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## Change management for lawyers requires long-term commitment

As politics and the economy remain in a constant state of flux, so do the rules for the business world. Organizations across myriad industries, sectors and geographies are constantly seeking ways to remain relevant and to innovate and capture as much market share as possible. Achieving these goals in such a volatile environment generally requires driving, implementing and leading businesses through fundamental change.

Change is never easy, regardless of who or where you are, and it requires a lot of foresight, planning, commitment and diligence. John Kotter's 1996 book "Leading Change," viewed as the seminal work in this area, discusses how implementing change in an organization, and making it stick, involves a strong commitment and a healthy dose of realism among the group of individuals initiating it.

The book is both timely and relevant to the metamorphosis of the legal profession and is a compelling read.

We can all learn a great deal about our organizations, and ourselves, by recognizing that any fundamental change we seek will not happen by sheer force of will. Driving change is a multistep process that unfolds and evolves over time and requires those involved to remain engaged at each step along the way to ensure both short- and long-term success.

All change efforts begin with a recognition that there is a need for change at the organization. There is often a certain level of dissatisfaction with the status quo or a sense that something fundamental to the business is not working on a basic level.

There could also be a desire to offer the same products or services differently or to innovate in some other meaningful way.

Whatever the case may be, there needs to be a clear vision for change and a mapping out of the strategy that will bring it about.

This plan then needs to be clearly communicated by senior

management to the key stakeholders and power base in the organization so that they can understand both the high-level direction and the implementation strategy. Buy in from this group is very important, since they are critical in garnering the support necessary to move the change needle among the rest of the organization.

There are a number of significant obstacles to any successful change management strategy. While it is essential to establish a compelling, substantive case to support the effort, it is just as important to recognize and address the cultural consequences of such an endeavor.

Indeed, the more quickly an organization tries to drive fundamental change, the more complex the interpersonal dynamics will become. This is particularly true in service professions like the law, where people are the most valuable assets of the business.

As a result, the cultural aspects of such change efforts are often where they fail. We cannot underestimate the importance of understanding the attitudes, needs and desires of those who are a fundamental part of the process and we must effectively communicate these strategies in a way that is both relevant and meaningful to employees.

Lawyers are an interesting breed and they have unique personality traits which can often prove challenging to those who are trying to drive change. For example, lawyers are often highly analytical and feel a real sense of urgency to solve problems on behalf of their clients. They are compelled to collect and consider proof and they will generally look for holes in arguments and theories presented to them.

Thus, it is important to provide lawyers with sufficient facts to enable them to properly evaluate a change management strategy and to give them an opportunity to provide meaningful feedback, both positive and negative, so that they feel invested in the process.

In addition, lawyers can be

### PARADIGM SHIFT



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slow to trust and resistant to change, so they may not take information being presented to them at face value or they may question the overall motives of those driving the change in the organization. When lawyers demonstrate these traits, they should not be viewed as malicious or as troublemakers.

Rather, there should be an understanding that playing the devil's advocate is simply how lawyers

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are wired and these characteristics enable them to effectively represent their clients. Moreover, skepticism should not be viewed by the change management team as a negative but, rather, as a necessary piece of building the critical buy in among members of the organization.

Lawyers are also often characterized as being introverted and not as adept as others in matters where high emotional intelligence is called for. These traits are particularly important to keep in mind when a fundamental part of the change effort involves a significant transformation into both a highly skilled and respected practitioner and a formidable generator of revenue.

Indeed, many effective rainmakers have a relatively high EQ (emotional quotient), particularly in areas such as empathy and resilience, and often demonstrate extroverted tendencies. These skills are not generally viewed as a lawyer's greatest strengths and are actually considered quite rare among this group.

Therefore, agents of change need to acknowledge and accept that it often takes time, patience and a great deal of hard work for attorneys to develop both the skills and network necessary to effectively make this transition.

As change leaders in the legal profession, we all need to do a better job of understanding those whom we lead and what motivates and inspires them. We also need to make a more concerted effort to take the amalgam of traits unique to these professionals and channel them into the change process in a positive way.

They are perhaps in the best position to help us understand what is working and what needs to be tweaked during the change process. Ultimately, successfully driving change is both a top down and bottom up proposition and it is dependent upon employees' understanding of, and commitment to, the cause and their willingness to spread words of support and encouragement to the rest of the organization.