

Blog/Podcast: Four Truths About Creating Law Firm Culture Change

by Sharon Berman

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Change is hard—and perhaps it’s hardest at law firms, where lawyers have historically been taught the billable hour reigns as king. Unfortunately, this has created a focus on personal production and competition with peers for business, rather than one of collaboration and entrepreneurialism.



[David Freeman](#), a law firm advisor and founder of [Law Firm CultureShift](#), has helped nearly 200 law firms identify the obstacles that prevented them from moving forward to achieve particular goals. He was a recent guest on the [Law Firm Marketing Catalyst podcast](#), where he shared four coaching techniques he uses with clients to create long-lasting change.

1. **Go Beyond Your Firm Retreat**

Business coaching has long been done using a straightforward model: come in, run a training, leave. Yet a single retreat or coaching session won’t necessarily move the needle the way a firm wants. Firms bring in consultants because they want to enhance things like client development, client service and cross-selling, but these are significant cultural shifts that require more than an afternoon of brainstorming. A culture shift requires firm-wide support and synchronization of multiple efforts over a long period of time.

The silo mentality that permeates many law firms can also prevent behavior change. Just because a managing partner talks about a goal a few times or puts on a presentation at a retreat, it doesn’t mean that notoriously individualistic lawyers are going to change their habits. Lawyers tend to be resistant to change, even more so than other professionals, so it takes consistent work behind the curtain to shift firm culture in a new direction.

Not everyone will be open to change at first, either. It needs to be led by the firm’s “pilots”: the innovators and early adopters who are motivated to try new things. They create the social proof necessary to convince the skeptics to get on board. From there, it creates a cascade of action that can transform the firm.

2. Don't Try to Change Overnight

It's impossible to change firm culture in one fell swoop. There are different stages of change, which happen over the course of months or even years. The first stage is the diagnostic shift, an evaluation process when firms dip their toe in the water and get a snapshot of what they need to do. David uses a tool called Culture X-Ray, where he surveys lawyers anonymously on 41 different areas of the firm. The resulting report gives firm leaders an egalitarian, honest look at how the firm is doing. Then, they drill down and choose three to five areas to focus on in order to move forward.

The tactical shift is the next level up, when the firm has identified the sector they want to move the needle in. It could be enhancing a specific practice group, improving client service or creating more of a cross-selling culture (which David likes to reframe as cross-serving). Whatever focus the firm has chosen, the next step is to execute specific strategies to initiate the improvements.

Finally, the holistic shift is when the entire firm is engaged and everyone works together in a synchronized, intelligently timed manner. Collaboration is crucial here because lawyers need to buy into the solution if there's going to be any sort of long-term change. They need to get their hands dirty and understand the whys behind the shift. Training, coaching and tracking systems need to be in place behind the scenes to drive the ongoing implementation.

3. Remove the "Culture Killers"

There are culture killers that live inside every law firm: they're the obstacles that prevent performance improvement, and they need to be obliterated for any change to happen. One common obstacle is the silo mentality, which inhibits collaboration. It could be general inertia, a result of job dissatisfaction or bad time management. And one of the most difficult challenges for lawyers is perfectionism and the fear of failure, which can stop them from ever getting started.

Deeper problems include a misaligned compensation system, which can play out in two ways. First, the compensation system may not be designed to motivate desired behavior. More common is what David calls "compensation perception disorder," when the system *does* reward behavior, but lawyers don't truly believe it.

Lack of trust is also a huge impediment, often created by poor communication between lawyers and staff. In one example, David once coached a lawyer who refused to cross-sell. When they had a deeper conversation about it, David realized this lawyer didn't trust his partners enough to share his business. Identifying this lack of trust was the first step to improving partner relationships at the firm and moving toward a culture of cross-selling.

4. **Take Ownership of the Change Process**

David sees himself as a catalyst rather than an enabler. He doesn't want his clients to ask him for guidance over and over again. Instead, his goal is to turn skills over to practice group leaders and let them drive ongoing behavior change. Before wrapping up a firm retreat, David always works with the marketing department and a few key lawyers to coach them on how to keep the momentum going. No matter how in-depth a retreat is, it means nothing if little is done afterwards.

Although creating change is difficult, David has seen plenty of success stories when a firm takes ownership. One firm he worked with wanted to embrace a service mentality, so he gave client service training to every partner, and the improvements quickly cascaded from there. At another firm with similar goals, David was inspired by the receptionist, who had the title "Director of First Impressions." He ran with that idea, weaving it through the entire firm and teaching partners, associates and staff that they make impressions in everything they do.