

## Book Review

By Jeffrey Isaac Ehrlich  
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# Coaching for Attorneys: Improving Productivity and Achieving Balance

By Cami McLaren and Stephanie J. Finelli (ABA Press 2014)

A useful book for attorneys, even if you don't like self-help books

I received an advance copy of *Coaching for Attorneys*, which is being published this month. The stated purpose of the book is to teach attorneys how to make positive changes in their lives, so they can live their lives in a way that is more conducive to achieving their goals. Perhaps that is a bit generalized. It would also be accurate to say that the purpose of the book is to allow attorneys to better organize their lives and their practices, so that they can practice law in a more efficient, less stressful way.

I thought the book was interesting and worth the time I spent reading it. I should give a brief disclaimer: I am not a reader of self-help books. As a result, it is possible that many of the concepts that I found so powerful in this book did not originate with the authors and are simply reformulations of the main concepts articulated in other self-help books. With that caveat, I'll proceed.

Cami McLaren practiced law for almost 20 years, and then moved into personal coaching and lecturing. Her co-author, Stephanie J. Finelli, is a practicing lawyer in Sacramento. From what I can tell, the book presents ideas formulated by McLaren, which she uses in her coaching practice, and draws on examples provided by Finelli.

### The Drift

The book is an easy read; divided into ten fairly short chapters. The first chapter is titled "The Drift," and it describes the state that many of us live and work in – basically drifting along in the currents of the routines we have created, without much critical thought about whether those routines are really working for us. People have a remarkable ability to adapt, and part of that ability allows us to get into ruts. The Drift provides a catalyst to recognize those patterns and routines, hold them up to critical scrutiny, and then decide whether we want to continue to go in that direction.



McLaren



Finelli

I won't provide a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the rest of the book. The over-arching theme is that people (and lawyers) tend to suffer from two problems: (1) they don't really know themselves very well, including knowing what they want, and why they want it; (2) they have a tendency to stop drawing connections between the choices they make and the outcomes that those choices produce for them.

A person who does not really understand what they want, what makes them happy, and why it makes them happy, will have a difficult time arranging their lives in a way that results in happiness, and will certainly have trouble, if they are already unhappy, in making effective changes.

### Connecting the dots

And without understanding the connection between the events we experience and the choices we make, we tend to feel that things "happen" in our lives, or to us, as if we were simply passive actors. Hence, if we are habitually late to court because we get caught in traffic, we are not late because of the traffic. We are late because we chose not to leave more time to get to court; or because we chose not to set the alarm a half-hour earlier; or because we chose to stay up late to see how a movie ended.

One of the most powerful concepts in the book is to show the reader how to re-frame his or her thinking so that what "happens" in our lives is expressed as the product of our choices. For me, this was significant because if an outcome that I don't like is the product of my choice, I can choose to change it. So, my desk is

not messy. Rather, I chose to have a messy desk. And I can choose to have an organized one, by choosing to spend some time organizing it. (I just have not yet made that choice.)

Another powerful concept in the book is that it offers a way to help decide *what* you want and *why* you want it. We often look past the "why." If you want to earn \$1 million next year, but you do not ask why you want that, you might be on the way to two bad outcomes. First, if you don't know why, you are very likely not going to be able to commit the personal resources necessary to reaching your goal. Second, you may find out that the goal may actually work at cross-purposes with the underlying reasons that you hold the goal. Let's say that you want to earn \$1 million because you think it will make you feel financially secure, so you can work less and spend more time with your family. It may be that the time you would have to spend in the office in order to earn the \$1 million would eat up almost every weekend and eliminate your vacation. So, if your ultimate desire is trying to find a way to spend more time at home, perhaps earning more money is the wrong way to go about doing it.

The book contains many exercises that ask you to examine what you want, why you want it, how you would feel if you got it, etc. The overall point is to find ways to make your goals and desires fully congruent and complementary. Part of understanding what you want is the understanding of what you might have to give up to get it, and requires a decision about whether you are willing to give it up. More succinctly, making difficult personal changes requires a lot of motivation and commitment. You are far more likely to succeed if you have a better sense of self awareness, so that you can commit to what is truly important to you.

### Helpful hints

From a practical standpoint, the book  
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offers many helpful ideas in the chapters on time management, self-maintenance, and communication. The time-management concepts, in particular, are grounded on common sense, and basically convert what lawyers tend to do subconsciously into conscious, planned-out routines. Most of us maintain a calendar and a to-do list based on it, which detail our upcoming tasks and deadlines. The book shows you how to better estimate the amount of time you will need to complete them, and how to schedule your life and practice in light of the true time commitments built into your deadlines.

When I read the communication chapter, I was a bit skeptical. It seemed fairly simple and self-explanatory. We need to listen better. I thought I was a pretty good listener and communicator. That night, I had a minor fight with my wife, precisely because she said one thing, and I heard something else and reacted to

it. As we worked through the mess I had created, I realized that what I had just done to start the fight could have been pulled from an example in the chapter.

The chapter on “enrollment” is interesting, in that it’s how to get people to do what you want them to do, but is really about how to enlist them in a partnership with you to achieve what they want. It comes back to learning to listen effectively, to find out what people really want, and how you can help them achieve it.

Not every concept in the book resonated with me. McLaren is, in addition to being a professional coach, also an NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) practitioner. I won’t wade into the debate about the merits of NLP. Let’s just say that it has many detractors. I found that, from time to time when there were statements or concepts in the book that I was particularly resistant to, they consistently

tended to be drawn from NLP precepts.

Nevertheless, I think that the book has great value. It provides tools that will help lawyers gain self-awareness, and that will allow them to harness that self-awareness into making better choices about how they practice and maybe even how they live. It also has practical advice for improving areas that many lawyers find troublesome, including managing their time and communicating with clients and staff. The book was originally titled “*The Integrated Lawyer*.” I think most of us could benefit from better “integration” and *Coaching for Attorneys* would be a good start. If you are interested in picking up a copy, you can find it at [www.mclarencoaching.com/coaching-for-attorneys/](http://www.mclarencoaching.com/coaching-for-attorneys/).

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