

To Be or Not to Be . . . Coached: A Profile of Coach Irene Leonard



Irene Leonard

by Mar Sulaika Ochs

“My goal is to transform the practice of law one lawyer at a time,” lawyer, and coach for lawyers, Irene Leonard says.

“Thirty years ago,” says Leonard, “lawyers had prestige, respect, and power. While lawyers will always have power, transforming the practice is more about respect.”

Leonard became a coach just five and a half years ago, after 18 years as a real estate and business attorney. Now she is Washington’s only International Coach Federation member coaching lawyers.

“I didn’t give up law because I didn’t like law,” she says. “I was pulled toward becoming a coach because I had always pushed friends to take steps to improve their careers and I like to help people. That’s also why I became a lawyer.”

Irene Leonard could best be described as “a man in a size-four dress.” That makes her laugh. Law is, after all, one of those solid bastions of our alpha male society. That some of this country’s best lawyers are female hasn’t yet transformed the profession from its patriarchal mode.

Irene Leonard can handle that.

“I work with incredibly satisfied people who realize they can have more, and I coach them to get there,” she says. “They already have some success; they simply want more success. You have to be willing to be uncomfortable.”

Try and tell a “bad lawyer joke” to Irene Leonard and see what happens. She’ll probably laugh, but will also quickly add, “I hold my clients as creative, resourceful, and whole. That reflects my belief about the legal profession as well.”

“That doesn’t mean there aren’t lawyers who don’t communicate well, or lawyers who are not good lawyers. But those lawyers need not reflect badly on the profession as a whole. Lawyers are like any other group of people. There are good

ones and not so good ones.”

Leonard’s clients range across Washington and North America. “One of my clients typifies the profession,” she tells me. “It’s hard for him to say, ‘I can’t deliver the document to you on Monday.’ I coach him so that he sees that the relationship with his client is more important. If he can’t meet the deadline, he immediately calls the client. Most clients will understand if you just tell them what is going on. Then, they are happy to pay the bill!”

Does this work, or does this sound like, well, mumbo-jumbo?

Not to Simon Brownlie, a Bellingham lawyer and Leonard client who, when asked, had no hesitations about admitting he used a coach. He credits his work with Leonard over 18 months with growing his practice from one to three partners.

Originally a South African lawyer, Brownlie was determined in 2001 to build a successful practice in a new country.

“I saw the United States as the Big Sell. So when I signed up for a CLE in a teleconference she was giving, I knew as a foreigner I had entrenched beliefs and preconceived ideas. She forced me to confront those.”

Coaching for Change tip # 21: Consider your limiting beliefs

Take some time to think about your beliefs regarding your practice that limit or stop you from achieving more. If you stop and really think them through, you may realize that you can do what you have not been doing. Expand your comfort zone.

The following are some common practice-limiting beliefs: That is not professional; It is easier to do this myself; I can’t ask for favors; They might say no; I don’t want to brag; I don’t know how.

As he muses about the changes he has

Editor’s note: Members have told us, in a variety of ways, they’d like to see more about members in Bar News. After all, it’s a member magazine. So this month we’re rolling out a new, occasional feature about interesting WSBA members, more or less randomly chosen. We’re interpreting “interesting” from soup to nuts — it can be something about a lawyer’s life, practice, or whatever you, as a reader, find of interest or worthy of note, and believe readers will as well. We encourage members to give us ideas. Better yet, send us the stories. From 750 to 1,000 words is a good place to land. Send your suggestions or stories to me at tradelaw@thompson-law.com. How often we run the feature will be determined by how many ideas we get for stories.



This month we start off with a piece on Irene Leonard, who, after a long and successful lawyering career, became a coach, which I gather is a sort of feng shui advisor for careers. Writer Mar Sulaika Ochs lets Leonard — and some of her clients — explain her business niche.

made to improve his law practice, Brownlie adds, "I wanted to return to something in more of a traditional role as a lawyer — an advisor, a counselor. There is a way of listening to people which is not practiced enough."

To practice that in himself, Brownlie, with Leonard's coaching, was forced to confront what didn't work for him anymore.

Citing Leonard's book, *Creating the Practice You Want*, Brownlie adds, "I know now I can create my own destiny as a lawyer."

"Technically, Simon is a very good lawyer; he knows how to draft an excellent agreement, and he's efficient," says Leonard.

I know that as a lawyer, it is not comfortable for us to ask for help. We have limiting beliefs

"By the time lawyers hire a coach, they have already made some unconscious decision for change. Because they have put their mind to changing their practice and then they focus on doing that, they begin to do things differently. Coaching is about structure — the structure to take action on a plan. That is one of the reasons it works. By working with me, I hold that structure for clients. Their insight is part of structure."

For Seattle's Camille Taylor Ralston, who wanted to become a "rainmaker" and elevate her practice to larger real estate transactions, working with Leonard means her "source" / book of business has more than doubled.

"She helped me think up, consider, and try out new ideas to realize my goals. She taught me how to quantify goals to measure success. Through persistent follow-up on Leonard's part, she made me try approaches with which I was *not* comfortable. For example, I was not comfortable calling up clients I hadn't worked for in a while — to shoot the breeze, find out what they were doing, and solicit work."

**Coaching for Change tip # 20:
Get comfortable with self-promotion**
People who thrive in business are the ones who naturally market themselves to the right people in the right way. Self-marketing does not have to be an onerous process if your marketing components are designed based on who you are. Know Yourself. What are your values? What are you passionate about? How do you operate? What are your strengths and weaknesses?

At first, Ralston, a partner at Montgomery Purdue Blankinship & Austin PLLC, wasn't sure she wanted to be identified for this article. She laughed and said, "that's because I think of my work with Irene as my 'secret weapon!'"

Successfully developing the marketing aspect has now garnered her recognition at that firm for bringing in business. "I was really not comfortable asking clients and other people, like brokers, to send me referrals. Through working with Irene, I started making all kinds of calls, and, gosh, it really worked, and people gave me transactions to work on and referrals that I would not otherwise have had."

Coaching for Change tip # 5: Defeat procrastination by following the theory, "Just Start!"

There is a distinction between "Just Do It" and "Just Start." If you have some matter on your desk that has been requiring your attention and you are ignoring it for whatever reason, pick up the file or the phone or whatever and just start on the matter

"I started my Law Practice Tips two years ago because I wanted to give something back, as well as create a marketing tool," Leonard says. "That is an approach to marketing I work on with my clients — to make it easy to come up with marketing techniques. I pay attention to what is going on with my clients and come up with a tip related to what is going on in their practice."

The tips became a way of thinking, and a way to transform that practice of law she is keen about.

"I don't like the football or sports analogy applied to coaching. It's not me. But if it is the image that works for people,

then think of Tiger Woods. He is at the top of his game — and he has a coach. He's not afraid to ask for help — and look at how successful he is!"

But how does coaching make Tiger Woods better at what he does?

"He just *is* better. We don't really know how it works, we just know it does."

But if we can deduce the impact on coaching through the stories of a couple of lawyers, can we conclude what the impact is on the whole profession?

"It's one lawyer at a time," she says, and smiles.

"Even at the beginning of my business I knew I wanted to work with lawyers, having been one. But I also knew I would have to be very good to coach lawyers. So when my own coach said to me over three years ago, 'What you really want to do is transform the business of law, Irene, I was not surprised exactly — but it was a breakthrough in my own visions and values.'"

"Now," she continues, "I have a new client, a Detroit lawyer who specifically chose me to help him build his practice. He told me that if I could build a successful coaching practice then I was the coach to help him build a successful law practice."

Anyone who doubts the role of coaching in any business — never mind coaching in the legal profession — has only to look at the statistics by the International Coaching Federation. Five years ago, there were 2,000 members — now there are more than 6,000, and that number is growing. Somebody knows something about making something work.

"I know that as a lawyer, it is not comfortable for us to ask for help. We have limiting beliefs: *I should know how to do this*. I am finding more and more lawyers who do ask because it works."

Her eyes shine as she states, matter of factly, "When two people come together with common goals, magic happens. What I want to happen next for me as a coach is to work with an already successful law firm to see them have even more of that success — and magic." ✍

Mar Sulaika Ochs is a Seattle freelance writer. Irene Leonard's coaching work is featured on her website, www.coachingforchange.com.