

Supporting the Leap from Cognitive Acceptance to Actual Change

Being prepared to respond to a few inherent partner concerns is essential to successful behavioral change.

by Sean Larkan

Much of what law firm leaders are called upon to do involves bringing about change at the individual partner level. Typically, this means first getting the partners to buy into the need for change at an intellectual level. Achieving this "cognitive acceptance" is not easy, but the really hard part is then getting those partners to *actually* change the behaviors that necessitated the change.

In our work with law firms, partners are invariably bright, hard working and successful. This is sometimes coupled with a touch of healthy cynicism, skepticism, change resistance and a desire for self-determination. Why should they change? They are, after all, already successful doing things their own way. Add this to the unique aspects of each partner and the situation for each firm and one finds there is no magic cocktail of implementation steps that will work every time for everyone.

Despite these challenges, we have found that that being prepared to respond to a few inherent partner concerns is essential to successful behavioral change.

- *Give me the facts.* Lawyers are accustomed to digesting complex situations. The factual basis for the proposed changes should be carefully thought through and communicated.
- *Why should I believe this?* Where others have provided information, or may even have rated performance, it is important that partners feel comfortable with the credibility of information sources.
- *Let me be involved and feel I am contributing.* Successful partners are usually control freaks and like to be involved in the design of changes and their implementation. In other words, they must be comfortable with the "message" and be shown respect.
- *Can I trust you?* It is vitally important that the right person presents the case for change. This may or may not be the traditional leader of the firm.

- *Does this apply to everyone (or am I being picked on)?* Partners need to know they are not being singled out. What they are being asked to do is no different than what is expected of every other partner.
- *Will you continue to take an interest or is it now up to me?* It is folly to believe that nodding approval or even enthusiastic acceptance in one or two meetings will result in true behavioral change. It is essential that leaders maintain an ongoing, genuine interest in the change process, most importantly in the person concerned, and provide or facilitate feedback on achievements.
- *Am I now 'branded' or will my turning over a new leaf be recognized?* In the words of the One Minute Manager, "*Try to catch them doing something right.*" Recognition of achievement and improvement is the glue that can cement the above principles. A public pat on the back goes a long way to building confidence and trust.

Key to behavior change is the recognition that law firms cannot buy compliance. Partners' earnings are too high to permit behavior change to be driven by compensation. Money may reinforce changed behavior but most firms don't have enough money available to get lawyers to do something they are not already convinced they should do. Unfortunately, driving change is far more subtle and complex - which is why inspiring behavior is the essence of strong leadership.