

Change is Hard. Strategic Change is Harder...

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on October 16, 2013

A series of life events have forced me to make little changes in how I do things – changes you would never normally consider unless pushed. A broken wrist forced me to start checking luggage again – something most confirmed constant travellers like me would never do. In the process I learned that, because so many people no longer check bags due to baggage fees, baggage handling has become far more streamlined and less of an issue than it once was. No more hour-long waits for your luggage at O'Hare. A series of technological frustrations drove me to not only buy a new computer but to change operating systems in the hope of making things easier. The jury is still out on that one. However, both of these left me reflecting on how difficult it is to get people to move away from things that they know, are comfortable with, and have worked reasonably well for them for a long time. It almost takes an act of God... And that's for small stuff, really.

So it can't be surprising that for really successful people doing big things differently – or doing different big things – is especially hard. Why should they even try? But in the end it is your most successful, best people at every level who will need to make change happen, if you are going to achieve your strategic objectives. They are the ones who can. They are also the people who benefit the most from the status quo, and from current ways of doing things. So why should they change?

In most firms these days, change management efforts are focused primarily on the underperformers. They are the easier targets, and intuitively the ones who "should" change. "Do more work." "Be more productive." "Develop some business." All well and good, and these efforts sometimes result in modestly improved economic performance. But not strategic position change. That requires that the firm – and by implication the best people in the firm – do something big and different to make that change happen. As Einstein famously said, "the definition of insanity is to keep on doing the same thing and expect different results." I suspect this is at least a major reason why so many strategic planning efforts fall down on implementation. The people who can actually make change happen are doing just fine doing things the way they always have – and management has little interest in trying to get those people to change, as they are perceived as doing good things already (and they usually are.)

To really achieve strategic change in most firms today, the focus is going to need to shift significantly toward getting the strongest performers to change what they are doing. This is a bit like telling someone who has reached the peak of their professional careers that they need to climb a different mountain. What's in it for them? (It's not about compensation – they already have that.) Why should they do it? (Challenge? Leaving a legacy? Protecting the next generation?) This may be the core law firm leadership and management challenge for the next decade.

What might happen if a firm shifted the focus of its change management efforts from, say, 90/10 focused on remedial change vs. strategic change to the opposite? Some will succeed, though not all, but the demands of the current market suggest that most firms need to try. And, by the way, flipping the key focus of change management as described above will be, in and of itself, a major strategic change.