

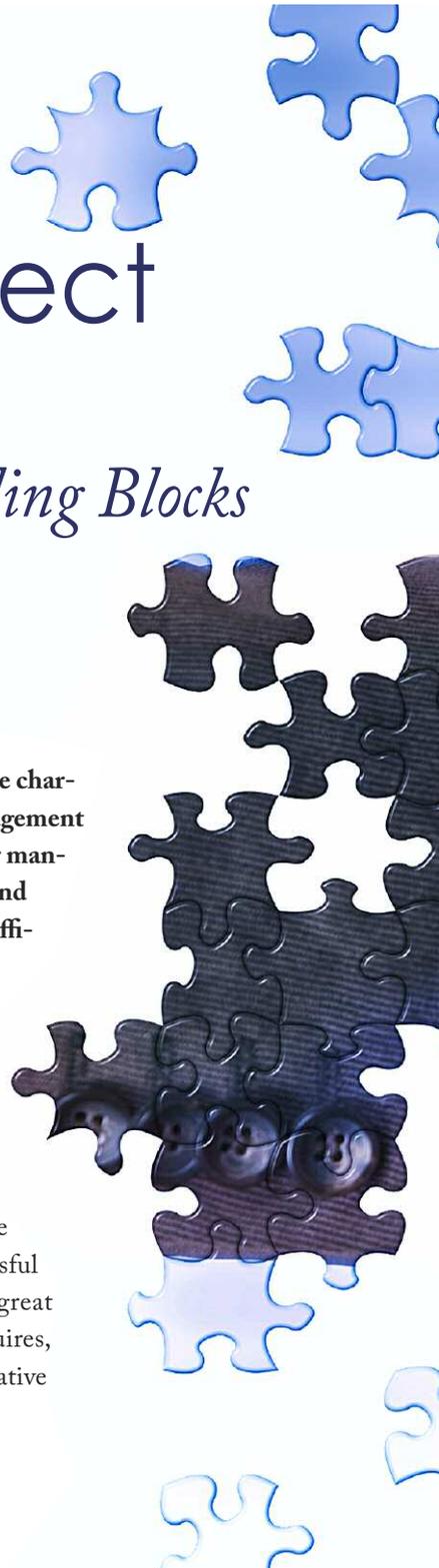
# Reflections for Legal Project Managers

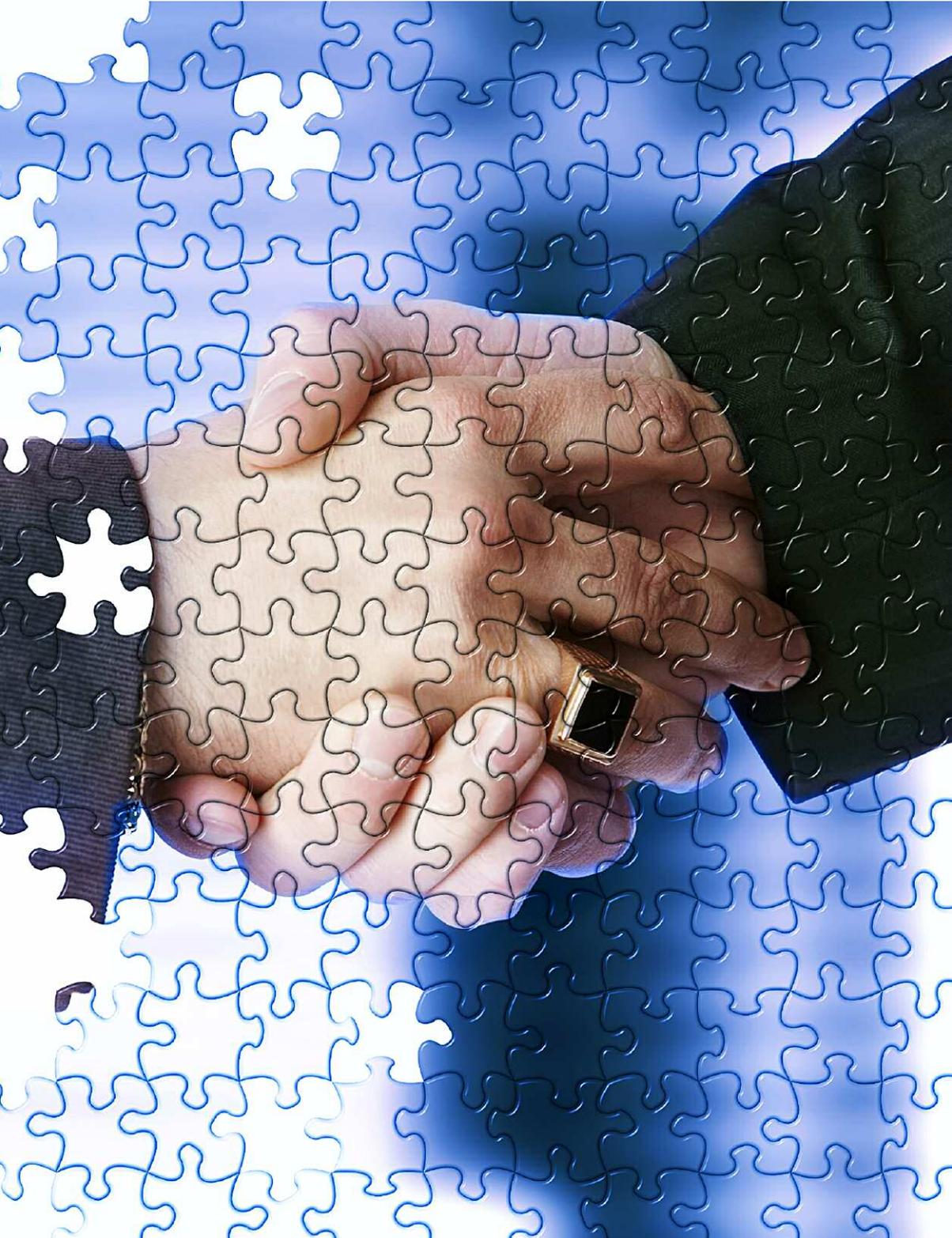
## *Understanding the Building Blocks of Lawyer Collaboration*

By Douglas B. Richardson

In her article on legal project management (LPM) on page 4, Pam Woldow describes the characteristics and benefits of legal project management — what it looks like, how it improves matter management, how it leads to improved metrics and fewer surprises, how it achieves significant efficiencies, and how it fosters more interactive client relationships.

**A**t its heart, LPM is really all about collaboration. Here at Edge International, we think LPM is set to transform the way law is practiced in the future. But successful LPM implementation requires more than great blueprints and rational processes. It also requires, and eventually must engender, a collaborative





commitment among stakeholders. As many frustrated legal project managers will attest, that can be a tall order when the cats you're trying to herd are lawyers.

American colonial patriot Thomas Paine once suggested: "If we do not hang together, we shall surely hang separately." That message finally seems to be coming home to lawyers whose profession has become economically challenged. The sun is setting on the epoch dominated by "individual contributors," because the legal profession's structures — both law firms and legal departments — have become so large, specialized, geographically dispersed and global that interdependence has become an absolute necessity.

Thomas Paine once suggested: "If we do not hang together, we shall surely hang separately." That message finally seems to be coming home to lawyers.

“

But that doesn't mean that lawyers willingly embrace the prospect of pulling together in harness with their colleagues, even if that harness promises the LPM benefits of rationality, predictability, efficiency and profitability. So we need to understand why lawyers do, and don't, collaborate well.

### WHY LAWYERS RESIST COLLABORATION

Trying to mobilize lawyers by lecturing them about how collaboration produces better synergy, efficiency, results and motivation does not work. Nor will showing them the LPM "value proposition" automatically build strong buy-in to law firm or legal department LPM initiatives or translate into real-life best practices.

Why is this? Why do so many lawyer groups and teams remain, as one wag put it, "a bunch of egos connected by central heat?" If "emotional intelligence" — that ability to relate effectively to diverse personal styles in diverse situations — is now widely recognized as a core leadership skill in the private and not-for-profit sectors, why do so many lawyers still want to do everything their own way?

The answer lies largely in lawyer temperament and personality. Over three decades, I have conducted standardized personality assessments of hundreds of people who chose the law as their career. A large percentage of lawyers come out looking remarkably similar to each other — and remarkably different from the general population.

Lawyers rank near the 90th percentile in autonomy, far higher than the

overall population. Skepticism? Above the 90th percentile. In urgency, lawyers rank at about the 75th percentile, 25 percentage points above the general norm. In other words, lawyers tend to push for immediate gratification and lose interest if rewards and benefits take a long time to ripen.

On the other hand, lawyers are less resilient than the general population (30th percentile), which tends to make them self-protective and conflict-averse. And most telling, lawyers rank in about the 12th percentile for sociability, a category in which the general population ranks at the 70th percentile. And there you have it: lawyers are not natural joiners.

“

Lawyers rank near the 90th percentile in autonomy, far higher than the overall population. Skepticism? Above the 90th percentile. In urgency, lawyers rank at the 75th percentile, 25 points above the norm.

### **UNDERSTANDING LAWYERS’ “MASTERY PROFILE”**

A very high percentage of lawyers, both male and female, display what I call a “mastery profile.” That is, they define their self-image very strongly in terms of mastering new challenges and racking up an impressive list of accomplishments. Their motivational motto is, in effect, “I am defined by what I do.” Mastery types therefore enjoy the role of free-range subject-matter expert, where their competency commands others’ respect, if not their affection or trust.

This motivational profile tends to make lawyers “challenge junkies,” whose careers are shaped by a continuous pursuit of individual success experiences. They need a constant supply of personal wins to maintain their sense of self-worth, because in their minds, a single failure can psychologically taint a consistent prior record of success.

### **THESE CATS CAN BE HERDED**

It’s hardly surprising, then, that many lawyers don’t welcome the call to collaborate. Still, they are capable of working effectively on teams, provided the other players have complementary technical competencies and are skilled enough to merit respect. Lawyers do not see teams as affinity groups, where membership and acceptance are their own rewards, or as social organisms. They tend to regard teams as performance-producing machines.

In this sense, lawyers’ natural drive for the objectively manageable

outcomes may actually prove to be the key to successful LPM initiatives — which are, after all, designed to produce consistent methods for setting standards, tracking progress and measuring results.

Getting LPM to “stick,” however, will require that during their training, lawyers are insulated from the fear of failure and the humiliation of being revealed as incompetent or ignorant. This is exactly why LPM training programs must proceed incrementally, with ample time to master new terminology, try new techniques and experience the practical productivity and client relations benefits of LPM.

Good training, however, is not all that’s required for successful team participation and improved productivity. All the players have to trust all their colleagues — and with lawyers, that’s asking a lot.

With legal project teams, aligning incentives for all stakeholders requires the leader to inventory and understand the hot-buttons and turn-offs of each team member.



### **OVERCOMING RESISTANCE TO COLLABORATION**

People can and will collaborate only if three conditions are met:

1. they believe it is safe to collaborate;
2. they are adequately motivated by the potential rewards of collaborating; and
3. they understand what to do in order to collaborate effectively.

Effectively taught and implemented, LPM addresses the last condition admirably: it delivers the goods at the rational level. So that leaves us to examine the subjective barriers to collaboration.

Let’s look at the first two conditions: why doesn’t everyone commit constantly to ardent, unhesitating collaboration? Easy: we’re afraid it might not be safe. A basic tenet of human nature is to constantly weigh the likely rewards and risks of any action. If the downside of any choice clearly outweighs the benefits, we choose not to act.

However, things get trickier in situations, such as the advent of LPM, where the players can’t predict the consequences of their actions. Whenever we can’t accurately assess risks and rewards, we tend to withhold our trust and decline to exercise initiative. Among conflict-averse lawyers, this lack of trust may not take the form of open resistance, which makes it difficult for the

project leader to understand why everyone is nodding their heads vigorously while the project succumbs to “friction losses” and loses momentum.

Addressing the second condition, having motivational drivers that keep all the players engaged, is challenging because we all have unique personal “motivational maps”: different values, drivers, aspirations and goals that resonate particularly powerfully for us as individuals. With legal project teams, aligning incentives for all stakeholders therefore requires the leader to inventory and understand the hot-buttons and turn-offs of each team member — a time-consuming but absolutely essential project step.

Fortunately, most lawyers do tend to respond positively if several basic motivational hungers are fed: 1. their typical need for control; 2. their need for respect for their abilities; 3. their need for individual achievement as well as team success; and 4. their craving for approval.

### **HEAVY ON THE CARROTS, LIGHT ON THE STICKS**

In a practice group or client team context, how can a project leader address this reluctance to trust? The classic recipe is one part open and frequent communication, one part clear performance standards (firmly applied), two parts fair and frequent feedback, and most importantly, three parts making sure all team members feel that their individual interests are perceived and respected. With large teams, taking everyone’s motivational pulse is a large undertaking, and this explains why well-wrought communications plans require frequent mood checks as well as process checks.

It’s important to understand that collaboration is not really a unified “mass” activity. It’s actually an aggregation of unique individual contributions to a common cause. Similarly, trust is not really a group phenomenon: it is a continuous work in progress, a relationship-building exercise in which the skilled leader must reinforce personal bonds lawyer-by-lawyer until individual commitments finally coalesce into a climate of collective trust.

Such collective trust is hard to orchestrate, particularly if the players are on different floors, in different cities, in different countries, or are part of different cultures. Without trust, however, true collaboration is impossible; best the leader can hope for is compliance. Trust cannot be generated by forced acquiescence or threats of punishment. Compliance-based teams

“

Trust is a continuous work in progress, a relationship-building exercise in which the skilled leader must reinforce personal bonds lawyer-by-lawyer.

function — if at all — only as long as a power figure keeps swinging the stick. This certainly is not the recipe for the successful long-term adoption of the sweeping attitude and behavior changes that LPM requires.

### **LPM AND THE STAGES OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT**

Powerful and proactive top-level sponsorship is required to launch any large-scale change management project. But the real collaborative action happens after the kickoff. Team-building gurus tell us that all new project teams progress through four inevitable stages of development:

1. *Forming*, where relationships are cordial and superficial, but nothing very serious gets done;
2. *Storming*, where the alignments of power, authority and control get hammered out, often noisily;
3. *Norming*, where acceptable attitudes and processes — both formal and informal — are tried, tested, and accepted or discarded; and
4. *Performing*, in which roles, boundaries, standards and outcomes become institutionalized and widely accepted.

It would be grand if LPM implementation could jump directly to Norming and Performing, but the first two steps simply cannot be ignored or skipped. LPM describes the procedural norms of good project performance, but it does not purport to prescribe personal attitudes or motivation shaped during Forming and Storming.

Moreover, in legal project management situations, Norming often must extend beyond just accommodating new methods and procedures. It also must include processes for transitioning out of the past, for mourning “the old days” while orienting team lawyers to current realities, opening up communication that fear or resistance has shut down.

This, of course, is hard sledding if some team members — notably, an entrenched power elite — believe they fared better under past practices. What incentive do they have to dilute or transfer their power or economic advantage? Put differently, broad-scale LPM initiatives are likely to foster intergenerational tension between the traditional fiefdom princes and the more collaborative (and certainly more technologically proficient) successor generations. LPM program planners therefore must understand and accommodate these differences in perceived self-interest among different stakeholders.

## THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE

After the top-level leadership power structure has issued the challenge for everyone to collaborate better, the best LPM implementers may turn out be young turks with plenty of skin in the game — respected up-and-coming lawyers perfectly capable of building their own spheres of influence, but who choose instead to subordinate their own self-interest to the productivity of the team and the success of the organization.

In the long run, leveraging the buy-in from high-potential lawyers and organizational opinion leaders among each stakeholder cohort will be the best way to develop buy-in and collaboration from the rank and file at all levels.



Edge International Partner **Doug Richardson** advises law firms and legal departments on leadership development, organizational and interpersonal communications, team effectiveness and legal project management. A Certified Master Coach, Doug formerly was a large-firm litigator, federal prosecutor, and Dow Jones columnist for over 20 years. Contact him at [richardson@edge-international.com](mailto:richardson@edge-international.com).