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Michele DeStefano's inspirational ideas for leading innovation in the legal world

Management, Innovation & Technology 5 min

As a thought leader on the power of innovation, Professor Michele DeStefano shared her insights on managing innovation and cultural change.

Author: Michele DeStefano, founder of LawWithoutWalls, author, speaker, consultant and Professor of Law at the University of Miami.

“Don’t be afraid to be a Big Bird” was a key takeaway of **Michele DeStefano**’s talk to a group of legal-minded listeners at the IE Tower.

“Our job is to get all the little birds to come together to fly as one and then let them go,” the author and professor of law at the University of Miami reminded her audience. The focus of the latest LawAhead Hub event was driving and managing innovation and culture change, with Professor DeStefano also addressing the importance of encouraging and retaining younger team members.

The professor began her talk by admitting that creating culture change and innovation is hard work, often failing due to poor execution and bad team management. Highlighting the importance of strong self-awareness, she cited the **DISC personality** test as a way of

ascertaining how you and your team interact. But she pointed out that no leader should simply accept test results without understanding how that information can be leveraged to get the best out of your group. Innovation, she pointed out, stems from a well-run team. If there are any tensions or cracks within the team structure, it could jeopardize their entire project.



SAFETY first

So how to shore up your team and ensure success? Professor DeStefano used the acronym **S.A.F.E.T.Y** to spell out some interesting concepts and remind everyone of the importance of thinking small:

“S” stands for Survey & Surmise: working out what your team is like. This goes back to the DISC analysis and is crucial for a functional working environment. What is everyone's preferred way of working and how do the different personalities interact? Consensus needs to be built between those working together.

“A” refers to Accountability: team members need holding to account. Make sure everyone is on the same page and really understands what needs doing, why it needs doing and by when. Making sure colleagues understand the mission statement of the business is also crucial, so that the project adheres to the company's core values.

“F” is to Flatten the structure of your team: give your younger colleagues more than they think they can handle—they'll surprise themselves and you. And make sure there are direct lines of communication in all directions. Younger generations generally don't want to work in hierarchical structures. **They've grown up being able to interact on social media with their sporting heroes or celebrity stars**, so they expect to be able to have direct dialogue with the boss and pitch their ideas.

“E” is for Empower: Gen Z is a creative generation, who really want to feel part of a movement of change. There has been a **marked trend in recent years of young people quitting jobs** in which they felt undervalued and underpaid. So it's imperative that leaders ensure they feel appreciated by giving them an important and creative role in the project. Listen to what they want and try to understand their point of view. Indeed, the professor recommended gamifying projects where appropriate to keep younger colleagues inspired and interested.

“T” stands for Think tiny: projects that extend beyond a period of around four months will struggle to come to fruition. Break a big project down into smaller goals, and keep teams small too, she recommended. Having sub-groups of three or four people rather than large, 12-person teams, will be much more manageable and efficient. And celebrate small wins! If a huge project is broken down into various steps, each achievement should be toasted—this will maintain team motivation going forward.

“Y” means say Yes to the eager beavers: it might seem that it's always the same enthusiastic team member offering to take on tasks. Don't be shy of leaning on them, Professor DeStefano urged. Early adopters of new systems and technology are essential, and they will help to teach and encourage others in the company who are perhaps less enthusiastic or more resistant to change. People often want to see proof that a new system works before going to the trouble of learning it for themselves, so the professor urged that younger, keener team members be encouraged to take new systems on board. Once they're proficient and demonstrating its value, they can help convince other members of the organization. It takes time to learn new tech tools but in the long run it'll save your organization time.

Back yourself and your team

At the end of what was an inspirational talk, Professor DeStefano encouraged everyone to “have the audacity to lead and the courage to suspend their disbelief.” To listen to the colleague who has what may seem like a crazy idea. To follow inspirational people and learn from them. Even copy them. As TS Eliot said, “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal.” Her main advice was to be the Big Bird who stands out from the crowd, to build trust and empower colleagues to work together optimally. Following all this advice will not only help spur innovation but will help create a working environment that everyone can thrive in.



Michele DeStefano is a thought leader on the power of innovation, the founder of LawWithoutWalls as well as an author, speaker, consultant and Professor of Law at the University of Miami.

She has been recognized by the ABA as a Legal Rebel, and by the Financial Times Innovative Lawyers (North America) as one of top 20 most innovative lawyers.

She writes about the intersection of law, business, and legal innovation. She received her J.D., magna cum laude, from Harvard Law School and her B.A., magna cum laude, from Dartmouth College.

Further reading:

- *Legal Upheaval: A Guide to Creativity, Collaboration, and Innovation in Law Michele DeStefano*
- *New Suits: Appetite for Disruption in the Legal World Michele DeStefano*
- *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable Patrick Lencioni*

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