

# The Law Gazette

---

## Making change happen

by **Chris Roebuck**

Created 11/06/2010 - 09:08



Legal firms face probably their toughest challenges for years in the current economic environment. Implementing change successfully to meet client needs is critical, but there is increasing evidence that purely rational decision-making is insufficient.

No longer can change initiatives take years to implement, lack clarity and focus, and never quite deliver the predicted benefits. They are a risk to an organisation – but a risk that must be borne to move forward and best deliver client care.

The longer change initiatives take, the greater the risk of failure, wasted resources and diversion of effort from key deliverables. Managing partners or equivalent must take the lead and implementation must be rapid, focused and deliver measurable benefit.

Boston Consulting Group's DICE system, validated in more than 1,000 major change initiatives, identified four key factors: review frequency (every six to eight weeks for simple initiatives and two weeks for complex change); project team capability (that is, the team must be the best people for the task); management and staff commitment; and additional effort support (those delivering change must have time to do so as well as carry out their 'day' job).

These factors, used at review points, give a good measure of likely success and potential risks. In the *Harvard Business Review* of January-February 2010, Robert Miles looked at why change fails. Failure factors are: avoidance of reality, lack of management commitment, too many initiatives, disengaged staff, loss of inertia, and 'doing' change or day-to-day business (but not both). These failure factors mirror the BCG success factors.

Change is not just a rational exercise. Recent Corporate Leadership Council research on building engagement and achieving high performance suggests that up to 47% of staff commitment is emotional – much higher than many assume. So there has to be emotional as well rational buy-in, which is something often forgotten. Neither is sufficient to ensure success alone.

From my own experience of leading change in two global organisations, there are basic principles to make change successful:

- High-profile launch and keep the momentum up – launch 'with a bang' and have everyone engaged and ready to implement change within three to four months.
- Confront reality – management and staff must genuinely accept the need for change and what needs to be done.
- Emotional and rational case for change – both are needed.
- Commitment for change from everyone.
- The best leaders – not the people who have time on their hands.

- Keep it simple and focused – have one clear overarching initiative that everyone can focus on and which can be communicated simply.
- Frequent progress reviews – check you are making real progress and identifying risk every few weeks.
- Combine change with business as usual – help staff to be able to do the ‘day’ job and make change happen at the same time.

Partners are key in any strategic change. They must make the case, build engagement, use the best people and drive change personally through line managers supported by HR. Passing responsibility for leading change to HR will cause it to be quickly viewed as just another HR initiative and lose credibility.

Multiple, ineffective, confusing and distracting change initiatives are viewed by many as a depressing fact of life that saps their enthusiasm and commitment. Change should be a challenging and inspiring journey to a better place that is undertaken willingly. Build inspiration not desperation. Good luck.

*Chris Roebuck is visiting professor of transformational leadership at Cass Business School in London and has held senior HR roles in a number of major global organisations. For more information and case studies, see [www.chrisroebuck.net](http://www.chrisroebuck.net)*

Copyright 2010 Law Society All Rights Reserved



The Law Society

---