

Change Management for Legal Departments

By Stephanie Corey, UpLevel Ops CEO & Founder

Overview

With the vast changes in the legal landscape and the development of new legal tech programs, systems and processes in the last 5-7 years, in-house departments have had to embrace change like never before. With the amount of time and money spent on these new programs, processes and systems, maximizing adoption is critical to ensure the cultural shift will be lasting and will provide an ROI in terms of productivity, reduced costs, information accessibility for both in-house teams and clients, better client service, and so on. Although every company culture is different, there are several overarching factors that must occur to ensure implementation and adoption success for any new initiative (not just technology systems). We attempt to capture them here.

First, it helps to understand what change management is. Change management in legal departments is the conscious approach to shifting the team from its current state to a new one. The goal of the change management process is to get the team to embrace changes to their current environment rather than resist them. We often recognize the need for change and have a vision for the desired end-state, but transitioning the people, systems and methodologies can be very challenging. The change management process enables impactful communications between those leading the change and those affected by it. Those communications must be shaped by a deep understanding of the department's culture. This is less about focusing on any one particular change and more about understanding that constant change is normal and part of everyday life. It is about having a mindset that such change is good and needs to be embraced as an opportunity versus something to be resisted.

Change can be daunting, particularly in the legal profession, where lawyers may be resistant to change and innovation. Lawyers come from a culture of following tradition and valuing precedents, and are trained to view everything with a challenging and skeptical eye. This often makes change very difficult for them, no matter how essential it is for the department. In today's environment, however, change is essential because sticking with the status quo means being left in the dust as the rest of the world evolves. For almost every best-in-class company, the key to success and growth is innovation which, itself, is defined as change. The best legal departments are ones that embrace change as a key component of their culture and expect changes to occur on a daily basis. As with anything else, the more often they do it, the better they become at it.



“The goal of the change management process is to get the team to embrace changes to their current environment rather than resist them.”

Tone from the Top

The tone from the top not only has to communicate that change should be expected at all times, but it also determines how successful any specific project or initiative will be. Absolute clarity of the project vision, roles and responsibilities and end goals demonstrates conviction and helps align the law department around the common cause.

To make change a worthwhile undertaking, the GC and his/her deputies should communicate the project goals to the entire department, stay abreast of milestones and publicly celebrate wins along the way. The GC helps tremendously by rallying the troops and communicating value to the end-users.

Early User Buy-in

Getting user buy-in and acceptance is a critical step in any successful change implementation. Those who are truly bought-in more likely will feel a sense of ownership and work towards the success of the program. The project lead should go as many layers down as needed to involve as many stakeholders as possible during the requirements gathering and process definition stages. It is best to get as much information as possible during these two stages, which is the opportunity to involve the majority of users and make them feel like they contributed. The team that makes decisions around the actual design of the program or system should be much smaller, including project “champions” from each group. But because the initial team input was robust, the outcome should be acceptable by most. And because every turn is an opportunity to communicate, once the design is complete, the project lead should communicate back to the team why certain aspects of design were included while others were not.

Understanding and Changing the Culture

The culture of every legal department is different and should be taken into account when determining how best to implement any new program or technology, who to make responsible for the program, how to communicate about it, what timeline to use, etc. Taking all of these things into account will help people be more receptive to the changes the program will bring. For example, company cultures that are very conservative may require a longer time line to implement new programs. More work will need to be done upfront to socialize concepts, more communications will need to be done, and someone very senior and well-respected will need to lead the project. Communications should include the goals and benefits of the change and the positive impacts it will have on the team, the department and the organization. Cultures that are more adept at change can often move faster with less socialization.

While changing the culture of a company or department takes time, there are several steps that will help shift the culture:

- **First**, the leader needs to define how they want the culture to be, document it in a vision or culture statement, and communicate it broadly and often
- **Next**, hire people who exemplify this new vision of the culture by creating a rigorous hiring process that includes behavioral questions to identify who will be a good fit
- **Third**, there should be an onboarding process to further reinforce the ideals of the new culture, perhaps even with a message from the top leadership
- **Fourth**, expectations of behavior and outcomes should be documented along with a system to track progress, which must be specific to the desired behaviors
- **Fifth**, those expectations should be communicated to employees, who must be clear on what is expected of them
- **Finally**, employees who embody the new culture should be rewarded financially and with public recognition

Appoint the Right Implementation Leader

Assigning roles and responsibilities for the internal team is critical for a successful program implementation. Someone who is enthusiastic about the project or technology and who will evangelize it with the rest of the team should be appointed to be the leader. We have found that completing a [RASCI chart](#) (Responsible, Accountable, Support, Consult, Informed) for new projects is very helpful in making accountability clear and driving efficiency.

The person leading the project should be senior and empowered to make decisions. If the program is large and broad-reaching across departments, an executive steering committee should be formed with cross-functional leaders to ensure that each group is properly represented.



Hiring temporary resources from the outside will be very helpful (and for complex programs, critical), and who you hire makes a big difference. For a new technology implementation, using the vendors from whom the software was purchased to consult on the implementation is almost always a mistake – even many vendors will confirm this, as it's not their area of expertise.

Plan Your Change Management Program

Studies over many decades repeatedly show that about 70% of change efforts end without success. To end up in the successful minority, it is important to tackle the change process with the same level of planning you've given to the actual program itself. Just as you would with a project plan, create a communications plan and timeline with assigned responsibilities and hold people accountable.

Have Realistic Goals

Have realistic goals about the change management program and don't try to boil the ocean. It is important to have a timeline with milestones along with way and dashboards to track progress so successes can be tracked, communicated and celebrated.

Hold People Accountable

Clear accountability during periods of change is critical, and deliverables and timelines must be tracked in writing and reported to either the GC or the Steering Committee on a regular basis. The legal team should be clear on who is responsible for leading the initiative, with clearly defined deliverable dates. As suggested above, a RASCI program can be very helpful here.

Tie Success to Performance Evaluations and Compensation

The goals of the project should be tied to responsible participants' performance evaluations, and ultimately, their compensation.

Over-Communicate

Which brings us to communications. We started with communications from the top, followed by communications from the project lead and each of the stakeholders. Next come communications from the project champions. Project champions should include a leader from each team who are early adopters, and who will communicate back to their respective teams on progress, changes, etc. They are called "champions" because they champion the project rollout to their teams while addressing any concerns their teams may have.

Communications should be consistent and frequent, and done in a variety of ways such as email, newsletters, conference calls and in-person meetings. Every meeting is an opportunity to hear from these champions about how the project is progressing.

Celebrate Wins and Learn from Failures

Publicly communicating wins will keep people feeling positive and help them continue to embrace the ongoing change. Although it is important to understand why mistakes happen so that they don't happen again, there's no need to spend too much time dwelling on them. Move on quickly and keep the project as upbeat as possible. Change is difficult enough without getting mired down in the difficulties.

Train, Train, Train

If designed correctly, the new processes will be easy to remember. Nonetheless, a variety of training methods are needed to ensure success. Training should be role and function specific. Train people only on the things they need to know so they don't become overwhelmed; demos for every single thing a technology system can do not only will not be helpful, but actually may be counterproductive. Just like with communications, training should be delivered in a variety of ways because people learn differently: in-person, conferences and videos. Users should have a help-line of some sort when they have questions.



Usage of a new technology system, new process or rules of engagement must be mandatory. If a few individuals get away with not being on board, others will follow suit. In fact, the embracing-change attitude should be taken into consideration when giving promotions, or other public recognition. Every action sends a message one way or the other. Many top companies include change acceptance as a performance factor on employee evaluation forms.

Use the Lawyer's Nature to Your Advantage

Although lawyers tend to be risk averse in nature, and thus may have an even harder time with change than many others, they also respond to competition. When possible, link goals or usage to friendly competitions within the department. For example, give awards and public recognition to the team who most quickly adopted the new process, and have them present to the rest of the department on ways in which the new process is better than the previous one. We are always surprised at how often this simple technique works.

Keep Communicating

After the implementation is complete, people will want to know that their valuable time was used wisely and the GC will want usage to remain high. The best way to do this is to continuously share successes and show the continued value derived from the project. For instance, after implementing an initiative such as RASCI, look for opportunities to publicly share how its use has helped attorneys better understand their roles and responsibilities, and how this has led to quicker and better results for the clients. For the rollout of a new employee development program, have people share how it has helped them in their current roles. This on-going communication will greatly help set the change in the department's DNA.

Other Considerations

Making Change a Priority

In many legal departments there is an overarching perception of "not having enough time" – not having enough time to do anything other than fight fires, not having enough time to engage in strategic thinking, etc. In other words, not having enough time to manage the business of running a legal department. In truth, the issue is not time, but priorities. As with anything, if the priority is high enough, then time will be available. Legal departments are no different than the businesses they support. Their workloads are no different than any high-performing business team. Part of living in a culture that embraces change is a top-down understanding that innovation, efficiency and productivity are absolute priorities. Without these changes, there will be no growth and the organization (including those on the team) will suffer the consequences.

Some Team Members Will Resist

Some people embrace change more readily than others. For those who refuse to change, working with them to understand their resistance may help them overcome it. They may have reasonable objections that can be worked through and addressed, or it may be a matter of helping them better understand specifically why the change is necessary and what it will mean for them. In the end, there is a harsh reality that if some team members simply refuse to get on board, this legal department may no longer be the place for them.

Conclusion

There is no silver bullet for shifting a company's culture to readily embrace change. This type of transformation takes time, and one should expect progress rather than perfection. The steps outlined in this document will help bring about the desired outcome, and most certainly accelerate progress.



Further Reading

1. *Managing Change Within the Legal Department – the In-house Perspective*, Slaw, March 26, 2014
2. *Changing an Organization's Culture Without Resistance or Blame*, Harvard Business Review, July 15, 2015
3. *10 Principles of Organizational Culture*, Strategy-Business, February 15, 2016
4. *15 Best Ways to Build a Company Culture that Thrives*, Forbes, January 2018
5. *Change Management Strategies for Your Legal Department*, Wolters Kluwer, January 2020
6. *How to Build a Company Culture: 9 Tips and Tricks for Managers*, Connect Team, October 2021
7. *Building Company Culture the Right Way*, Built In, February 2022
8. *Change is Hard. Here's How to Make It Less Painful*, Harvard Business Review, April 2022

Stephanie Corey is the CEO and Founder of UpLevel Ops and a widely respected veteran in Legal Operations with areas of expertise in Information Technology, System Implementations, Process Analysis and Improvements, Finance, Communications, and Administration.

Recently, Steph co-founded [LINK \(Legal Innovators Network\)](#), a legal operations organization exclusively for experienced, in-house professionals. She previously founded the legal operations trade organization CLOC (Corporate Legal Operations Consortium) and is a former executive member.

Stephanie formerly served as the Chief of Staff and Senior Director of Legal Operations at Flex, the second largest manufacturing company in the world. She has spent the better part of her career providing value-added services to Legal Departments, including building and deploying critical infrastructure to enable them to meet their business priorities.

Stephanie holds an MBA from Lehigh University and a BA in Economics from Wilkes University. She is based in Redwood City, California.

About UpLevel Ops

UpLevel Ops leads the evolution of the legal operations practice.

We are trusted advisors providing practical guidance, mentorship, and coaching that goes beyond consulting. With our custom, high-end service – born of extensive corporate in-house experience – we partner with clients to craft actionable solutions. We create a roadmap to success that empowers teams with best practices, tools, and workflows tailored to their unique business objectives.

For more information about UpLevel Ops, please email us at info@UpLevelOps.com or you can discover more at UpLevelOps.com.

