

Coaching Supports Choices for Change

BY ROBIN OAKS

Interdependence is and ought to be as much the ideal of man as self-sufficiency.

Man is a social being.

- Mahatma Gandhi

This quote, attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, suggests that a healthy balance between self-reliance and interdependence is crucial for well-being, work satisfaction, and harmony in life. Coaching is a leadership tool that supports lawyering well because it facilitates change by addressing the core needs of autonomy, authenticity, growth, and relationship. A coach, like a mediator, is less a taskmaster and more a change-maker, facilitating individuals to resolve conflicts of all kinds.

John F. Kennedy said, “Change is the law of life.” Coaches create a confidential, safe, and supportive environment for professionals to explore challenges, build skills, and make changes internally or externally. A coach helps you discover your own solutions by providing skillful guidance and strategic problem-solving. In one study involving over a hundred large law firms, which evaluated the many benefits of coaching, the definition used for the research survey was the following: “Coaching is an active, creative partnership in which a coach asks thought-provoking questions to help an individual think through a situation, come up with options for action and choose which option they want to take.”

The core skills of an effective coach are deep listening, keen awareness, compassionate attention, and skillful communication. Choices for making changes happen by accessing all forms of one’s *intelligence*, including physical, intellectual, and emotional. Emotional intelligence involves self-awareness, awareness of others, resilience, and self-regulation. These all lead to adaptability and effectively navigating change. I’ve asked a local coach, Michael Gibian, who works with high-achieving individuals, to join me for this article and answer some questions about coaching benefits and how emotional intelligence impacts professional success.

Looking back on my decades of legal practice, I wish I’d hired a coach for assistance at the outset. Although, the reality was that in my early legal career the idea of

coaches or mentors was a foreign concept (at least in my experience working in BigLaw). Having a confidential advocate, especially someone I could trust and who understood my world, would have helped me more effectively deal with the stressors and uncertainties I felt. It took a serious sickness (about fifteen years into my legal career) to finally show

me that help-seeking is a strength and supportive

relationships are vital for well-being. Constant striving, ignoring messages of distress within, and relentless self-reliance create limiting roadblocks that have consequences.

After my illness broke me down—I *woke up* and sought out helpers from many fields to assist me. The practices learned from medical professionals and ancient wisdom medicine and mind-body-energy practitioners brought me back to life. My healing journey inspired me to pursue a parallel career as a conflict resolution consultant and transformational leadership and well-being coach. These wellness, conflict resolution, well-being, and resilience strategies create the flexible glue that now support and sustain my law practice—and living well. The stressors of law practice did not change. Awareness of my *whole* self and the interdependence of my mind, body, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and environmental dimensions changed—and transformed me.

After a recent well-being in law presentation that I gave to a roomful of legal professionals, a couple of attorneys approached me to talk. Each characterized their respective legal practices as successful (one was a solo practitioner, the other a law firm partner). But, they felt restless, frustrated, and stuck. They didn’t know what needed to change – or what they could do. I could feel that they wanted me to give some sage advice. I resisted my urge to figure out what was wrong (this was my lawyer-side wanting to *fix* the problem). Instead, I suggested that they might want to find a coach to assist them. One reason for this article you’re reading was to share what I discussed with these two lawyers about coaching for legal professionals.

There are many coaching styles and types reflecting different backgrounds and approaches a coach takes to support professionals. Key differences in coaching types reflect such factors as: the level of a coach’s control, intended



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or expected goals, relevant context, and coaching focus. For instance, transformational, well-being, and leadership coaching all emphasize aspects of personal or professional development and skill building from a holistic approach. Other coaching types might offer specialized support. As an example, career coaching focuses on identifying and navigating career goals, occupational paths, and job transitions. Executive coaching targets high-level executives, focusing on support for strategic thinking and organizational and change-management decision-making. Finding a coach that fits your individual expectations and needs, personal preferences, and unique personality is important for a successful coaching connection.

Susan Jones, a law professor at The George Washington University Law School and an advocate for supporting lawyers and law students through leadership coaching, explains, “*Leadership coaches* regularly help clients 1) become more self-aware, 2) recognize ‘blind spots’ in how their behaviors and comments impact others, and 3) develop a broader range of tools to more effectively accomplish their objectives.” “Change requires leadership. Although lawyers often hold leadership positions in our society, they have not been taught to lead.”¹

In her article, *The Current Environment Needs Leadership: Coaching Can Help Lawyers Lead*,² Jones writes: “The definition of good leadership varies but consistently includes nuanced judgment and emotional intelligence (EQ). Indeed, numerous studies site EQ as *the* factor that sets CEOs apart from their peers who demonstrate similar technical skills, accomplishments, and knowledge.” Leadership coaching (as well as any other coaching type) is at its core about creating a collaborative connection that cultivates leaders who foster *flourishing* for self and others.³

Coaching was historically viewed as a “remedial” human resources intervention to address subpar work performance. More recently, coaching has become a valuable leadership and business tool for fostering peak performance. Similar to elite athletes who hire trainers to support their mental and physical strengthening, legal professionals can utilize coaches to stay on top of their game navigating the realities of legal practice and life challenges. Research shows that more than fifty percent of Fortune 500 CEOs hire coaches in order to excel at their jobs.

I’ve invited Michael Gibian to share some of his coaching strategies. Michael’s work with high-achieving professionals draws from a variety of modalities, including mindfulness, emotional intelligence, somatic psychology, and Internal Family Systems (IFS).

* * *

Question: Michael, before we explore your coaching approach, I’d like to know what inspired YOU to be on your path of helping high-achieving professionals through “inner leadership coaching”?

Michael: When I was a child, my sister died. That loss cracked something open in me that never fully closed. From that moment on, I was drawn—quietly, persistently—to the question beneath all questions: How do we live with pain? Over the past 35 years, that question became a path. I trained in mindfulness with teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh, Jack Kornfield, Goenka, and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. I later turned toward somatic psychology, studying with Ron Kurtz (founder of Hakomi) and John Eisman (founder of Re-Creation of the Self). And for decades now, I’ve worked with clients—people facing real pain, stuck patterns, and the quiet longing to feel fully alive.



Michael Gibian

Question: Can you share a few examples of how coaching can help both personally and professionally?

Michael: I worked with a CEO who, from the outside, had an amazing life. She ran a growing company, had a calendar full of investor meetings, and took fancy vacations. But in our first conversation, she admitted she’d recently snapped at a colleague over something minor, gone silent in the car ride home, and then picked a fight with her partner about a dishwasher. She was embarrassed. She was tired all the time, waking up at 3 a.m. with her mind racing. “It’s not that anything is wrong, exactly,” she told me. “I just don’t feel like myself anymore.”

When we slowed things down, she realized she’d been operating in overdrive for years. Jumping from one fire to the next, without ever wondering what her body or emotions were trying to tell her. She repeatedly missed noticing the tightness in her own chest or the way her team went quiet when she pushed too hard. What helped wasn’t a total career pivot or a silent retreat in Bali. It was learning small, repeatable ways to notice what was happening in her body, name what she was feeling, and make choices that weren’t just knee-jerk reactions. Over time, she stopped feeling like she was bracing for impact every day. She was still ambitious, still driven—but also more present, calmer,

and, to her surprise, even more effective at work.

Another professional I coached was a 42-year-old lawyer who used to spiral into panic before every court appearance. Chest tight, heart racing, mind flooded with worst-case scenarios. Everything was tried—suppressing it, breathing exercises, positive affirmations—but the panic kept getting worse. I helped reframe the mindset that was fueling the reactivity: “What if this isn’t panic? What if it’s your body preparing you for something that matters?” Instead of fighting it, instead say: “My body is getting ready to advocate. This energy means I care.” This legal professional then began relating to the sensation differently. The physical sensations didn’t vanish—but the fear of them did. Allowing the body to become an ally, not a battleground, resulted in a much better outcome physically, mentally—and in the courtroom.

Question: What insights can you share about the importance of emotional intelligence for navigating legal practice stressors?

Michael: Emotions are messengers—not dictators. You don’t have to obey them. But if you ignore them, they’ll just get louder. “Being emotional” isn’t a weakness—it’s data about what matters to you. The problem isn’t that you feel; it’s that you were never taught how to work with feelings skillfully. Most emotional suffering isn’t caused by the feeling itself, but by your relationship to it. Although many high performers think emotions get in the way of success, that’s one of the biggest misconceptions out there. Emotions aren’t the problem—it’s our lack of skill in working with them. Emotional intelligence is about accurately reading your own state and accurately reading the state of others. Without that, you can’t lead effectively, sustain focus, or make good decisions under pressure.

High achievers often try to outwork their stress. But unacknowledged emotional strain shows up in every interaction. Stop ignoring the signals your body and emotions are sending. Fatigue, irritability, and trouble sleeping aren’t random—they’re data. If you miss that your client is overwhelmed or your colleague is shutting down, you lose

influence without knowing why. A study by TalentSmart found that 90% of top performers score high in emotional intelligence, and that EQ accounts for 58% of performance in all types of jobs. Low EQ increases conflict, turnover, and burnout—costing companies millions each year.⁴

Question: Why do you think there are so many successful people who feel deeply dissatisfied?

Michael: Because achievement without self-knowledge eventually becomes hollow. You can have all the external markers—income, title, respect—but if you don't know yourself, you can't align your life with what actually matters to you. For attorneys, doctors, executives—there's often a long period of doing what's rewarded externally. But at some point, the mismatch between your outer life and your inner life creates a sense of disconnection, which can feel like chronic low-grade burnout or a loss of meaning.

Question: Your book and coaching approach emphasize what you call the Five Keys. Can you explain

what this means, and also include a simple practice you can share with the reader?

Michael: Here's the truth most people were never taught: Your current patterns aren't permanent. They're learned—and what's learned can be unlearned. Each of the Five Keys helps to unlock our natural intelligence and stop reacting automatically and start responding with clarity: Key One unlocks emotional freedom—because emotions are data, not directives. Key Two unlocks mental clarity—because thoughts aren't facts. Key Three unlocks intentional identity—because you become what you practice. Key Four unlocks courageous growth—because avoidance feels safe but keeps you stuck. Key Five unlocks purposeful living—because your pain deserves meaning, not just management. These aren't just ideas. They're the tools I return to, again and again, when life gets real.

The Five Keys are practical psychological literacy skills:

1. **Feel Everything** – Emotions are signals, not weaknesses. Learn to sense and name them.

2. **Thoughts Aren't Facts** – Question your mental stories before they drive your actions.
3. **You Become What You Practice** – Small, repeated actions shape identity and behavior.
4. **Face What You Avoid** – Avoidance increases stress; meeting challenges restores capacity.
5. **Let Your Pain Mean Something** – Transform struggle into purpose and connection.

Together, they build the core of emotional intelligence—accurately reading yourself, reading others, and adjusting in real time. These are learnable skills that reduce reactivity, deepen relationships, and restore a sense of agency. ■

Robin Oaks has been an attorney for nearly four decades, and for twenty-five years has provided legal services focused on independent workplace investigations and mediations. For over two decades she has studied and become certified in a wide range of emotional intelligence, cognitive fitness, and mind-body healing

practices especially useful for legal professionals and the stressors they face. She offers MCLE presentations, PROS training programs, witness well-being support, and individualized coaching sessions empowering legal professionals to thrive in livelihood and life. Contact: Robin@RobinOaks.com or 805-685-6773.

ENDNOTES

1. Jones, Susan R. (2020) *The Case for Leadership Coaching in Law Schools: A New Way to Support Professional Identity Formation*, *Hofstra Law Review*: Vol. 48: Iss. 3, Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/hlr/vol48/iss3/6>
2. Susan R. Jones, Kate Neville, *The Current Environment Needs Leadership: Coaching Can Help Lawyers Lead*, ABA Business of Law (September 25, 2020); <https://businesslawtoday.org/2020/09/current-environment-needs-leadership-coaching-can-help-lawyers-lead/>
3. Flourishing is a positive psychology term that means optimizing engagement, performance, and thriving in all dimensions of life—and work.
4. Travis Bradberry & Jean Greaves (2009) *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* (TalentSmart research findings).

The Wave-Riding Method

A simple and effective emotional self-regulation practice to try from Michael Gibian:

Neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor found that emotions create a 90-second chemical wave in the body. The feeling rises, crests, and naturally fades—if you don't interfere. Everything after that wave is your interpretation—your story, your resistance, your attempts to suppress what was already moving through. In other words: Think of emotions like waves in the ocean. You can't stop them from coming, but you can learn to surf instead of being tumbled. And as you learn to stay with your own emotions, you'll naturally become more present for others' feelings too.

1. Name it without judgment: "I'm noticing sadness."
2. Locate it in the body: "Tight chest, heavy eyes."
3. Stay a little longer than usual: "Let it move. Let it soften. Let it be."
4. No fixing—just permission: "You're allowed to be here." You're not trying to fix the feeling. You're building the capacity to stay with it.

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