Selling Ideas Internally: Getting Group Agreement or Buy-in
By Ed Oakley and Doug Krug

Gaining the buy-in of a committee or group could be one of the toughest challenges people face. Gaining the agreement or commitment of one person is difficult enough, but accomplishing this with a whole group is usually even more complex.

When selling to a committee, we may not know what kind of support we have from all the individuals, even if we have met with them individually (and hopefully we have!). And who knows how they've been influenced since we saw them last, even if it was yesterday? What about the politics and hidden agendas often found in group environments?

Yet the keys to gaining group buy-in are the same as for individuals: developing relationships and "selling" directly to both the organizational and personal needs and desires of the individual group members. When we do this well, we are not so much selling our idea or product as letting them buy-in to what they want. Furthermore, when people align with us because they want to, they have a sense of ownership and a commitment to making it work.

With the help of our clients, we've developed a model that is very effective in the complex arena of "selling" to a group or committee. Specifically this model discusses the process involved in accomplishing our two basic objectives: 1) building a web of relationships between ourselves and the committee members, and 2) connecting what's in it for each of the group members to support the program.

We'll review the process of a group presentation step-by-step from initiation to close. The steps are Initiation, Objective Identification, Presentation, Benefits Clarification, and Close. We'll suggest approaches that we and a number of our clients have found far more effective than more traditional approaches.

One consultant discussed this approach with us just before a very important sales call with a major organization's top management team. He reported that the sales call was highly successful and attributes much of his success to this powerful approach. He developed strong relationships throughout the meeting process and gained more clarity about how his services would benefit the organization and the individuals. He did not have to sell! They wanted to buy! How can we accomplish this in the complex environment of a group meeting?

Let's discuss the **INITIATION** phase of a group meeting in which we plan to present an idea, program, or product to a group. Involving the people and getting them to communicate is our primary objective in this initiation phase. We also want them to participate in a positive way. When we do this early in the meeting, people tend to drop their defenses and open up to more possibilities. They also become involved and focused on the meeting and objective.

As soon as possible, we want each of the people to be fully "present" and attentive to our subject. One key is to use an effective question to start the meeting. We want the question to encourage positive comments. We want people to open up, not shut down, so the question should be on the light side. While it is okay to have them start thinking early in the meeting, we don't want them to have to think too hard!

Since the exact purpose of your meeting and the nature of the group you are convening is unknown to us, we can't suggest a specific question in this article. However, we can provide some ideas to encourage your own creativity. Some examples:

- You have come a long way in this project. What do you most appreciate about how you have handled the process?
- Now that the team is formed, what are you particularly looking forward to about this project?
- This committee has been working together on this important acquisition for more than a year now. What do you most appreciate about how the committee has worked together?

How do you think questions like these would accomplish the objectives of getting everyone participating, thinking, and involved? How do you think this approach might be more effective than some other ways such a meeting might be initiated?

The next phase of the meeting is **OBJECTIVES IDENTIFICATION**. Objectives need to be identified from each individual's personal and current perspective. They need to be probed until the individuals agree that there are no more fundamental underlying objectives or issues. We cannot deal with them if we do not know what they are! List the issues/objectives as specifically as possible on a flip chart. Use this list directly in the actual presentation that follows. Explicitly ask for agreement every step of the way. The question might be something like:

1. What are the 2 or 3 most strategic/critical elements that you feel need to be addressed in this situation?
2. What aspects of this situation do you feel are most important to the success of the project?
3. How would those issues, if resolved, support the organization in moving towards where we want it to be?

Write the objectives/issues as specifically as possible on a flip chart (which you'll also use for your presentation later). It is important to identify the elements that are important from each individual's perspective. Then we need to probe until the individuals agree there are no more underlying issues/objectives.

Obtain explicit agreement to the list. Ask each if they agree that these are the critical areas of interest. When the list seems complete, verify that nothing has been left out. Now and only now are we ready for the actual presentation.

PRESENTATION:

Everything we have done so far has been designed to best prepare us and position us for the presentation. Now, throw away the canned pitch! We want to address each and every objective on the group-developed list directly in the presentation.

As long as we stick to their interest areas, we will keep their attention. We do not want to address areas that are not on the list, or we will lose people. This approach concentrates on their issues, rather than on the content of some canned presentation. If there are elements that we want to address, we must make sure they get on the list during the objectives identification.

We want to deal with one element at a time as appropriate, and involve the group each step of the way. Look for frequent opportunities to gain agreement with questions like:

- "How do you see this addressing the (specific) need we identified earlier?"

Questions should be directed to the person who had the objective you just addressed.

Actively seek concerns before leaving an issue:

- "What has not been addressed about this specific element?"

It is better to get concerns out now than find out later when it is too late to deal with it. The intent is to gain agreement that your solution fully satisfies the need on each issue, and at least on some key areas, that your solution uniquely satisfies the need.

If something comes up that you do not know how to address, ask the group how they might address it. Use a question like:

- "How might you address this aspect of the situation?"

Again, we are fully involving them as "partners" in the solution.

BENEFITS CLARIFICATION

It is important that each of the individuals be clear about the value/benefits to the organization and to themselves of resolving the issues, accomplishing the objective, or whatever the situation. This is the buy-in part. We can assure this is accomplished by asking effective questions and listening:

1. "If we could accomplish all these objectives, what would be the value to the organization?" (Be thorough with this one by asking questions like: "What else?" "How?")

By now, relationships have been developed that open people to look at a more personal question, such as:

2. "If we could achieve our plan, what would it do for you personally?"

Encourage the group to be okay with acknowledging, owning and sharing their personal stakes.

THE CLOSE

By gaining agreement every step of the way and being very thorough, the close becomes very simple, perhaps, something like: "What do we need to do to move forward with this project?"

Some General Suggestions:

- When the meeting goes long enough for a break, after the break, bring people back into focus with a question like: What have you most appreciated about this meeting so far? The facilitator/presenter should participate as well.

- Check for changes following thinking and sharing time. Use questions like: What issues discussed so far do we need to talk about more? Any additions to the issues list? Any concerns?
- Leave plenty of silence both after questions and after responses. Allow plenty of time for people to think and complete and for things to happen.

All purpose response after every contribution: Thank you!

SUMMARY

This interactive approach to inspiring group agreement is based on building relationships utilizing what one of our clients called "The Ultimate Empowerment Tool", effective questions. Remember the best "selling" is done by those who talk less than 20% of the time and listen more than 80% of the time!

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