

# Undermining Behaviors

## *Hidden Obstacles to Change in Law Firms*

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Law firms, like any other type of business organization, frequently fail to achieve changes that everyone outwardly supports. What happens?

### **Do you really want to change?**

Are you and your colleagues ready to change? Any assessment of readiness to move forward as a *group* starts by answering two questions on an *individual* basis:

1. Am I willing to stay the same?
2. If I am *not* willing to stay the same, what I am willing to do differently?

It's tempting to blame our failure to achieve on external forces and other people, especially when we're stressed out or when we feel overwhelmed by others' expectations and demands. However, when we affix blame externally, we lose both the mental will and opportunity to affect at least some positive change for ourselves.

### **Undermining behaviors**

A key question at this point is: *What am I doing that interferes with my ability to do what I SAY I want to DO?*

These "undermining behaviors" are often invisible "bad habits" that we have acquired, adapted, and unconsciously reinforced over time.

For example:

*A group of lawyers enthusiastically profess to want to improve the way they practice law and serve their clients. Yet they engage in an undermining behavior such as not meeting regularly to follow up on the progress of initiatives. The good intention is there; but they, even consciously, engage in activities that seem to undermine the very goal they have set for themselves.*

Make a list of your own *undermining behaviors*. These are things that you might possibly do that undermine your commitment to effectiveness with time keeping, time management, and prioritization.

For example:

*I hesitate to say "no" to anyone.*

*I first do what I like to do and do well.*

*I tend to procrastinate with longer-term-projects.*

*I usually prefer to "do it myself" rather than explain it to someone else.*

## Undermining Behaviors

*I typically don't take breaks during the day, working until I'm exhausted.*

After you have made your list, read back over the undermining behaviors that you currently use. Then answer these three questions for each of the undermining behaviors:

1. What would be the consequences of forgoing that undermining behavior?
2. How do I feel when I imagine myself doing the opposite of the undermining behavior? Am I Stressed? Worried? Anxious?
3. By engaging in the undermining behavior, what worrisome outcome am I committed to preventing? What am I trying to protect myself from?

Let's use another law firm example:

*An associate was asked to research and recommend a plan for how the law firm could become involved with a local charity. She presented her suggestions to the partner in charge of the project who immediately dismissed her ideas and brought in another charity of his choosing.*

*When the associate was asked how she reacted, she said:*

*"I really value open communication and am committed to transparency in my dealings with other lawyers*

*in the firm. Notwithstanding my sincere commitment to openness, I find that I frequently withdraw when I feel that my input is not valued or appreciated."*

Her possible responses to the three questions, above, could have varied widely. Here is just one possible scenario to illustrate the thinking process.

**1. What would be the consequences of forgoing that undermining behavior?**

*The consequence of forgoing "withdrawal" when I feel undervalued could mean that I would need to tell the partner how his behavior makes me feel and what I need from him to feel less discouraged and more willing to help with something else in the future.*

**2. How do you feel when you imagine yourself doing the opposite of the undermining behavior? Are you stressed? Worried? Anxious?**

*I feel stressed when I imagine telling him how his behavior is affecting my motivation and commitment to the firm. I am afraid that he will blame me and offer opportunities to someone else next time.*

3. **By engaging in the undermining behavior, what worrisome outcome are you committed to preventing? What are you trying to protect yourself from?**

*By withdrawing I am trying to avoid further stress that could come from disagreeing with a senior person in my firm. I might also have to accept some responsibility for how I went about the project without consulting anyone else.*

**How this associate responds to these three questions is at the heart of her personal readiness to change.** It offers important clues about her assumptions, her “bad habits,” and her motivations. It also clarifies that her commitment and behavior in this type of situation are out of synch. This disconnect is stressful and unsettling.

### **The unique individual perspective**

As this example illustrates, the learning and change process is unique to each individual lawyer and to each group of lawyers. In order to be effective, a personal learning and development strategy needs to take into account individual differences.

Two lawyers may be equally inconsistent about keeping time records. However, they may undermine their improvement commitments in very different ways and for very different reasons.

Solutions will only be successful long term if the improvement process takes individual differences into account, regardless of whether the end result for both lawyers - timely submission of accurate time records - is the exactly the same.

### **About the author**



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