

HOW TO WIN SUPPORT FOR YOUR IDEAS AT WORK



"The mind likes a strange idea as little as the body likes a strange protein, and resists it with similar energy. If we watch ourselves honestly, we shall often find that we have begun to argue against a new idea even before it has been completely stated."

– Arthur Koestler

To some degree, we all suffer from neophobia – fear of the new. But few of us recognize it in ourselves. Instead, we bristle when friends, business associates or co-workers reject our brilliant new ideas in favor of the status quo. "Stick-in-the muds!" we mutter, unaware of the same conservative tendencies in our own behavior.

Neophobia is a well-documented trait. Many people rationalize it, claiming that constructive criticism of new ideas can help identify potentially harmful flaws. As long as it's done in a spirit of friendliness and objectivity, it can't hurt, right?

Wrong. Many people take personally any criticism, no matter how constructive. Their typical reaction is to become more cautious about offering new ideas – and more critical of the ideas of others.

Insight into the dynamics of resistance will help you present your ideas more effectively. As with any problem, knowledge of the causes of neophobia can lead to appropriate measures to overcome – or at least lessen – the resistance.

Why the Resistance?

Most resistance to new ideas stems from people's resistance to change. Even routine changes in organizations are met with protest and foot-dragging. Imagine how much resistance a radically new idea creates. Whoever said, "Creation is a stone thrown uphill against the downward rush of habit" didn't exaggerate. Three main factors combine to make us distrust change.

1. *The false security of the familiar.* Time-tested methods, standard procedures, accepted policies and other rules and regulations give many individuals a feeling of anchorage and stability. The clearly defined, the firmly established, the things that make their world predictable have a powerful hold on them. A new idea frequently seems a direct threat to the sense of security.

In addition, some people feel that accepting a new idea denigrates the worth or validity of what exists. Or their reasoning goes, "We have enough problems as it is; why add problems we might not even be able to cope with?" Clearly, accepting change means more headaches, work and responsibility.

2. *New ideas threaten power and status.* Some people react negatively to a new idea simply because it's not their own. Executives are especially prone to downplay the value of new ideas. They feel threatened if their underlings or peers offer suggestions. If changes should be instituted, they reason, then they would have thought of them in the first place.

Change is also fought because it makes some jobs obsolete or tumbles former experts from their pinnacles. For example, CAD/CAM innovations made traditional draftsmen all but obsolete. Many a draftsman who for years was a skilled professional suddenly found he was a novice starting the slow, painful path of learning a new technology.

3. *Transgression into private domains.* Some people see new ideas, especially when they originate in another part of the company, as encroaching on their turf. In most companies, responsibilities are carefully defined. People come to regard these responsibilities as their private preserves. When somebody comes up with an idea that directly concerns their own area, the usual reaction is defensiveness or hostility. "Nobody has the right to trespass into my area of specialization," they say. This artificial (but very real) barrier not only kills off many valuable ideas, but also prevents the free flow of information and communications between departments.

Sometimes, there are compelling reasons for the rejection of new ideas. The sheer number of ongoing or priority projects may be so high that pursuing a new idea would disrupt current work. Or, a new idea may resemble a proposal previously submitted by someone else. A perfectly good idea may be so costly to develop as to be impracticable. In most companies, simple economics dictate what can and what can't be developed.

Occasionally, a new idea involves changing a small part of a procedure, process or product that's already scheduled for complete overhaul. Or the extra time and effort needed to develop a presentation for the idea simply may not be available.

While many of these considerations might be convenient rationalizations to escape extra work and effort, in individual cases and in certain organizations they're perfectly legitimate.

Influencing Acceptance

People are willing to accept change if it's presented properly. This usually means overcoming the following hurdles:

The purpose of the proposed change isn't clear. Ambiguity can trigger anxiety and unrest. Experience has shown that fear of change can be more disrupting than change itself. Try to help people realize the reasons for the change and the objectives it will accomplish. Idea originators often feel the advantages should be obvious to everybody. This is rarely the case, however. People resent being taken for granted, even though the proposed change might benefit them.

People haven't been asked to participate in the planning and implementation of the proposed change. They'll cooperate more readily when asked to help solve problems that affect them.

Acceptance of the change is demanded on the basis of loyalty to the company. Loyalty is a fine attribute, but it can't be elicited by edict. Alone, it's insufficient for people to accept change.

The change will radically alter the group's modus operandi and relationships.

Communication regarding the change is directed to only a few people. Even though a change may affect select individuals in a department, all employees need to know what the change entails. Otherwise, team cohesiveness and cooperation go out the window.

The explicit and implicit rewards for making the change are considered inadequate. New ideas and changes are more likely to be successful when people other than the originators have participated in the planning and implementation stages. This helps the people understand what the change is all about. It gives them confidence that the idea originators are genuinely interested in their input and suggestions.

It's also important that people be allowed to air their objections to a proposed change. Even if some of these aren't valid or well thought out, the airing of grievances has a cathartic value and can reduce initial resistance.

Questions to Analyze Neophobia

WHO?

- Who could become involved?
- Who might help make the idea more acceptable? Who has the power to champion the idea?
- Who needs to be convinced of the value of the idea to get it implemented?
- Who can provide the necessary resources to make the idea succeed?

WHY?

- Why might others freely or willingly support the idea?
- Why would they volunteer their support and services?
- Why would they accept the idea in the first place?

HOW?

- How might the others be rewarded for supporting the idea?
- How could you demonstrate, dramatize or visualize the idea's benefits?
- How could you pretest the idea?
- How could the idea be improved before it's implemented?
- How might you anticipate any difficulties in the idea's implementation?

WHAT?

- What special strengths, capabilities or resources could others contribute?
- What challenges or opportunities for expressing talent could be produced?
- What might gain enthusiasm for the idea?
- What might be a suitable schedule for implementing the idea?

WHEN?

- When might the idea be completed?
- When should the idea be presented to assure that the timing is right?
- Where could you anticipate the greatest resistance?
- Where could you begin for maximum, quick and visible progress?

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