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Becoming change-able is the key to law firm success

I am often asked 'what is the most important capability that any management team should focus on developing in its people?' My answer is always the same: it is the means to bring about change – to behaviours, to practices, to systems and structures. Having the ability to adapt to a new set of opportunities or challenges places a law firm in a position to control its environment. An inability to change means that the organisation is beholden to the market.

A firm that is change-able doesn't just have a good understanding of change management techniques, reinforced with a robust set of tried and tested processes. It also has the ability to engage its people in a journey, to move from a current state to a desired one. It is this engagement of people which can be most challenging. But, without it, any change process will most likely flounder.

Psychology of change

Countless academic studies have found that the key issues to address at the outset of any change programme is the need to increase the sense of urgency, create a burning platform and ensure everyone understands why staying still is not an option. This can take the form of both carrot and stick – painting a picture of the positive benefits of the change that is proposed as well as highlighting the dire consequences of not changing. The psychology of change demonstrates that people will only change when they perceive the pain of moving to be less than the pain of the status quo.

Change management guru John Kotter, who created the eight-stage change framework in *Leading Change*, is clear about the need to build a "powerful guiding coalition" to obtain much-needed engagement with the change programme. As Jim Collins pointed out in *From Good to Great*, great businesses recognise that it is crucial to "start by getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats".

Only with a clear understanding of the criticality and unsustainability of the current position driving the need for change, coupled with a cohesive group with strong intent and empowered to act, can a plan be developed and communicated.

A structured (and ongoing) communication process is vital. Any change initiative has the potential to affect morale and performance. Indeed, research shows that this is often the case as people come to terms with a new reality. These concerns and tensions are reduced when information, support, guidance and opportunities to feed back at critical stages in the change implementation process are factored in.

Change programme

At the outset of the change programme, the aim should be to raise awareness of what is proposed and why it is necessary. A common human reaction may be denial or frustration; the focus of the leadership team must be on building commitment. Such emotions will often be shared openly and can be dealt with quickly and effectively.

However, as the change process moves on, it will be vital for the firm to increase levels of understanding among its people about how the change will happen, how it will improve working practices and the benefits that it will bring. During this part of the change cycle, hidden feelings of anger, confusion and resentment may emerge. It is therefore crucial that transitional support is offered throughout this phase.

Clear communication, focused on clarifying roles and responsibilities, is key. This is also the point at which investment should be made in equipping people with the new skills they will need to succeed in future. By providing support, the firm will be able to achieve high levels of engagement and commitment from its people to the change process. If done well, a shift in mindset can be achieved. Those at the vanguard of change will

become advocates themselves. They will have seen the positive effects of working differently and want to help others to benefit too. They will be actively involved in the change effort.

Creating and maintaining momentum is important. Demonstrating that the climb will be worth the view is critical to bring about the sorts of behavioural changes that are required and to maximise the chances of success for any programme. Once the initial eagerness has waned, law firm leaders should deliver incremental evidence of progress in order to refuel ambition and maintain momentum. This is best done by creating and communicating short-term wins.

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Winning hearts

For most people involved in a law firm change project, gaining initial intellectual buy in for a new initiative is not the fundamental obstacle which needs to be overcome. Winning minds is the easy part of the equation; it is winning hearts which represents the more formidable challenge. Progress here rests on the firm's ability to build and maintain emotional commitment, underpinned by suitable processes and systems, to create a longer-term shift of attitude, approach and delivery. That is the real measure of success. ■■

Andrew Hedley has been advising law firm leaders on strategy and change management for more than 15 years (www.hedleyconsulting.com)