

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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Leading Change in Ever-Changing Times

In recent years, the legal industry has seen extraordinary change. And the pace doesn't seem to be letting up.



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Tenured employees leave, requiring you to focus on succession planning. New generations of employees join the ranks, requiring you to rethink how to engage them. Technology evolves at a relentless rate. Pricing pressures require you to find efficiencies wherever you can.

These changes require strong project management. But do you ever wonder if the changes you're leading really stick? Do you spend your time focused on compliance when you really want commitment? Does it feel like battling concerns and resistance is your *other* full-time job?

Resistance to change can stem from the way a project is managed or the quality of the solution. And these are real issues to manage. But resistance within a law firm can sometimes feel supercharged. In the late 1990s, Dr. Larry Richard conducted research identifying key traits that differentiate lawyers. Understanding these traits can shed light on the resistance you've encountered and help you gain greater commitment from lawyers:

- **Higher Skepticism.** Lawyers are typically highly skeptical, which means they tend to be "judgmental, questioning, argumentative and somewhat self-protective." That means it takes more convincing to win their support.
- **Higher Urgency.** Lawyers often demonstrate "impatience, a need to get things done [and] a sense of immediacy." They may not respond well to protracted change introduced in multiple phases.
- **Lower Sociability.** Lawyers may be "less inclined to enjoy interacting with others" and "may prefer to spend more time dealing with information, the intellect or interactions that emphasize the mind rather than the heart." Lawyers might not be engaged by a flashy communications campaign designed to win hearts — stick to the facts.
- **Lower Resilience.** Lawyers can be "defensive, resist taking in feedback and can be hypersensitive to criticism." Lots of change causes stress, and lawyers need time to recover before launching yet another initiative.
- **Higher Autonomy.** Lawyers "resist being managed ... bridle at being told what to do and ... prize their independence." If they're not involved in the change and don't support the direction, you'll feel their pushback. This is especially true if you've included mandatory training as part of your change.

With these traits in mind, how would you approach your change efforts differently? By using change management techniques, you can bring the people perspective to your projects and deliver real value.

A FIVE-STEP APPROACH TO LEADING CHANGE

To do change management right, follow these five guidelines.

1. **Communicate:** Frequent, targeted communications are the key to leading successful change. When your audience is highly skeptical and autonomous, you have to get the why exactly right. Be prepared to tell them the why repeatedly, as their sense of urgency can sometimes lead to messages being overlooked. Studies suggest you'll need to share the why five to seven times before your audience hears you.
2. **Demonstrate personal value:** Simply explaining why we're making a change isn't enough to win over most employees. To gain buy-in, you need to find a personal hook. We often hear lawyers say, "Non-lawyers don't know what I do, so how can they know if this is going to help me?" To win them over you'll have to tailor your message — make sure your message is specific to *their* practice and how *they* work.
3. **Learning:** Changes often mean learning new skills. Setting the conditions for effective learning requires us to broaden our thinking. How do your lawyers like to learn? Lawyers love to learn, but hate to be taught. If they are able to exercise autonomy and have input, they're more likely to engage.
4. **Support efforts:** Change projects are often demanding and exhausting for those leading them. As a result, it's not uncommon to lead the horse to water and then head for the hills. Once you win commitment to change, you have to provide strong support. Provide clearly written, on-demand resources in addition to well-prepared frontline resources.
5. **Measurement:** How do you know when your change is successful? Sometimes hard metrics can be observed, captured and reported on. However, for some projects, measurement is anecdotal and requires conversations. When conversations reveal ongoing resistance, take action. In some cases, re-communicating the why or finding a new personal hook can help. In other cases, the lack of engagement or adoption can signal a need for additional skills. Sometimes conversations reveal good news — your employees are adopting the change.

When your efforts are successful, it's important to celebrate those victories. Sharing employee testimonials or success stories is a great way to encourage others, help overcome resistance among peers, and share the value to the firm.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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