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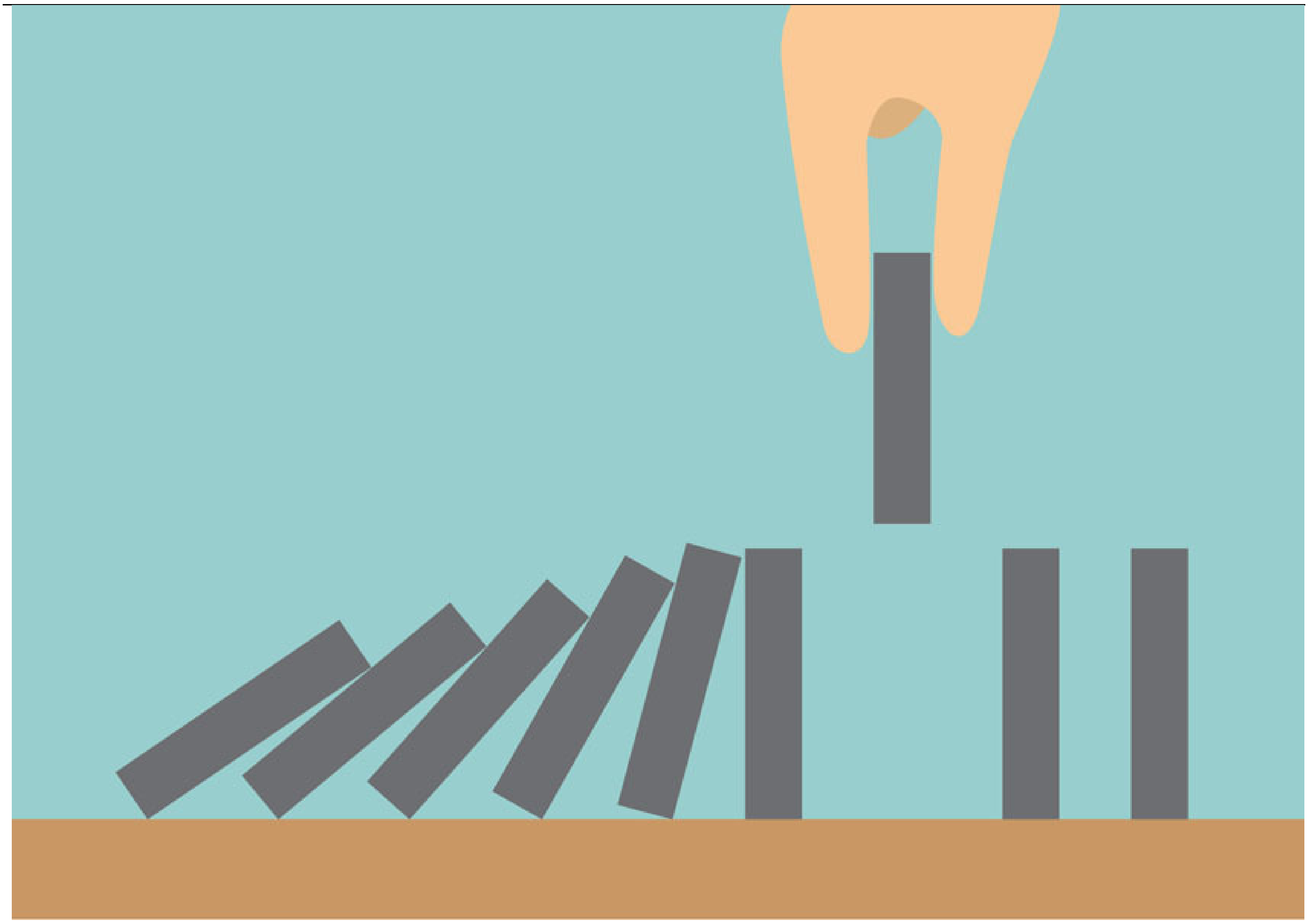
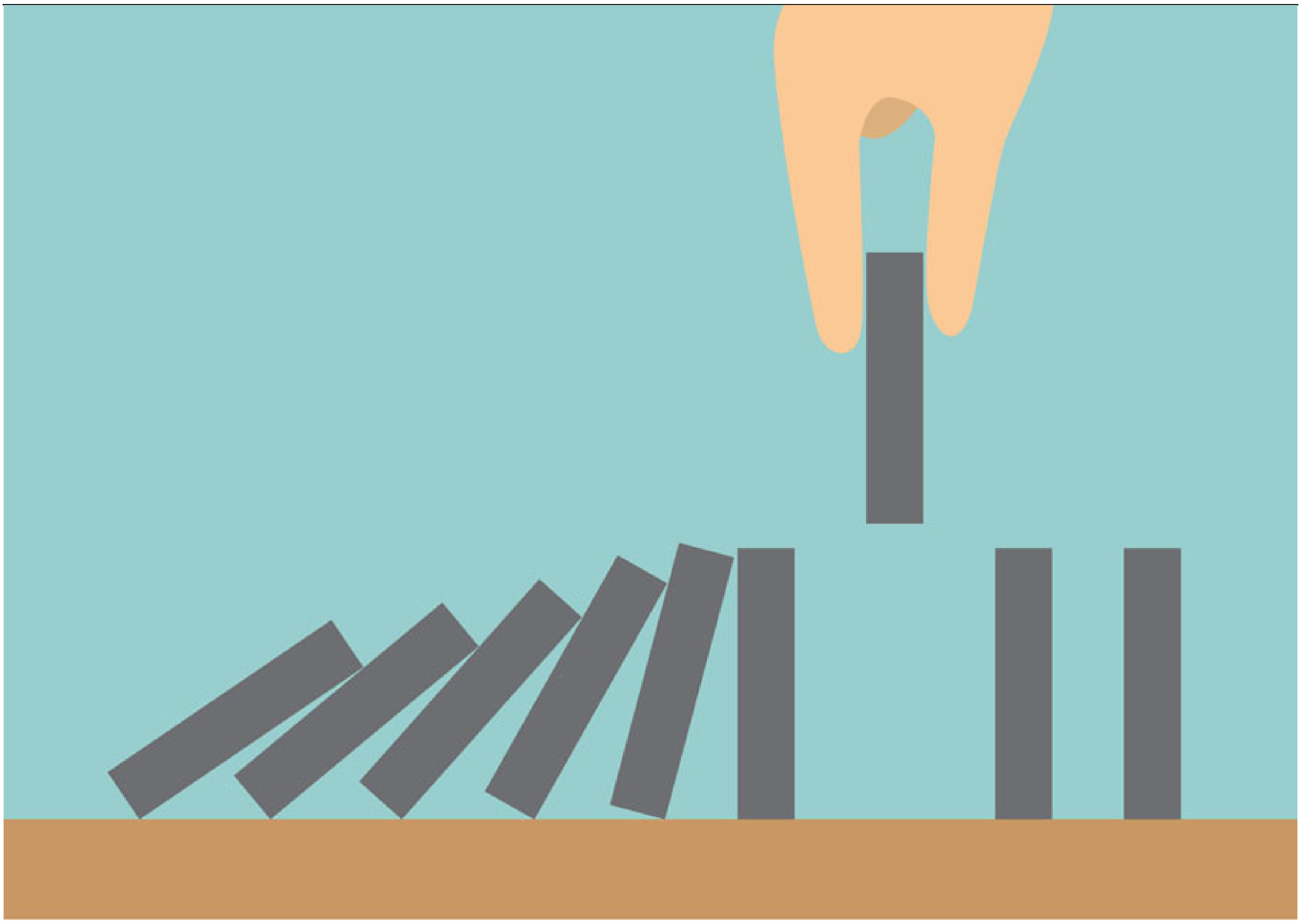
Implementing Impactful Change

Law Department Management





When you read the word *change*, how does it make you feel? In my experience, the mention of change makes people react like they do to Mondays, fingernails on a chalkboard, and Milli Vanilli. We all know change is inevitable for organizations that want to grow and evolve, so why does change have such a negative connotation? This column will focus on how to shift your legal department culture to one of accepting, adopting, and promoting change.

Before you start any type of change, be sure you know why you are embarking on this new journey. I highly recommend watching a Tedx Talk by Simon Sinek called “Start with Why — How Great Leaders Inspire Action.” It’s an old talk, but it’s completely worth the 18 minutes of your time to help focus you and your teams. Without a clear purpose of change, projects and initiatives will fail.

In addition to vocalizing why change is needed, here are five other steps for implementing impactful change within your legal department.

Step 1: Include department employees in the change process

It is critical that you don’t presume to know the concerns and needs of all your department employees. The type of work (and how it is managed) differs across practice areas.

When AEP first implemented our document management system, we only had two folder templates available. We thought standardizing would allow for easier collaboration across practice areas when looking for information. Instead, entire practice areas were not using the system because the folder templates did not easily fit into their daily work routine. The benefit of the occasional cross-practice area data share inhibited efficient document management. So, we completely revamped our folder templates. Working with each practice area, we asked them to identify five to eight core work processes they managed and the needed folder structure for each work process. Once the new templates were implemented, user adoption significantly increased across our department because it was no longer difficult for our employees to file documents.

It is always good to standardize across the department, but too much standardization may reduce user adoption. There are many ways to include employees in your change adaption, such as group roundtable sessions, surveys, or process deep dives to establish pain points, capture ideas, and identify priority opportunity items. At AEP, we typically form a core team of Practice Area Liaisons, or PALs, who are selected to represent their practice area for the entirety of the change.

Keep in mind that when evaluating business processes, some people may fear they are being viewed as inefficient and non-productive when really it is the processes or tools that are the problem. Disarm people’s fears by letting them know they have done a great job with the limitations of the current process. Once people relax, they will have many creative ideas about how to improve processes.

Simply gathering feedback at the beginning of the change process is not enough. As the change planning progresses, department employees should be included in requirement gathering, design review, testing, and training. The more involved your employees are, the more successful your change will be.

Step 2: Clearly identify and communicate the benefits of change

Focus on how the change supports the corporate and department vision and mission — and communicate that to your teams. Your communications should come in different forms.

- **Get people excited by keeping them included and informed.** Regularly email the department about progress and timeline. Continually remind everyone of the benefits of the change.
- **Support direct interaction.** Provide incentives like donuts and coffee to get people to meetings.
- **Offer “office hours.”** Designate times when key team members will be available for quick discussions.

Step 3: Create and implement a training plan

Successful training is critical to change implementation and continued adoption. Recognize that how people handle change is different; some run screaming from it and others thrive in an evolving environment. Some people may have change “baggage” from a previous bad experience. So, multiple training strategies are necessary to cover all your bases. Be prepared for a combination of group classes and one-on-one attention. Prepare a phased training strategy with communication, documentation, and then actual training sessions.

Step 4: Share the results

Share results with the department after the project is over. The people in the department are invested in the change and want to know the results. Share the data that follows a change. For example, create a dashboard that shows savings.

Steps 5: Rinse and repeat

Change management is not a one and done process. It has been scientifically proven that people need repetition to form a new habit. Per a study conducted by Phillippa Lally, a health psychology researcher at University College London, on average, it takes more than two months before a new behavior becomes automatic — 66 days to be exact. And how long it takes a new habit to form can vary widely depending on the behavior, the person, and the circumstances. In Lally's study, it took anywhere from 18 days to 254 days for people to form a new habit.

Most of this article has been focused on the internal department, but don't forget about your external partners. If the changes you are making affect your external firms and vendors, you should involve them during planning to ensure your vision is feasible and will not cause an increase in work for the firms. You should clearly communicate the changes and expectations to your external partners as well as offer training and Q&A sessions. When AEP implemented automated matter budgeting, we offered multiple interactive WebEx training sessions for all our external partners and provided detailed training guides, both of which helped lead us through a seamless transition.

For more tips on leading change, I recommend you check out the ACC resource "Legal Operations: Leading Practices in Implementing Strategy, Leading Change, and Advancing Law Department Excellence."

Julie Richer

LEGAL OPERATIONS AND DISCOVERY MANAGER

AMERICAN ELECTRIC POWER (AEP)