



How Change Happens

It is a common lament for sales and service professionals who reside in law firms: “We know what changes are needed, but how do we make them happen in an organization resistant to change?”

For those who attended the 2008 RainDance Conference of the Legal Sales and Service Organization, there was an answer. Jake Julia, the first Vice President of the Office of Change Management at Northwestern University, offered up the results of his in-depth analysis on how organizational change is made and the characteristics of effective change agents.

Julia told audience members that catalysts of organizational change “understand their current culture and cultural processes, they understand the complexity of their enterprise, and they know how to influence others by utilizing key networks within the organization.”

He added that effective change agents consistently utilize and demonstrate:

- Patience in achieving their objectives;
- A strong work ethic;
- Strategic thinking and staging of priorities;
- An ability to understand multiple perspectives in the organization; and
- An ability to build consensus and energize others.

As strategic thinkers, successful change leaders are good at developing plans for staged progress toward reaching an institutional goal. According to Julia, these leaders often adopt methodologies that have certain actions in common, including:

- Establishing early and critical partnerships with key leaders;
- Identifying the needs of the organization and its individuals;
- Identifying the issues and challenges related to any objective;
- Developing a step by step plan to achieve objectives;
- Communicating their vision and their plan; and
- Measuring and communicating their results.

The senior change executive also offered up some specific suggestions for those who are struggling to effect change in their own organizations. “Start with small, focused changes because they are often most successful and have the quickest impact,” he said. “You can sometimes make bigger changes as well if you start small with a pilot program and share the test results with others.”

For audience members who raised a number of questions about communications related to change, Julia suggested that “transparency and honesty in communication is extremely important, but so is the regular staging and timing of communications and updates so that people don’t get disconnected.” He also observed that effective change may require input from all organizational departments in order for people to take ownership of any objective rather than opposing it.

Julia also noted that change is not natural for organizations, adding that a state of inertia can keep the most successful organizations from tinkering with their successful patterns of the past. As some attendees observed, change is often best effected in times of crisis or failure when organizations are most receptive to a new paradigm or plan. They noted that the point of perspective around which many successful rallies for change have been organized is a true focus on what the customer demands.

For those who thirst for more metric information and study on just how change is made, Julia advised running a Google search on “the science of organizational change.”



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