you catch and fix problems when they are still small, coach and develop your people, and gain valuable insights from sharing information throughout your group.

About the Author

Patrick is an internationally recognized author, lecturer, strategist and seasoned advisor to the leaders of premier law firms; having had the honor of working with at least one of the largest firms in over a dozen different countries.

He is the author/co-author of 11 books most notably his international business best seller, First Among Equals (co-authored with David Maister), currently in its sixth printing and translated into nine languages. His two newest e-books, The Art of Leadership Succession and Strategy Innovation: Getting to The Future First (Legal Business World Publishing)) were released in 2019.

He proudly serves as a non-executive director (NED) or advisory board member with a variety of professional service firms and incorporated companies. His aim is to instigate innovation, provide independent strategic insight drawn from his years of experience, and support effective governance.

His three decades of experience led to his being the subject of a Harvard Law School Case Study entitled: "Innovations in Legal Consulting" and he is the recipient of an honorary fellowship from Leaders Excellence of Harvard Square.

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