

Helping new parents get back to work

Coaching program targets lawyers struggling with home, job responsibilities

BY DARYL-LYNN CARLSON
For Law Times

The demands of sustaining a lucrative law practice in order to become a partner at the firm someday put enough pressures on young lawyers. But for women, taking leave from their work to start a family can be downright overwhelming.

According to a recent study of 50 British law firms, one-fifth of women left their practice and quit law after starting a family.

Those challenges prompted Marjorie Shore, a trainer and coach with the Coaching Clinic in Toronto, to launch a program geared specifically towards helping women and men achieve a balance between demands at both work and home.

She started the program after receiving phone calls from law firm clients who reported they had women who were completely overwhelmed by trying to negotiate their workload after returning from maternity leave.

"They said they had female lawyers who had returned to work and were struggling," Shore recalls. "The lawyers were in their office and were particularly unhappy, sometimes even crying, and definitely struggling upon returning to work."

Shore, a psychotherapist and executive coach, operates the Coaching Clinic with her partner Jerome Shore. They provide law firms with a range of coaching services.

Shore, who launched the transition program for lawyers with families about five years ago, has many law firm clients. The program involves one-on-one meetings before their maternity leave, then up to two months before they return, and finally through followup sessions to assess their work, career goals, and practice with an eye to managing both work and home responsibilities.

"I think having a coach to talk with really helps them to stay steady until enough time has passed that they feel they can understand what this is going to be like in the long term," says Shore.

Bindu Cudjoe, a partner in the debt products group at McMillan LLP, says she has benefited from working with Shore after returning from maternity leave and prior to taking leave again.

She has three youngsters aged five, three, and one. Her practice focuses on representing lenders and borrowers in a variety of domestic, cross-border, and global corporate and commercial debt financings, including syndicated lending and asset-based,



Bindu Cudjoe turned to the Coaching Clinic for help after returning from maternity leave and before going on leave once again.

cash-flow-based, and mezzanine transactions.

McMillan makes Shore's coaching services available to lawyers who want support and feedback on balancing their responsibilities. "The people who I work with have made it very easy to step out and take the time on maternity leave without feeling that I had to keep on top of my files," says Cudjoe.

Yet once she returned to work, the challenges started to mount.

"I have a transactional practice

that is mostly driven by deals and, at times, it can feel overwhelming to juggle work priorities with my home priorities," she says.

But, Cudjoe notes, it was very helpful to have Shore's advice in order to understand how to achieve a better balance.

"She is a third party who doesn't have a stake in the choices that I make, so it was good to have her to talk through some of the challenges of juggling all the responsibilities at home and at work and to yourself," she says. "There can be a lot of chatter in your head about whether you can have this kind of practice and still be the parent you want to be."

Shore was particularly good at helping her see things in different ways, Cudjoe adds. "Sometimes, she can help reframe the issue and present a different perspective on it in terms of how my family can perceive my responsibilities at work and how my colleagues and clients might perceive my responsibilities at home. So if you can get your head around that, you can focus on how to do a great job for your clients, spend quality time with your kids, and be the parent and spouse you want to be."

Claire Kennedy, a tax partner at Bennett Jones LLP, has two children aged six and three. She

retained Shore on her own after realizing she needed some objective feedback on scheduling and prioritizing. "It was important to come to the realization that if you can't stick to your schedule, you're not a bad mother. It really is about juggling all the time," she says, noting that "a number of my colleagues quit law outright" after having children.

Kennedy acknowledges, however, that she has an advantage: "I have a full-time nanny and a stay-at-home husband."

Still, she works long hours and also travels a lot as a speaker at various conferences, often overseas.

"Essentially, see it as an investment in your career. If you have to pay someone to do something around your house, that is a trade-off in that context," she says.

Shore, she points out, understands the law firm culture and the time demands lawyers working in it find themselves dealing with. "This is a day-to-day thing," Kennedy says. "You can't put in a single system and have it work every day. Your schedule is not going to be a clear eight to six [o'clock] with all the clients running according to that, so there will be days that work better than others. I think for people who stay in the private practice of law, they have to be flexible." 