

# John Kotter on Getting Buy-In For Your Ideas

In the book *Buy-In*, change management guru John Kotter and co-author Lorne Whitehead present a solution to one of the most basic challenges facing leaders and managers – how to win support for a good idea. [1] This article provides an overview of Kotter and Whitehead's strategy for protecting your ideas and winning the support you need to implement them successfully.

## Four idea killers

The book begins by giving an overview of the **main forms of objection** you are likely to face as you present your idea. The book's core scenario is familiar to everyone. You have a good idea which you think will make a real difference to the future of your team, department or organisation. However, when you present it, you are faced with myriad **objections, concerns** and **counter-arguments**. Your idea is either shot down, or you fail to gather the necessary support to make it a reality. The people who would most benefit from implementing your idea lose out, as does your organisation.

Based on Kotter's in-depth research into how successful change begins, the book usefully groups these objections into **four categories**. The authors recommend developing a good awareness of these main objections so you can adopt the right approach to countering negativity:

### 1. Fear mongering

This kind of attack strategy is based on **raising anxiety** to such a level that a measured, objective consideration of the idea, plan or change proposal becomes impossible. Risks are augmented and fear of what might happen if the idea is implemented gathers momentum. This type of attack can be highly **manipulative**.

**Word associations** play a powerful role here, particularly if the fear mongerers use words and phrases that are strongly associated with previously unsuccessful change initiatives. In this situation, fear can make the most reasoned, objective people so anxious that they will strongly oppose the idea which is being presented, even if the plan bears little resemblance to past proposals. Fear mongering can be illustrated by statements such as:

- 'We tried this before, it didn't work.'
- 'That sounds like *(something which didn't work before)* to me.'

### 2. Delay

Put simply, 'death-by-delay' tactics slow the communication and discussion of an

idea or plan so much that it **loses momentum** and the window of opportunity to implement it is lost. Delay strategies often **divert attention** to other seemingly more pressing issues, or argue that the plan needs to wait until another project is completed or that an immediate crisis must be dealt with first etc. When this happens, any progress that was initially made towards achieving buy-in is hampered, and that progress is never regained. Good ideas are often delayed by arguments such as:

- 'We've got too much to do right now.'
- 'This is a good idea, but this is the wrong time for it'.

### 3. Confusion

In the process of gathering buy-in for an idea, many questions and concerns (both legitimate and not so legitimate) will be raised. The problem arises when these descend into **lengthy conversations** and **convoluted discussions** which are littered with irrelevant information, complex data and potential alternatives to the one which is being presented. This **sidetracks the core idea** as people start to question whether it has been thought through properly as the discussions become increasingly complex.

Furthermore, statistics and complex number crunching are a powerful means of bewildering others, and are often used by people who have a need to be seen as the 'smartest' person involved. Confusion often arises from responses like:

- 'Have you thought about x, y, and z?'
- 'Your proposal leaves too many questions unanswered.'
- 'You can do A until you have done B and C, so the plan won't work'.

### 4. Ridicule (or character assassination)

This approach is used not to undermine the core idea, but rather the **person behind the idea**. Whether done openly or behind closed doors, this strategy involves questioning the **competence** of the person involved, or the **strength of their character**. Regardless of how much work you have done on your proposal, this type of objector will pick out what you haven't covered (however small or insignificant it might be), and use this to undermine your credibility. People may even go as far as calling into question aspects of your character, and whether you are the right person for the job at hand. This form of objection can be identified in phrases like:

- 'No one else does this, so why are you suggesting it?'
- 'Surely you must have considered this?'
- 'This idea is too simplistic.'

### An important caveat

The authors point out that the four main objecting strategies outlined above may

occur **in isolation** as you present your idea, or more commonly as a **combination** of two, three or even all four approaches. For example, an attack that begins with fear mongering may build into confusion and delay, ending with an attack on your character and ridiculing of your idea itself. It is therefore important to **be prepared** for objections which may come from all sides, and also from areas or people that you least expect them from.

## **Saving your good idea**

In the second part of the book, Kotter and Whitehead present their **five-step methodology** for countering objections and gaining buy-in for your idea. These steps can be summarised as follows:

### **1. Gain people's attention**

This is the most important, yet the most basic, element of the book's strategy for success. It involves **bringing in all of your potential opponents** and attackers, and inviting them to contribute to the discussions. Moreover, it involves **encouraging people to voice their concerns** and challenge the idea that you are proposing.

However, it can often be easy to **do the opposite** of what the authors suggest, that is, going behind people's backs and not including them in the discussions or correspondence about your project. But **bringing objectors in** can work powerfully in your favour, by overcoming the biggest challenge people face when they need to gain buy-in for their ideas – **simply getting people's attention** in the first place. When you engage with objectors, this **creates drama**. More importantly, as you tackle your objectors, provided this is done in a measured and appropriate way, interest in your project will grow.

Although you may feel **nervous** about adopting this approach, try not to be afraid of your objectors, however disruptive, angry, emotional or sceptical they might be. As Kotter and Whitehead say, when you begin to capture a person's attention, you will gradually start to engage their mind, and start to build the positive support you need.

### **2. Win minds**

Once you have people's attention, the next step is to use **simple, commonsense dialogue** to create strong support for your idea.

When someone makes an objection, it can be tempting to respond with lots of data, logic, or complex lists of reasons why the response is unfair or uninformed etc. Instead, consider how best to **make your idea clear** and simple so that it can be **understood easily by everyone**. If you take **too long** to present your idea, or it is **overly complex**, you will quickly start to lose the very attention that you worked so hard to gain in the first place. Understanding the basis of your idea is the building block upon which support for it is built.

### 3. Win hearts

In order to gain true buy-in you need to win hearts as well as minds. Kotter and Whitehead say that the key to winning hearts is **showing respect for the views and opinions of others**, even if you strongly disagree with them.

Showing a lack of respect can really harm your approach, not to mention your perceived character. The audience may start to **side with your objectors**, particularly if you respond in kind with bullying tactics or angry, defensive responses.

From his research into successful change, Kotter says that successful buy-in is rarely reached as a product of a fight or major disagreement. By treating people with respect, you will gradually draw your audience emotionally to your side, where they are more likely to listen carefully to what you are saying, particularly if you continue to follow the advice laid out in the previous step.

### 4. Watch the crowd

It is important to remember that your objectors are likely to make up only a **small percentage** of the number of people you need to garner support from. It is all too easy to focus your attention on dealing with the objections and disruptions of a small minority, rather than understanding the thoughts and perspectives of **the majority**.

When you are responding to an objection, your primary concern should be the **reactions of the majority**, rather than being distracted by the reactions of the attacker themselves. By doing this, you will quickly notice if the audience start to become confused or fearful, or if their energy is becoming positive and supportive. **Continual monitoring of the whole audience** therefore enables you to change your approach accordingly.

### 5. Be prepared

Before you pitch your idea, spend plenty of time planning your approach. Think about **who your audience is**, and **brainstorm** the likely objections that could come up. Remember the four objection strategies of **fear, confusion, delay and ridicule**, and **plan your responses** to each one. Not only will this help improve your performance, it will also raise your self-confidence. Staying calm and confident, even in the face of multiple objections will help you resist the tendency to become defensive.

## Summary

As you develop your idea, it is critically important to be aware of the four main objection tactics you are likely to encounter when you present it and begin to gather support – fear mongering, delay, confusion and ridicule. Recognising which of these strategies are being used, and tailoring Kotter and Whitehead's five-step methodology of **gaining attention** for your idea, **winning people's hearts** and

**minds, watching the crowd** and being **well prepared** will enable you to counter these objections effectively and ultimately make your idea or plan a reality.

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[1] John Kotter and Lorne Whitehead, *Buy-In: Saving Your Good Idea From Getting Shot Down* (Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2010).