

PETER SCOTT CONSULTING

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“If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change”

(Giuseppe di Lampedusa, the Leopard 1958)

‘How can we get our people to change?’ is the question being ever more frequently asked by law firm leaders as the pace of change becomes faster. Law firms are now facing challenges of a nature which they have never encountered before and which if not addressed quickly and effectively are likely to be ultimately destructive.

I am pleased to see that many of those who now lead their firms are responding to these challenges by addressing some of the most fundamental strategic issues relating to their businesses including:

- The changing expectations of clients;
- The attitudes of their people in relation to how they adapt to a changed legal landscape; and
- The need for law firms to be run as profitable businesses, with all that entails in terms of managing performance of people.

To deal with these issues which are usually at the heart of the need to change, law firms must be agile and focus strongly on change management, have quick response times to threats and strategic opportunities, have streamlined decision-making processes and have people who are open minded, flexible and prepared to learn new skills and ways of operating.

Faced with such challenges, how should a managing partner approach matters? Here are a few thoughts to begin with.

Make the strong case for change

Given that law firms are collections of individuals and many are still organised as partnerships (many are also still culturally ‘partnerships’ even if structured as LLPs or limited companies), then **taking your people with you** is a fundamental requirement. The people in the business will need to be persuaded that change is necessary and so building a consensus within a firm as to the need to make changes is a necessary first step.

Partners in law firms are in my experience on the whole fairly sensible people and can distinguish between strong logical arguments which make good sense to them, from proposals which are weak

or flawed. If they are presented with sound and well-thought through common sense arguments for a particular course of action then many partners are likely to be supportive.

Managing partners should however not assume that their partners have as much knowledge about the business and the threats and opportunities which may exist. There is often a vital first step to take, namely to '*educate*' partners as to the reasons which make particular courses of action necessary. If they can have their eyes opened to the facts then they may be more likely to accept changes.

Unfortunately, some partners do not always think logically when proposals are made which are likely to affect them because the very idea of changes to how they work or their positions within a firm are likely to be regarded as threats and they will raise the barriers. Emotions such as fear are likely to drive their thinking and so a managing partner will need to approach the process of persuading people to change with these issues in mind and to adopt a tone and a style of persuasion to assuage if possible such emotions.

As always it is about ***communication, communication and more communication!***

Enlist external help if necessary

Sometimes it may be useful to enlist the help of trusted third parties to assist with persuading, because some partners will always believe that their managing partner has an 'agenda'.

As a managing partner I learned this lesson many years ago when my then firm (*Jaques & Lewis*) was in the process of becoming a part of *Eversheds*. The proposal was that we would drop our *Jaques & Lewis* name shortly after joining but a number of partners were insisting on retaining the name for five years, which could have derailed the whole process. My solution was to enlist the help of our 'PR' advisor who addressed the partners at a meeting and told them that the 'goodwill' of the firm resided in each of them, not in the name *Jaques & Lewis* and that they should do the 'courageous and gutsy thing' and agree to drop the name immediately in favour of the name *Eversheds*! They agreed without further argument. An object lesson for anyone trying to conclude merger negotiations!

Use client feedback to support your case

The use of client feedback can be used as a powerful tool to win hearts and minds and to secure consensus. Well tried and tested techniques such as face to face client perception surveys will usually reveal how a firm will need to change in terms of what future expertise clients will require, how clients view service delivery and the attitudes of a firm's people. If a firm has gone to the trouble of finding out how it is currently performing (or not) and how clients want it to perform in the future, then it should take to heart that feedback, because its future is likely to depend upon it.

Partners sometimes however will go into 'denial' when presented with negative client feedback, as shown by the following reactions of a group of partners when I delivered some strong client messages to them about the firm –

One half of the partners said that the clients' statements could not possibly refer to their firm!

The other half acknowledged that possibly the statements did refer to their firm but that the clients were lying!

Allow partners to 'own' the changes

One of the lessons learned by many law firm leaders who have successfully changed their firms for the better, has been to let their partners believe that ideas for change have come from the partners themselves rather than being imposed on them. Using carefully facilitated sessions with groups of partners to 'brainstorm' issues will develop ideas which the partners will feel they 'own', and achieving consensus in this way is likely to be that much easier.

Harness the power of 'the team'

Attempting to manage a change process alone can be difficult (and even dangerous) for a managing partner. Before starting out, the law firm leader should assemble a strong group of supportive partners to help drive forward the process.

Harnessing the power of the team can be a vital component in the change process if the chance of success is to be maximised. The team will need to be chosen carefully.

Ideally a managing partner should gather together the best thinkers, whose intellects, common sense and commitment are respected throughout a firm. Choosing from a broad base throughout a firm can also be politically sensible so that each part of a firm can feel its views are represented.

Teams put together for strategic purposes or for gaining consensus for change need not be (and often should not be) wholly internally resourced. Those within a firm who are attempting to drive the process should ask themselves whether they have all the skills to successfully carry out the tasks. If not, it may be advisable as mentioned above to bring in external advisors who do have the appropriate skills and knowledge to help ensure success. Sometimes only an external person will be able to identify the real problems which need resolving in a firm.

Managing change in a law firm can be a difficult and complex matter and, like a continuing journey, is never over. There is no single or ready-made solution, but always being aware of the need to win 'hearts and minds' is usually a good approach to adopt.