

MANAGING GRINDERS IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS.

By Rob Starr, Big4.com Content Manager.

“We really know professional services,” Laurence J. Stybel says and there’s no doubt that statement carries appropriate weight. He is the co-founder of Stybel, Peabody Lincolnshire, a global firm specializing in leadership and career success headquartered in Boston.

It boasts two of the Big4 as clients. The firm was founded in 1979 and also works with 13 of Boston’s 15 largest law firms plus one of the world’s leading strategy consulting firms.

Paying Homage

Stybel starts our conversation about leadership in the Big4 by paying homage to the origins of the *Finders, Minders and Grinders* template they subscribe to.

“That framework wasn’t created by me,” he says. “One of our clients was the late lamented Arthur D. Little which was at the time the world’s largest management consulting firm and they had this concept that applies in the professional services world extremely well.”

Predictably, the Grinders are the folks in the entry level positions who are willing to work incredibly long hours. They are, according to Stybel, tasked with proving their competence by



Laurence Stybel

paying studious attention to detail. The key is to be competent, reliable, and detail-oriented. Be a workaholic and that will get you far.”

Success as a Grinder

“The problem that I find with this population is that in order to be successful as a Grinder, you need to be a little obsessive/compulsive as a person.

As you achieve success as a Grinder, the temptation is to keep doing what you’ve been successful at in the past,” he says. But doing Grinder work in the future can work to the detriment of further advancement.

Enter a beneficial psychological concept called unlearning that’s best done through social *unfreezing*. It’s an idea Stybel champions and Stybel Peabody uses it in its work with professional service firms. The concept of unfreezing was first described by sociologist Kurt Lewin.

“This concept is not fully appreciated. It rests on the premise that in order to learn new things, you must first need to unlearn old things.” This failure to honor how difficult it is to unlearn and the need for unfreezing has worked to the detriment of many acquisition integrations.

Past habits of success are extremely hard to get rid of. Grinders need a push to carry on with the new phase of their professional lives.

Stybel proposes an *unfreezing* ceremony after the third year. The ceremony would include a symbol of the firm’s appreciation of the person’s hard work by providing a new title for the person and a new job description which stresses the importance of business development ability.

These formal ceremonies of status change tend to be dismissed in business as trivial. At the same time, people do require ceremonies to help them psychologically unfreeze. For example, Stybel observed that the Boston University School of Nursing held a Memorial Service at the University Chapel to celebrate the closing of the School. The Sterling Bank of Waltham held a Dixieland Funeral for itself the day before it became part of BankAmerica.

“Ceremonies have an important unfreezing benefit” and people who are mildly obsessive compulsive benefit the most from them. Big Four CPA Firms and law firms are full of such people!”

Upward Mobility

Beyond the negative consequences on upward mobility the Grinder role presents, Stybel points out there are even more imminent dangers. For example, the pressures on the Grinders are amplified by the fact there are others waiting to take the jobs and do the work cheaper through a variety of methods like outsourcing to India. Artificial intelligence working in this slot is another looming threat to those who wish to nestle into Grinder roles as long term careers.

“The Grinder role has always been a transition role, but now it’s going to be more so,” Stybel says.

The unfreezing process he describes is the way to learn new things with a better mental outlook and of acknowledging the need to clearly delineate the need to close one door and open another on a career path. In essence, the process is about allowing people to mourn one position and its traditions and ethics as they move to another.

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