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TO BRING ABOUT CHANGE TAKE THE TRAIN

There's an old adage, "The only constant is change." This has certainly been true in the practice of law as well as in life. And the evolution of the "New Normal" will result in further change in the legal profession. However, rather than attempting to predict what these changes will be, we address here the broader issue: If change is constant and inevitable, how do you bring it about?

Effecting change, particularly in a professional firm, can be agonizingly slow and painful, beset by such powerful emotions as fear and anger. Therefore, the first thing to remember is this: Resistance to change is natural and inevitable. When forced to change, people push back, no matter how minor the change is or how beneficial it may be. Firm leadership must recognize this fact and address every reaction to change, no matter how trivial or irrational it may be.

The way to do this is to get people talking. Let them vent. Once they've finished voicing their objections, or at least their initial ones, a strategy that often works is to put some of the loudest dissenters in charge of making change happen – staff as well as partners.

It is also important to recognize that just because people say they want something doesn't mean they'll like it when they get it. Even subtle, unspoken resistance can be a problem. Some people will agree with everything you want to do – and then continue doing what they've always done. But humans are amazingly adaptable if you make it desirable for them to change. Give recognition and praise. Even revise the compensation system. One thing you can definitely count on is whatever gets rewarded will get done.

Even with these approaches, however, firm leaders will still meet some resistance. When that happens, the only thing you can do is just keep plugging away until there are no more excuses as to why something won't work. Sometimes the answer is simple. As Samuel Johnson once said: "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

Another point to recognize is that, even after they've accepted the need for change, not everyone in a firm can adapt at the same pace. Remember the tortoise and the hare. Patience – and persistence – are required. Leadership must stay with the plan until the goals have been met. One authority calls this "creating a sense of inevitability" and uses this metaphor. A lot of people will stand in front of a train that isn't moving and trust or assume that it won't start rolling toward them. On the other hand, few people will jump in front of a train that is already barreling along at 80 or 100 miles an hour.

So the real secret to effecting change is to get the train rolling.

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