

The Anatomy of *Persuasion*

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The Presence of a Problem is the Absence of an Idea

You've heard the age-old, repeated calls for help by CEOs and other leaders everywhere, *"We need all the ideas we can get from our people!"*

You've also heard the inevitable, harsh, contradicting responses from those working at lower levels within organizations, *"Ever try to get an idea approved up there? Forget it!"*

And you probably know from personal experience that moving ideas from concept upward through approval to actual productive use often is so difficult, so plagued with pitfalls and obstructions that successes feel like Pyrrhic Victories.

This, an almost universal organizational malfunction, deserves far more serious attention from management than it gets, especially when a straight-forward, low-cost solution is readily available to everyone.

After over 20 years of helping thousands of people analyze, shape and sell their ideas up the organization, we clearly recognize why developing a continuous flow of good ideas is difficult for most organizations.

The problem: many managers don't realize that the origination and application of good ideas is a mechanism that can be controlled and enhanced with two mutually exclusive processes. The creation of an idea is one process; getting it accepted and put to use.

is quite another process. Each process uses a different, unrelated type of thinking.

Creation is largely a right-brain function—innovation, free-thinking, imagination... Only certain people excel naturally at this. But persuasion is a critical thinking left-brain function that everyone can learn.

There is some overlap in each direction, of course. But people with dominance on one side are not nearly as skilled when dealing with tasks requiring thought processes from the other side. For a very rough parallel, think of switching hands when doing a familiar task like writing your name.

This is why the most imaginative among us usually lack the skill required to build winning proposals for their ideas. This deficiency is disabling. With rare exceptions, ideas must be sold. The story about "building a better mouse trap and the world will beat a path to your door..." is pure myth.

Consequently, advocates of ideas almost always need left-brain skills when facing formidable upward paths to approval.

Here is an example: Robert, a PhD biochemist, had recently taken over as leader of a research group which had been trying unsuccessfully to find a new drug to treat a well-known disease. Robert decided

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Promoting an Innovative Environment

R & D Innovator Magazine recently published an article by **Charles W. Prather, Ph.D.** in which the "climate for innovation" within an organization was identified as being directly related to success. Strong correlations between overall employee job satisfaction and their level of innovativeness were also found to be consistent. Prather described a number of parameters that can enhance the climate for innovation, which include:

1. Freedom – how free is the staff to decide how they will do their job
2. Idea time – do people have time to think things through before having to act
3. Idea support – are there resources to give new ideas a try
4. Trust and openness – do people feel safe speaking their minds and offering different points of view
5. Risk-taking – is it ok to fail

Prather points out that while these issues are often considered "soft" versus the hard budgets that are required to try new approaches, they are the most important elements of promoting an innovative environment. "It's the soft stuff that's hard," Prather said. "Though both are needed, we find that much more attention needs to be paid to the soft stuff after a minimal amount of hard resources are available."

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that the research path, previously approved by his management, was seriously flawed and should be abandoned in favor of a new direction he had devised. He came to us because he had failed to convince his "stubborn" management to let him use his idea and change direction. An otherwise bright and competent man, Robert quickly learned our process: how to think through and structure a convincing proposal. His work appeared sound to us, and he later reported a success. He added that he had not thought of persuasion as a precise, disciplined thinking process. Neither had he recognized persuasion as the vital element in the process of creating change. Robert also said that what he learned would change his life. He now knew how to sell his ideas.

What can you do to establish a flow of good, useable ideas in your organization? Start by studying a few past successes. You will learn that most good ideas came from within. Guaranteed! You will also learn that the people who generated these ideas usually were those closest to the work or area involved. Guaranteed! You will hear tales of exasperation and frustration about the approval process. Guaranteed! You will discover that inordinate amounts of time and effort are expended on these tasks, win or lose, mostly lose. You will be told of brilliant ideas that shouldn't have fallen by the wayside, but did. And, you will meet veterans of these approval processes who may tell you they do not relish the idea of going through them again even if the idea at issue is clearly outstanding. You will hear of barriers such as *information overload...they really don't want to hear from us down here*, et cetera. Reports like these will confirm that a self-defeating inhibitor lurks in your organization, one that you must root out if you expect meet your goal.

Your next step is to cross fertilize. Teach persuasion skills to those who generate ideas. Different from negotiation and selling, these skills will give them the thinking processes needed to analyze situations and to develop cogent, crisp, single-page proposals that will get buy-in from management. Your people will respond enthusiastically once they recognize that this new thinking skill is a viable path to a success that will add new dimension, self-confidence and empowerment to their lives. Expect those charged with implementing change to respond quickly: engineers, chemists, software people, research and manufacturing people... A case in point is reported by Phillip L. Pennartz who headed a joint venture between DuPont and Eka-Nobel.

With rare exception, ideas must be sold. The story about building a better mousetrap is pure myth!

"Training our people in persuasion skills was a key element in making things happen at our new company when I was president. We

needed to shape 25 technically oriented strangers, recruited from all over the paper industry, into a cooperative working force capable of functioning in the highly competitive environment.

"Establishing trust and effective working relationships among these people was our first job. We needed to stimulate a flow of useful, problem-solving ideas that would actively address the tasks facing us. To accomplish this we taught our people persuasion skills, a thinking process that helped them analyze, organize, and get buy-in for their ideas. Everyone understood and used the same process. Progress was both swift and productive. Persuasion-skill training as a management tool helped shape the group into a functional, integrated team."

If you follow the Pennartz lead, you will get similar results. As your people become practiced, they will start working together when developing proposals. Juices will flow. Success breeds success. A synergy will occur, and the flow and acceptance of good, useable ideas will increase even more. There is a time-saving, bonus benefit here—the process also will sift out and eliminate poor and marginal ideas early on. The upshot: you will have launched a new era of progress and the beginning of a vital cultural change. Please notice there is really nothing new here. But don't be surprised if you get credit for cultivating you organization's *"intellectual capital"* with *"knowledge management."*

One more thing... because every idea will not get buy-in for one reason or another, remember success is based on failure. Be sure to give praise when a proposal fails, if the person used the techniques taught. This will keep the creative fires stoked and pave the way for more winning proposals and future successes. Keep in mind the simple truth: ***The presence of a problem is the absence of an idea.***