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How to Manage Change in Your Law Firm

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Many people are resistant to change. Oftentimes, that resistance comes down to two factors: the fear of loss or the fear of having to adopt new processes. Whatever the reason may be, change is often the inhibitor preventing innovation and improvement.

With this in mind, ask yourself this, if change is necessary for the advancement of society and businesses alike, how can you help your firm embrace the change that will help improve your business?

There are three types of change that impact our firms.

1. People-related changes can be a change in the duties of an individual or position, promotions, new hires, terminations.
2. Process-related changes include changing procedures, protocols, workflows.
3. Tool changes that involve changing technology and or equipment.

Regardless of the type of change, people fear they are losing something. To address those fears and have as smooth a transition as possible, there are steps you can take to encourage your firm members that you are taking the matter seriously and working to ensure the change is made for the good of all. Let's take a look.



Identifying the Need for Change

Firms who have a clear strategic plan and clear vision of where they are going will find it easiest to identify where change is needed. By identifying where you want your firm to be in ten or five or three years, you can assess external and internal environments and determine what challenges are going to interfere with your goals and what changes you need to make to overcome those challenges.

For firms who do not have a clear [strategic plan and vision](#) (don't feel bad if this is you, as this is the majority!), the need for change is often ignored until there is a financial loss that is impacting the firm in a negative way. By ignoring the need for change, a firm will eventually lose its competitiveness in today's market, impacting its bottom line, and then there will be a scramble to make the necessary changes to overcome the challenge. This reactive instead of proactive approach creates a firm environment that can be unsettling for its members, and the more you can work toward becoming a firm that is proactive, the better off you will be.

Enlist the Buy-In and Support of Leadership

Without the [buy-in](#) and support of leadership, any attempt at change will be a challenge. Firm employees are intelligent people, and if they are reporting to a partner who is not on board with a change, they will see it, and they will follow suit. You will not get the entire firm steering your ship in the same direction if your leadership is not all turning the wheel in the same direction.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

When considering a change in your firm, it is important to [communicate](#) early and often. Do not assume that leadership discussions stay within the upper ranks. There will always be a partner who trusts their long-time staffer with management information, and before you know it the rumor mill is buzzing. With the exception of people changes that are inappropriate to share, it is important to communicate with your firm members. Today's technology allows for such communication in a face-to-face environment even if you are not all in the same location. One communication with everyone at the same time is ideal so that everyone receives the same message.

What if, after communication among firm members or while still on the leadership level of communication, you discover the issue is not yet ripe for change, but you know it is important to your firm's long-term vision? Do not despair. Over time, you can gently move communication in a direction that it becomes ripe for change.

Involve All Stakeholders in the Process

We already know that humans do not like change. How can we help them overcome their fears? Part of the communication process involves including all stakeholders in the process. Consider a technology change, for example. Who are your end users? How will they use the product? Do you know all the ways in which they use your current system and what their needs or wishes are for a future product?

When it comes to technology, there are many reasons for change, but the most important reason is to meet the expectations of our clients. Clients today want efficiency, transparency, service delivery, and technological savvy from their law firms. While this is what your external stakeholders want, your internal stakeholders may be harder to convince. Where do you start?

1. Communicate the reason for the needed change.
2. Query your end users on *their* needs.
3. Create an implementation team that includes stakeholders from every level of your firm.
4. Help the team to make data-driven decisions.
5. Manage resistance. Hold subtle conversations, listen, and promote discussion. Ask “how do we make this work?”

Identify Benchmarks for Evaluation ROI

Follow-through is important. If your firm has a habit of implementing changes but not following through on them – saying we are going to do things one way, then finding it doesn’t work and going back to the old ways that don’t work – eventually you will not be taken seriously. If firm members see you taking change seriously for the greater good and evaluating what went right and what went wrong, they will be on board with you.

By knowing what you hope to accomplish at the beginning of your project, you can easily identify benchmarks of improvement that the change is meant to accomplish. Once the change has been made, are these benchmarks being met? Things don’t always work out as we had hoped, and that is okay. It is also okay for your firm members to see that you are not afraid to try and fail – it will encourage everyone to be a change agent looking for ways to improve for the greater good without fear of failure.

Some examples for positive changes you might see from a change in technology, for example:

- Attorneys now able to enter their own time efficiently and easily;
- Improved and more efficient billing process;
- Ability to easily save all documents and emails to a client file;
- Ability to track activity in a client file;
- Ability to track deadlines in a client file;
- Ability to log into a client file regardless of where you are located.

By identifying similar benchmarks for what you hope your change will accomplish, you can easily pinpoint what worked and what didn't. By allowing your firm members to participate in these processes, the changes necessary for the growth of your firm will have a much better chance at being successful.

The Takeaway

Change can be hard, but without it, your firm will lack the progress and development needed to stay relevant in a very competitive industry.

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