

**Change Management**

# **Getting Your Team to Buy into a Big Change**

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**Summary.** When five elite London law firms attempted to introduce a new senior role — “counsel” — they thought that associates would jump at the chance to become a senior-level lawyer without the punishing hours and absolute devotion required of partners. Yet... [more](#)

If you ask associates in an elite law firm about how satisfied they are with their work, you’ll learn that they have big concerns, regardless of gender, about the long work hours that make it almost impossible to

care for a family, take a real vacation, or even get regular exercise. That message was almost overwhelming, when a *Legal Business* survey in 2006 revealed that only 37% of UK associates thought that partnership was an appealing career goal, while 75% expressed the need for an alternative that allowed better work/life balance.

Something interesting happened, however, when five elite London law firms tried to introduce an alternative career path that responded to those concerns, in an effort to retain their high-value employees. The role they developed, which they called “counsel,” would be held by highly skilled lawyers — like partners — but counsel would do less business development than partners do. The role would be high status and require hard work, of course, but it would involve fewer hours than partners are expected to work.

Yet the associates, who had been so vocal anonymously about the impossibly long hours, responded with disdain. We began researching the five firms in 2007, immediately after they introduced the counsel role. We interviewed 67 people — legal associates and counsel, partners and managing partners, and HR directors — at three time points over 11 years. In addition, we analyzed organizational documents and articles in the legal press. In our conversations with associates we were struck by how strenuously they denied the counsel role’s relevance for their own careers, but insisted that it would be good for other colleagues who had different priorities — especially female colleagues who wanted to start a family. But it was not for them. They were ambitious and wanted to be partners.

What we found when we dug into associates’ responses was that the respondents held multiple “logics” about their work and family lives, but experienced angst about expressing them freely. In their initial anonymous responses, they felt safe in expressing the “family logic,” which holds that family and other relationships outside of work are important to living a good life. Yet their public responses to the role of counsel were based in the “professional” and “corporate” logics that were typical (and legitimate) within the firms. While lawyers recognized that the counsel role would help the firm retain scarce and

talented staff, when it came to their own careers, they felt that the counsel role violated the “professional logic,” which holds that being a serious lawyer is about giving everything to the firm, sacrificing all for the chance to make partner.

Over the next 11 years, we observed what happened as HR professionals and managing partners tried to get to the root of associates’ and partners’ objections to the new role and how they responded to mitigate the concerns.

### **Objection #1: Irreconcilability**

It’s just not possible to be considered a serious professional at this law firm unless you give everything to the pursuit of partnership. You may *say* the role of counsel is legitimate, but it can’t be, because making time for family or other interests is irreconcilable with professional success.

### **Mitigating Response:**

HR directors *redirected* associates away from the traditional notion of professional status (which considers partner the be-all and end-all) to a more corporate sense of status (the counsel is a senior and respected position in our hierarchy). They defined and stressed the role’s rights and privileges: Counsel is allowed to attend partner meetings; counsel can use the partner lounge. They recast the role as an alternative but not the end of the road to partnership, e.g. “not everyone has to go through it to make partner ... but for some it may be a very good platform.” The HR directors also redirected associates away from interpreting the role as solely for women to care for families and toward seeing it as professional autonomy: “offering different choices for all men and women” and “giving options to talented people with different desires and preferences.”

### **Objection #2: Ambiguity**

Associates worried that the counsel role was not sufficiently distinct from either partner or senior associate roles, which implied that the compensation might not be fair. Partners worried that clients would

perceive counsel to be of lower quality than partners, suggesting quality standards had eroded. “We already promote the very top associates to partner. Wouldn’t these people be ‘less than’ in terms of quality?” Both of these objections were based in firms’ standard professional logic.

### **Mitigating Response:**

HR directors clarified the role and protected the reputation for quality by *reinforcing* the role with bureaucratic processes, including clear and stringent performance metrics, close vetting of applicants, and rejection of a fair number to prove that this was indeed a distinct and senior role in the professional hierarchy.

### **Objection #3: Contradiction**

Partners believed that the new role revealed a conflict between strategic goals. The counsel role supported the firms’ desire for growth. However, firms also wanted to retain their professional-service-firm character, which requires careful attention to the professional development of young associates to support their career progression in the up-or-out system of partnership. Partners worried that the counsel role would potentially “fossilize a group of people” who would then block development opportunities for star associates. It could limit ambitious senior associates’ exposure to challenging client problems, demotivating them and watering down the professional logic.

**Mitigating Response:** HR directors *reassured* partners, claiming that the desire for firm growth and the desire to maintain professional norms would not be in conflict because they would manage counsel numbers to ensure that they were a very small proportion (they kept the ratio vague) to ensure senior-associates’ professional development and firm growth.

Overall, the attempts to mitigate concerns were successful. At four of the five firms, the counsel role has taken hold and become increasingly assimilated into the professional hierarchy. The gender

mix became increasingly even over the period of our research. At the fifth firm, the HR partner amplified the gender message, implying that the role was a good career proposition for women seeking more time with family. In that firm, the counsel role was greeted with continued skepticism, and the role has not become legitimate in the head office, though it has been adopted in international offices to fill a status vacuum created by a lack of partnership opportunities.

What we take from the research is that, even when society's values change, and employees privately hold those changes in values, they may not be willing to express them at work because of contradictions with workplace norms and logics.

In order to make changes consistent with emerging societal values without provoking angst for employees, managers need to couch the changes in the legitimate logics and values of the firm, rather than the societal values that employees care about but are anxious about expressing. Change agents could *redirect* employees away from values seen as irreconcilable with workplace logics and towards already-legitimate workplace values; they could *reinforce* at-risk values with other legitimate values or processes; and they could *reassure* employees that the change will not force a trade-off between two values they hold dear. Our research showed that the values at the root of objections and those the change agents drew on to address them harmonized over time, making it more comfortable for employees to express the new societal values while also holding onto workplace values.

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