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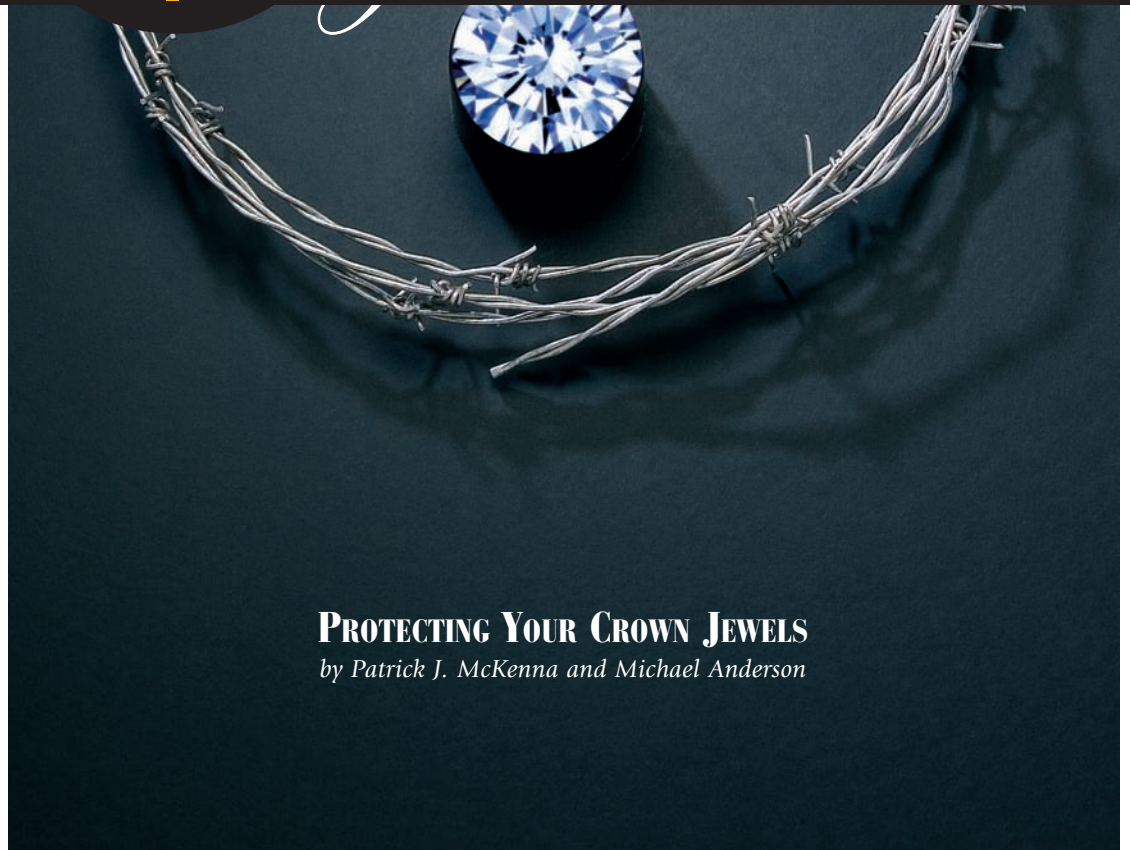
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# The Seven Immutable Laws of Change Management

A CATALYST FOR MANAGING PARTNERS WHO ASPIRE TO MOVE THEIR FIRMS FORWARD

by Gerry Riskin, **EDGE INTERNATIONAL**

**M**anaging Partners: Why is it that your intelligent (no, make that “super intelligent”) lawyers seem to react to your change initiatives like you were asking them to drink a tankard of poison, even when they know full well that the brilliant changes you are proposing would be beneficial to them individually and collectively? When we get Managing Partners from various firms together, many of them want to commiserate with each other about the impossible task they have in managing the unmanageable – I suppose my Edge International co-founder, Patrick McKenna, and I did not cure that perception when we named one of our books *Herding Cats*. Some Managing Partners with whom I have had the pleasure of working are exceptions to that rule and what follows is what I think I have learned from them over these many years.

Here are the seven immutable laws of creating change in your firm. I guarantee that if you respect these rules, you will get the cooperation you need to effect the changes that will catapult your firm forward.

## **1 AS MANAGING PARTNER, PROPOSE IMPERFECT CHANGE INITIATIVES**

**Y**ES, I said IMPERFECT and when you saw that word a feeling of anxiety overcame you and you were tempted to react as a lawyer and not as a change-agent for your firm. Let me be clear. As a lawyer, your job is to do “the right things, perfectly.” That calls for unflawed effectiveness and efficiency. You probably hope your surgeon, if you ever need one, practices to the same standard. But face reality — as the manager of your firm, you do not have the luxury of doing only “the right things” because nobody, including you, knows what the “the right things” are except in hindsight — and hindsight is too late.

As a result, most good firms are paralyzed by the tedious, never-ending and totally ineffectual process of divining the perfect strategy accompanied by the perfect tactics. These firms are ships tied so firmly to the pier that no matter how well steered, they go absolutely nowhere. In fact, their biggest claim to fame is that they hit no icebergs — few ships do from the pier. Such firms may do “industry-average” well, but they are not going to consistently break out of the pack. Temporary successes come from individual initiatives that the firm is likely unaware of and therefore does not impede with excessive policies and standardization.

In strategy, you must make the best decisions you can with what you know and what you can speculate about. I am not against a little market research – in fact, I advocate it - but I am against the notion that you can know enough to comfortably make strategic decisions with the confidence that you are most certainly right.

Most good, collegial firms make the mistake of trying to convince the whole firm (at least the partners) that a decision is “right” before proceeding. There is no collection of competent lawyers exceeding one in number that can or will agree to any single course of action mainly because their training is not to find the wisdom and potential in an idea but, rather, to reveal the concealed risks within it. No idea will ever be good enough, so looking for unanimous approval is antithetical to creating change.

You as Managing Partner and your close team (executive committee, board if necessary) must make a decision. You must choose what you think your best option is from among the available alternatives.

The punch line here is “abandon perfection in favor of action.” Force the decision-making process within a reasonable time frame and then get moving. Release your ship from the pier. This will give you immediate competitive advantage. It will also contribute to the esprit de corps of your firm and that will literally add fuel to your change initiative. If you are going in the wrong direction, you can alter your course.

Please note that this is your initiative as Managing Partner — not your approval of the initiative of a support professional (like the marketing director in your firm). You can work together with such support professional side by side, you can even give them most of the credit if the initiative is successful but it must be your initiative, at least in part, or you have no hope of succeeding.

## 2 CREATE A VIVID PICTURE (VISION) OF WHERE THIS INITIATIVE LEADS

It is tempting to be vague because then you are not committing to anything. Not committing avoids scrutiny and criticism. But without certainty, your troops cannot get excited about your change initiative.

**Y**ou do not have the luxury of doing only “the right things” because nobody, including you, knows what the “the right things” are except in hindsight.

Be specific: “If we dominate the provision of X legal services to the Y industry, we will not only increase our revenues in both the A and B practice groups by at least 25% in the next two years, but we can also expect increases in the C and D practice groups of at least 10% attributable to cross-selling initiatives from the A and B practice groups.” Obviously the particulars are customized to the situation, but the point here is to be specific. While quantifiable measures are essential to your firm’s success, qualitative ones may be equally motivating to your people. For example, many of your people will work hard for the prize of having more work of a preferred nature or to do more work for preferred clients.

You will rarely be exactly right when it comes to strategy and tactics — and that is OK. You will almost always do better or worse than your forecast. Get comfortable with being wrong because that is what management is all about. If you meet your objectives all the time, you are way too conservative. You will learn from your performance and continually correct and fine-tune. This is not the practice of law — it is the management of the business. In a real estate transaction, we expect to get good title for the purchaser on closing. This is not a guess or a hope or speculation. It is precise and we had better get it right — it’s what we’re being paid for. But a percentage increase in revenues from a particular kind of work is a crap shoot. No matter how smart you are, there are some variables beyond your control and many that are beyond your capacity to predict accurately. Worse, even if serendipitously your strategy is perfect, your tactics may be quite imperfect, at least initially. Business winners constantly monitor outcomes and frequently change or at least fine-tune tactics in an effort to continuously improve results.

The punch line here is to create a vivid quantitative and qualitative description of a desirable outcome that everyone in your organization can relate to, knowing and accepting that it is not perfect.

## 3 PAINT “THE FIRST STEP” IN VIVID COLORS

“Take the first step, and your mind will mobilize all its forces to your aid. But the first essential is that you begin. Once the battle is started, all that is within and without you will

come to your assistance." Robert Collier (1885-1950)

As leader, you are going to have to foster the taking of the first step by every individual whose participation is essential to your change initiative. This means that the first step must be crystal clear and painted by you in vivid colors so that no individual hesitates because of a lack of clarity. The simplest way to do this is to facilitate a discussion that results in "to do" lists that include actual initial steps and time lines, and if necessary, methodologies. For example, the first step might be compiling a list of prospective clients in a particular industry that would have need of a particular service. The action may involve delegating internally (or even outside the firm) the task of creating the initial list, and might include identifying precisely the parameters within the list, like numbers of employees, locations, etc.

The punch line is to have a first step that is clear enough that you can ask if a specific thing has been done. For example, "Is the initial list ready?" is only a sensible question if it is clear that the first step was to create such a list and precisely what that list would be comprised of.

#### **4 CREATE CULT-LIKE INTERNAL PROMOTIONAL COMMUNICATIONS**

This is where your capable support professionals can shine. They can help you create imaginative ways to keep the initiative in front of your people. The internal trainer in a major firm showed me high gloss promotional announcements that were sent internally to remind audiences about various internal workshops. I asked about the "commercial nature" of the alerts and he responded that, "I have to break through the noise" to get their attention. He's right, of course. It's like paying attention to your spouse. If you take your

spouse for granted, you may not end up alone but you will not reap the rewards that would have been yours had you been more attentive.

Some firms use Monday Morning Memos to catalogue progress on the action checklist, person by person. Others celebrate to congratulate for achievements (complete with cake and silly hats — perhaps tee-shirts adorned by appropriate slogans).

#### **5 ASK FOR COMMITMENT – NOT AGREEMENT**

One of my most successful friends (and clients from my law practice days) has a One Sentence Journal and he posted the following wisdom one day:

"**Commitment and Doubt**": Commitment does not require the absence of doubt; often commitment means acting despite your doubt. (From Larry Anderson's *One Sentence Journal June 17 entry*.) (Larry's success is not only financial — it transcends to a long-term happy marriage and philanthropy.)

Think about it. You do not need your entire firm to agree with you and should not even ask for that. What you must demand, and accept nothing less than, is that your people commit to help you achieve your objectives even if they have doubts. At worst, someone who is not pivotal to the initiative may remain neutral and that means not sabotaging the effort in any way. But for that exception, those who offer passive or active interference must be confronted. If you don't have the support to pull that off, step aside. You are allowed to lobby for that support but it must be forthcoming or else your resignation should be tendered. This is not hypothetical — this is how the well-managed firms are run. Choose your initiatives carefully because you must suc-

ceed in attempting them. They don't all have to work but you have to be allowed to try them and give them the firm's best efforts. If not, call the election.

#### **6 TELL THE WORLD**

Do you know why betrothed people say their vows in front of friends and family — to cement their commitment. It is the same reason a banker friend told me the bank does television commercials: "Not just for our customers but for our own staff so that they can see the service promise we make to our customers and as a result they are more likely to live up to that promise."

Tell the world what you are shooting for, whatever that may be — in fact, you can say it before it is so: "Striving to be the firm of choice for the wholesale industry." I am not advocating misleading or untrue advertising but I am saying it's OK to declare what you are striving for. Your current and prospective clients will hold you accountable, but that's OK because it helps define the standard for your people and gives clarity to their target and therefore their everyday performance.

#### **7 TURN A SPOTLIGHT ON YOUR INITIATIVE AND LEAVE IT ON**

Many firms have fabulous meetings, sometimes in retreat venues where everyone participates in the creation of the master plan that will make the firm the "be all and end all." All participants leave the process feeling a sense of pride and excitement that is palpable. It is only after the passage of a few months and the absence of any visible accomplishments that the disillusionment sets in. The cynics and skeptics have a field day — they might as well all buy red tee-shirts with yellow words emblazoned across their



chests, "I told you so." Well, Managing Partner, you must not allow this outcome. It is lethal and you cannot recover from it. Instead you need the lights that were on at the retreat to remain on. This is accomplished by not allowing the insects to crawl back under the rocks (out of sight, out of mind). Instead, you need to design processes that keep your people (not insects at all) in plain view. You can decide for yourself what might work best for you, but here are some of the techniques I have observed or recommended:

☉ **MONDAY MORNING MEMOS** (as referenced earlier) giving weekly status reports to show everyone's progress on the distinct steps (actions) that have been agreed upon. This creates healthy peer pressure and allows no one to hide.

☉ **MBWA (MANAGING BY WALKING AROUND)** coined by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman in their business classic *In Search of Excellence* — this means frequently dropping in, unannounced, to ask the right questions and to offer help — "How is that list coming... I see you are struggling to get this done in light of your particularly heavy case load at the moment... let's explore some options... to whom could you delegate some aspects of this... I need you to make progress because others know you have an exceptionally heavy work load and if they see

**you getting your tasks done you will have effectively removed their excuses — I need you to do that... I will do anything to help, short of doing your task for you..."**

**M**ost good firms are paralyzed by the tedious, never-ending and totally ineffectual process of divining the perfect strategy accompanied by the perfect tactics.

☉ **Convene follow-up meetings that exchange "learnings" that individuals have gleaned from their respective tasks; for example, how they worked with difficult people internally or how they overcame client resistance. This should not be a meeting where everyone reports progress — progress meetings become meaningless exercises in seeing who can offer the most creative excuses for failing to deliver. This is a peer level training meeting where the objective is to become ever more effective at accomplishing quality non-billable tasks.**

**CONCLUSION:** Fostering change in a law firm seems impossible because most Managing Partners treat the activities associated with such change as if they were component pieces of a legal transaction. Partners are so reliable when it comes to their substantive legal work that it seems unthinkable that they could not complete mundane simple tasks associated with management initiatives. Well, the real world is that the non-billable activities are

not even on the same psychological map as the billable ones. Billable work means everything to a lawyer, from income to professional satisfaction to garnering the respect of peers (internally and externally) to being respected in social circles. Non-billable work, no matter how important, and regardless of the value to our futures, will always take second place to billable work unless you, Managing Partner, manage for a different outcome. The score in many firms is billable work "100" and quality non-billable work "0." By following these seven immutable laws of managing change, you will change the latter score from

zero and even if you only change the score to "99 to 1," you and your firm will be the beneficiaries of the infinite improvement from "0" to "1." Furthermore, in the legal profession, those who make continuous slight progress win the race, because most competitors are still tied to that pier.

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