

Empowering Lawyer Personalities for Successful Legal Process Improvement

By [Carla Landry](#) on January 18, 2021

This post first appeared October 26, 2020 on PinHawk's [Legal Administrator Daily](#).

People crave normalcy right now. Yet, here you come with a new initiative. But despite everything, this may be the perfect opportunity for your firm to take a different approach. If you have a strong sense of purpose and a solid plan, they may overlook the fact that your initiative comes with a healthy dose of change. Indeed, the evolving competitive landscape underscores the need to adapt your strategies to a new reality.

In the [first article](#) of the series, we talked about process improvement. As ALSPs increasingly cross over into coveted law firm territory, they are doing many of the things that law firms have traditionally done, only faster and cheaper. Next, we discussed how to create momentum for your process initiative by building an army of influencers. These influencers are evangelists for the cause, ready to make change happen among a group of highly intelligent lawyer types, each intent on going their direction.

Although we have used the term herding cats, lawyers may not be as challenging as you believe. In actuality, they have several key attributes in common. Lucky you to be working with a professional group that is so clearly delineated by a cluster of personality traits you can use to create your initiative's success.

Our friend and colleague, Dr. Larry Richard, has used the Caliper Profile for more than two decades. According to his research, lawyers are differentiated from the general population on some key measures. So, just what do we know about lawyers, and how can this knowledge help build further buy-in for change? Think in terms of customizing strategies that consider these unique personality characteristics and help ensure your initiative's success.

Stubborn Bank Customers

Some of you may remember a time when you had actually to go into the bank. Getting customers to use ATMs was not easy back in the 80s. Customers did not know anything about the clunky new technology, and besides, the tellers gave out lollipops to the kids. For some, the messaging seemed obvious. It was much easier to get \$100 from a curbside machine than to enter the bank, stand in line, and deal with the teller. The ATM was open 24/7. Easy right? Not so fast. For a large group of relationship-oriented people, there was a stubborn and persistent pull to go inside. So the messaging needed to be different. It all comes down to personality characteristics and personal motivation.

Lawyer Personality Traits

So what does this have to do with your lawyers? Plenty. Dr. Richard identified unique personality characteristics that you can use to understand better the messaging that resonates with your firm. We will discuss two of these characteristics in this article: They are autonomy and skepticism.

Autonomy

In the book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* by Daniel H. Pink, autonomy is described as the desire to direct our own lives. As a group, lawyers are high in autonomy. This autonomy is not the same as lonesome cowboy independence. Autonomy and interdependence are not mutually exclusive. They can coexist. Rather, the lawyer brand of autonomy is an innate capacity for self-direction. It is about empowerment. Lawyers who are high in autonomy prefer to act with choice. You are speaking their language when you give more control rather than take it away.

The bottom line for the highly autonomous: Your highest performing lawyers do not want to be driven by process. Make sure that your lawyers are involved in designing processes that give them greater control rather than take it away.

Skepticism

Skepticism is defined as having an air of doubt or incredulity. Psychologists generally agree that healthy skepticism is a good thing. It may be particularly beneficial for lawyers because they have it in large supply. It is part of what makes them good lawyers. Sceptics ask the questions that drive new thought processes and inspire next-generation thinking. But the problem is that highly skeptical people challenge pretty much everything. Innovators? Agents of change? Probably not what comes to mind when you think of skeptical lawyers. But your skeptics are a valuable source of institutional knowledge. They can drive you to distraction... and success.

The bottom line for the highly skeptical: You cannot be too realistic for skeptics. Do not repress the outlier opinions or try to silence the opposition. Provide a way to voice dissent by setting the ground rules upfront for how you'll disagree.

In the next article, we will cover a few more personality traits shared by lawyers and how you can leverage these unique characteristics to propel your initiative forward.

Use What You Know

It is true that many process improvement efforts never gain traction. But the reasons are predictable. You can ignore concerns and anxieties, but that doesn't mean they go away. They resurface as the eventual reversion to old behaviors. You will have the greatest chance of success if you allow lawyers to be heard. This will help you anticipate obstacles along the way.

This is not uncharted territory for law firms. It is a matter of tailoring your messages to appeal to your audience. To the extent that you understand your lawyers and what they need to thrive, you can make a difference in your firm's profitability.