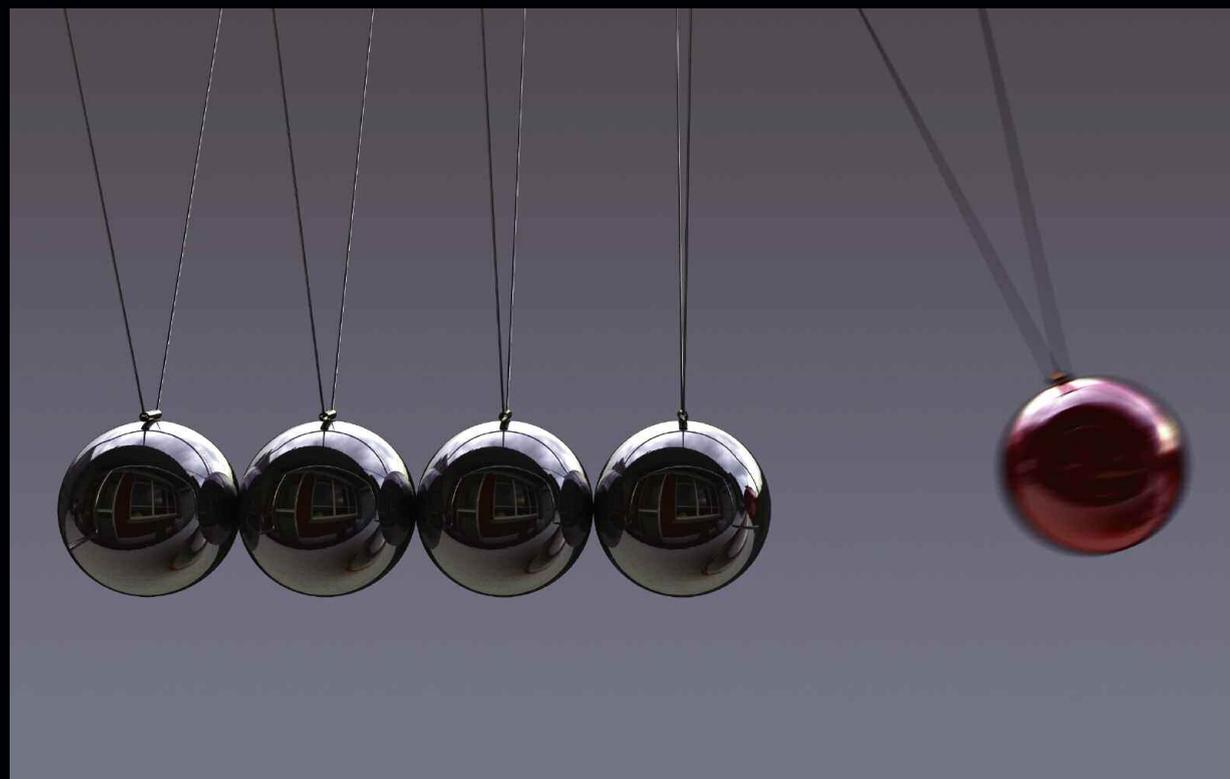


Think and Do

The battle between autonomy and collaboration

The complex interdependencies of today's legal world reward team collaboration as much as individual legal skills. Yet some experts claim that collaboration stifles creative problem solving and that originality is hindered by "Groupthink." Read on for a spirited analysis of the crucial interface between independent "thinking" and collective "doing," particularly in managing complex legal projects.

By Douglas B. Richardson, Certified Master Coach



The legal profession's headlong rush to embrace legal project management (LPM) correlates directly with the intensity of client demand for greater efficiency, predictability and cost-effectiveness in the delivery of legal services. And at its heart, LPM is really all about collaboration — collaboration among team members, among stakeholders, and between client and law firm.

At Edge, we have long asserted that to produce consistently high levels of productivity and efficiency, all team members must sing from the same play-book and be committed to singing in harmony.

However handsomely the legal profession once rewarded individual contributors, fiefdom princes, and lone wolves, today's complex global legal environment places a premium on shared knowledge, interdependent action, and mastery of a common procedural *lingua franca*. Such is the heart of LPM.

There are, however, significant barriers to improving collaboration and communication among lawyers. First, most lawyers are highly autonomous by nature, driven strongly by individual achievement, not collective effort. Autonomous introverts have long self-selected into the legal profession because it rewarded individual expertise and independent action. The legal profession historically was the province of the individual contributor.

Therefore, trying to improve lawyers' productivity simply by lecturing them about how collaboration will produce better synergy, efficiency and results (not to mention profits per partner) is like singing *Kumbaya* to them: it does not result in lasting behavior change. To be frank, many lawyers and law firms are testing LPM's unfamiliar waters not because they've gotten Collaboration Religion, but because their competitors are using LPM to powerful competitive advantage in wooing and pleasing clients.

DERIDING “GROUPTHINK”

A second significant issue is the active debate about when collaboration produces better results and when it doesn't. For example, in a recent *New York Times* article titled “The Rise of the New Groupthink,” author Susan Cain writes sarcastically that “Solitude is out of fashion...collaboration is in.”

Ms. Cain goes on to say that there's a “problem with this view,” citing persuasive research that “most people are more creative when they enjoy privacy and freedom from interruption.” She reminds us of Picasso's admonition that “without great solitude, no serious work is possible.”

Ms. Cain then trots out her heavy artillery: “The New Groupthink has overtaken our workplace.... Virtually all American workers now spend time on teams ... in which no one has a ‘room of one's own.’” She rails against “endless meetings and conference calls conducted in offices that offer no respite from the noise and gaze of co-workers. ... Privacy can make us productive; solitude can help us learn.”

Those cheers you hear are the relieved voices of all those lawyers who want only to be left alone to do their own thing.

Ms. Cain then trots out her heavy artillery: “The New Groupthink has overtaken our workplace.... Virtually all American workers now spend time on teams ... in which no one has a ‘room of one's own.’”

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE

As something of a loner myself, I can't dispute the negative impact of forced interaction and coerced collegiality on creativity, especially for us introverts. (On the other hand, extroverted people, the approximately 70% of the U.S. population who charge their batteries by interacting with others, often delight in collective brainstorming). That's where Ms. Cain focuses her distaste for collaborative activity: on its effect on “creativity and transcendence.”

However, productivity does not end with creative thinking. Somehow, all that intellectual power has to find traction on the road; if not applied to some practical purpose, it remains floating in the abstract realm of imagination and conceptualization. Great strategists need great tacticians to translate abstract goals into action priorities. Great tacticians, in turn, rely on pragmatic implementers to translate those priorities into action

and tangible results. It's a *continuum of productivity*.

Ms. Cain says that “group performance gets worse as group size increases.” However true this may be when applied to creative endeavor, it is manifestly untrue when applied to productivity. Is there any question that Fortune 50 companies contribute more to the GDP than seed-stage entrepreneurial enterprises? If smaller is better, what explains the inexorable trend toward increased law firm size, consolidation and global diversification?

Ms. Cain herself notes that the central narrative of many religions is the *seeker* (e.g., Moses, Jesus, Buddha) “who goes off *by himself* and brings profound insights back to the community.” (emphasis added). But after it has welcomed the seeker home, what does the community do with those insights? It incorporates them into collective activity, into implementing, performing and achieving on a repeatable basis.

In other words, successful organizations must both innovate *and* implement — both think and do. In order to produce all those widgets, Chevrolets, motions for summary judgment and complex financial transactions, most organizations spend more time and effort on *operation* than on *ideation*. And this is just fine with about 60% of their team members, the approximate percentage of Americans who are left-brain thinkers — naturally more oriented toward here-and-now action than the abstract conceptualization that marks right-brain thinkers.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE LPM?

There's no question that LPM speaks to the implementation end of the “Think and Do” spectrum. LPM is all about how lawyers *do* things — especially highly repetitive or rule-bound kinds of things, that is, the sorts of things lawyers often do. Here at Edge, we have been deeply involved with the evolution of LPM best practices over the last several years, and our experience demonstrates that most firms' LPM implementation efforts have

Ms. Cain says that “group performance gets worse as group size increases.” However true this may be when applied to creative endeavor, it is manifestly untrue when applied to productivity. Is there any question that Fortune 50 companies contribute more to the GDP than seed-stage entrepreneurial enterprises?

been more triumphs of perseverance than of sparkling originality.

True, LPM's "first adopters" qualify as courageous visionaries, bucking the longstanding forces of tradition and the inertia spawned by their partners' comfort with the status quo (although it must be said that the spark driving LPM was struck more by the global financial crisis than by the spirit of pure innovation).

At the end of the day, therefore, creative autonomy and collaborative action are not at war; they are just at different ends of the change management spectrum.

After notable early LPM initiatives by major firms, LPM moved rapidly from "first adopters" to "first followers" and "instant imitators," whose efforts to reshape the way lawyers practice have been marked largely by cut-and-try and trial-and-error. Yes, there has been a lot of creative thinking as alternative fee arrangements, increased use of RFPs, convergence programs and legal process outsourcing have shaped the form and substance of LPM. But it also must be said that the most successful LPM implementation efforts to "get outside the box" were undertaken from ... inside the box.

ADAPT AND ADOPT

If anything, the emerging role of LPM has been molded as much by adaptability as by pure invention. And adaptability is positively affected by collaborative action, inasmuch as the power of a collective, collaborative team does much to leverage diverse viewpoints, reduce feelings of risk, and increase feelings of commitment and security during this period of sweeping change.

When it comes to LPM, nobody has it entirely right yet: figuring out how to implement and institutionalize LPM across the face of an entire law firm or legal department remains a work in progress, and a daunting one at that. Over the next several years, the face of LPM will continue to morph, as leading-edge creative developments become conventional wisdom.

As more and more clients press for LPM (or at least for the efficiencies LPM provides), more and more firms — big, little, and in-between — will adopt increasingly "conventional" processes, procedures, tools and metrics. As this happens, collaboration will be the fundamental lever for implementation. Group process requires groups.

At the end of the day, therefore, creative autonomy and collaborative action are not at war; they are just at different ends of the change management spectrum. Just as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of the thinking is in the doing. •



Legal leadership and communications

Over 30 years of coaching and consulting, **Doug Richardson** has helped hundreds of lawyers develop into skilled organizational leaders, powerful collaborators and uncommonly convincing communicators. Doug's experience as a trial lawyer and nationally-recognized architect of innovative leadership programs lends a practical perspective to translating effective communication into superior team performance.

Email: richardson@edge-international.com

Call: 610.660.9555