

3 ways to encourage buy-in and improve results



<https://intheblack.com/articles/2017/02/01/get-buy-in-improve-results>

WORKPLACE

STRATEGY

01 Feb 2017



Use buy-in to get colleagues on board with your strategies

By CAMERON COOPER

<https://intheblack.com/contributors/Cameron-Cooper>

Gaining the support of colleagues for your strategies should boost morale – and results.

Old, hardline command-and-control business leaders must be rolling in their graves. A new breed of chief executive and manager is seeking to [persuade others](#) to embrace new strategies and ideas through buy-in rather than by cajoling them.

This approach is all about listening, engaging, collaborating and communicating with employees and other stakeholders. The rationale is simple: you can have the most fabulous ideas for your company, however, without buy-in they are not likely to get across the line or be as effective.

Professor Joshua Klayman, a managerial psychologist at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, says whereas the command-and-control model relies on compliance, progressive leaders can now see the value of using buy-in to drive performance and innovation. If that sometimes means experiencing resistance from others, then so be it.

“You want to see that as a resource,” says Klayman. “It’s easy to think that people who resist your ideas are just stubborn or mentally lazy. That’s too easy.”

This friction of views can result in a better [strategy](#) which improves the prospects of company-wide buy-in.

High stakes

Of course, leaders do not always embrace buy-in for altruistic reasons alone. While we still struggle to measure the costs of lost opportunities, many executives now understand that organisations pay a significant price when great ideas are dumped because they fail to win internal or external support.

An [international study of more than 220 business leaders](#) conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit and strategy consultant BTS, found that the highest-performing companies are good at getting buy-in across all levels of the business, whereas below-average performers struggle to do so.

When respondents were asked to estimate the strength of their commitment to their company’s strategy, 67 per cent of frontline managers at the market-leading companies – as measured by their profitability compared with industry peers – reported high levels of allegiance. That compared with just 33 per cent among the

average-performing companies and 22 per cent for the below-average performers. The discrepancy was even greater among middle managers.

“It’s easy to think that people who resist your ideas are just stubborn.”

Joshua Klayman

Simon Dowling, a collaboration specialist and author of the buy-in guide *Work with Me*, says modern businesses must respond quickly to customers’ needs and devise great ideas to serve them. [Leaders](#) and managers cannot do it alone, so they should create an environment in which their employees can be heard and get their ideas accepted. The real cost lies in missing that opportunity, says Dowling.

The other impact of lost opportunity is on morale. Imagine spending weeks on developing a new project, crafting a great pitch and then having your proposal rejected. Such a scenario happens repeatedly in business, deflating employees and robbing their companies of ideas and initiatives that might help them grow faster.

To offset such a risk, Dowling urges leaders to adopt a mindset of wanting to involve and include people to the point that they become “voluntary participants” in an idea.

“There’s a real opportunity for leaders to discover that space more.”

Consulting widely

Starbucks chief executive Howard Schultz is one corporate leader who has famously achieved buy-in from employees through a consultative approach and the rollout of social change programs for employees and the wider public.

Not all buy-in crusaders come from the business sector, though. Klayman cites the example of former Costa Rican president Jose Figueres, who convinced the public to back a controversial move in the late 1940s to renounce the country’s military, instead pouring money and resources into social programs such as [education](#) and health.

To this day, Costa Rica has no formal army and, while the Central American country is still poor, Figueres's changes have made a difference.

"He was very good at explaining and selling his vision to his people," says Klayman.

The key to getting buy-in, Klayman says, is to get a cross-section of insights during the creation and implementation phases of a strategy. Simply getting senior leaders to make a ruling and then announcing it will invariably offend some people. Instead, ask them how a potential new initiative should be managed. Get their views on how it could be done better.

Professional Development: **The strategic finance leader suite: Whether you're an executive or a manager looking to stay ahead of the game, these programs will help you sharpen the skills needed to be a high-performing finance leader.**

"You've got to trust people to help develop the idea," says Klayman. "A big mistake that is often made is to try to do things top-down."

Clients should not be forgotten, either. In an experiment led by Jennifer Mueller, of the University of San Diego, researchers asked executives, managers and other stakeholders of a company pursuing new ideas to rate them based on creativity, feasibility and profitability. Then they sought the views of likely customers. The upshot? The company backed the ideas it deemed most likely to be profitable, and the customers supported the most creative plans, revealing how a disconnect can occur between two parties if buy-in is lacking.

Part of the problem, Mueller found, is that CEOs often use metrics such as return on investment to assess the viability of ideas, but for new ideas, such metrics are hard to produce. The researchers concluded that focusing on "why" an idea should proceed may limit the tendency to reject creative ideas.

Be inclusive

To help get executives, staff, clients and other stakeholders to align on ideas or a corporate vision, Klayman believes the emphasis must be on getting buy-in from all levels of a business or organisation. From the retail customer service representative at the bottom of the totem pole to the chairman of the board, all voices should be heard.

He adds that some CEOs and senior executives let themselves down in terms of achieving organisation-wide buy-in. They may well be very effective in many other aspects of their leadership role but lack the capacity to bring others along with them.

“Sometimes that proves to be a serious problem for them,” says Klayman.

“The ability to let go may be where you derive your greatest power as a leader.” Simon Dowling

Dowling advises a “lateral leadership” model to ensure that people from all levels of an organisation can make an impact. The challenge in creating such an environment is for senior leaders to have the courage to loosen the reins and let others develop and influence strategies. It is a question of knowing when to wield and when to yield, says Dowling.

“The ability to let go may be where you derive your greatest power as a leader,” he explains.

In a changing business environment, one where disruption, agility and collaboration are the new norm, Dowling expects a culture of buy-in to become an ever more important point of distinction for companies. “They’re the organisations that will really be able to take the torch and run with it.”

3 ways to encourage buy-in

1. Ask “so what?”

According to Simon Dowling, the best leaders reflect on an idea or strategy and ask “so what?”. Why does it matter to this

organisation? Why is it important to them personally? Leaders should then be able to articulate just why they are pursuing the idea. Too often, employees are simply handed a project and told to make it without being convinced of its merit. As a result, they may experience what Dowling calls “delegated detachment”.

2. Focus on stakeholder management

Understand the social landscape of your organisation so you truly know who is who, who makes decisions and who needs to be consulted. Dowling urges leaders to identify allies, slow processes down and “engage with the right people in the right order”.

“We are in an age when the socially connected leader has a much more important role to play,” he argues.

3. Just listen

The champions of buy-in tend to listen well, engage others in conversation and, perhaps most importantly, test out whether others want to work with them on strategies or projects.

“People buy people first,” says Dowling. “They aren’t going to listen to you until they feel heard themselves.”

[Read next: How to influence colleagues on strategy – and avoid the curse of Kodak](#)

TAGS

WORKPLACE

STRATEGY