



Accountants and Advisors

Overcoming partners' general resistance to change

John Niehoff, CPA, Partner

Shin Nan Goto, CPA, Senior Manager

The legal industry continues to rapidly evolve in 2018, yet concerns still exist around whether partners are willing to embrace change, so their firms can continue to succeed. For instance, *Altman Weil's 2018 Law Firms in Transition, an Altman Weil Flash Survey* notes that "In 69% of law firms, partners resist most change efforts." In and of itself, that statement may influence some law firm management to shelf the expectation that meaningful efforts to drive change can be accomplished. However, a deeper review of attorney personality traits helps frame an understanding of common resistance from partners, and in doing so, helps develop a path for law firm management to achieve its objectives.

The *Caliper Profile*, an assessment tool that has been used for more than 40 years, measures personality traits and has been administered to millions of individuals. One example of its relevance to the legal industry is the comparative review of lawyer personality traits to the general public in The George Washington University's Masters in Law Firm Management Program. A review of a sampling of those personality trait comparisons sheds light on the common resistance to change for attorneys.

Skepticism

The first personality trend, one that shouldn't surprise legal administrators, is that attorneys score very high in "skepticism" when compared to the general public. In fact, attorneys as a whole are in the 90th percentile compared to the general population. Generally, individuals with strong skepticism can be considered argumentative, confrontational and judgmental. These types of personality traits well suit a strong "bet the firm" litigator, and as such, traits like skepticism are a significant reason attorneys are successful in the practice of law. However, the business of law, particularly in its current economic reality of competitiveness, can require what may be considered opposing traits such as trust, collaboration and compromise. Herein lies a quandary for law firm administrators — the very trait that makes attorneys so successful in their legal practices seems to continually be at odds with the financial goals of running a successful law firm. Accordingly, it can be expected that new ideas and initiatives being designed for the improvement of the law firm will naturally face attorney resistance. It is important for administrators to understand that a skeptical or challenging eye presented by attorneys is not inherently a judgment or undermining of their worth or skill. Taking an objective step back and understanding how skepticism is demonstrated by attorney counterparts will help administrators refocus energy on how to get these bright skeptics to embrace necessary changes.

Once legal administrators come to terms with the heightened level of skepticism, developing a roadmap to acceptance can follow. Administrators should push themselves to think through potential holes in their proposals and ideas, seek feedback from peers regarding common experiences and potential resistance and clearly communicate the long term benefits of their initiatives. New initiatives will need to address the impact to attorney's day-to-day work, suggest tactics on how to ease into this transition and develop proof statements to demonstrate the level of confidence supporting the likelihood of realizing the expected benefits.

Autonomy

Autonomy is another uniquely prevalent personality trait in which attorneys score very high, 89th percentile, compared to the general public. Beginning in law school, if not earlier, aspiring attorneys are encouraged to develop their independence, their individual research and analytical skills and their ability to be a self-starter. Often individual achievement and acknowledgement are emphasized above that of a team. In contrast, MBA students are generally encouraged to work in inter-disciplinary teams to accomplish goals and objectives where collaboration and group synergies are emphasized over the individual. Accordingly, legal administrators should recognize that their attorneys may not be as naturally comfortable working in teams or delegating responsibilities to others. However, as much as this personality trait may indicate that attorneys don't like to be told what to do, in our experience, attorneys are keenly aware of the need to provide exceptional client service. As a result, when administrators can frame a change initiative from the "voice of the client," the likelihood of eventual acceptance increases.

Resilience

Another personality trait, with a larger variance from the norm, is resilience, whereby attorneys ranked in the low 30th percentile. In general, attorneys tend to be less adept at quickly recovering from a failure. Yet, innovation and change often comes from a progression of lessons learned from minor failures. Accordingly, as law firms pursue continuous improvement, it is helpful to be mindful how this lower level of resilience can further drive resistance to change. New initiatives that are designed to manage the risk of failure and minimize the potential impact of failure are more likely to gain necessary support.

Personality trait implications

These distinguishing personality traits have significant implications to law firm managing partners, practice area leaders, firm administrators and other leaders with management responsibilities. New competitors continue to emerge, client service requirements and expectations change and technology continues its ever-changing impact on all aspects of life and business. The collective nature of these forces of change necessitate that law firm management lead their firms to continuously seek opportunities to improve performance. Those opportunities include a variety of levers, such as innovation in service delivery, process improvement, specialization, application of artificial intelligence, billing rate adjustments reflective of evolving changes in the nature of work and many more. All the while, in the background of the profession stands these dominant attorney personality traits high in skepticism and autonomy, while low in resilience. While it is natural for attorneys to resist change, it is imperative that management carefully plan, promote and execute in a manner that motivates its partners to get onboard.

