

## **Leadership in Action**

Every successful executive wants his or her company (or department) to be the best it can be – more importantly, better than peers and competition. Most unsuccessful executives also have this same goal and desire. Unfortunately, desire does not seem to be the defining reason for success. How you execute seems to be more important.

The key is leadership and leadership is an action not a spectator sport. Too many executives fail to implement excellent ideas and changes because they spend too much time waiting for things to develop and waiting for support. My favorite management cartoon shows two buzzards sitting on a cactus in the desert. Underneath it says – “Patience my ass. I’m going to kill something!”

Actions speak louder than words. Actions build momentum and create the inertia a company needs to continue to be successful. Companies that “rest a lot” need to get on an exercise program of change and get in shape. While you are resting, your competitors are creeping up on you and stealing market share.

Let’s back up a bit and dissect the typical change project. Everything starts with an idea. Let’s assume it’s your idea and it’s a great idea. You know you can’t develop and implement it alone so you talk to your peers and staff to get their reaction and support. You already know it is a great idea for the company but you need to understand how they see it from their specific perspectives. And, you need their involvement and support. In most companies, the reactions you can expect will fall into three categories; a few “yes’s”, one or two “no’s” and a lot of “buts’.” A “but” usually looks like a “yes” but contains a reason why it cannot be done now. For example, not enough money in the budget or not enough staff or other resources or it needs to be coordinated with other efforts, it needs to be prioritized, etc. If your idea is truly great, the “no’s” will be easy to deal with. The “buts” take more work but you must deal with them. They want to delay and postpone your idea and postponement is the kiss of death to any idea.

There’s a reason why you can expect more “buts” than any other type of reply. It’s the safest position for an executive to take. It is both positive and supportive and, at the same time, shows concern that there might be a problem that needs to be investigated and or at least considered. It’s the perfect answer for a cautious executive. No matter what happens they are right. And it slows things down and gives an executive time to see if they have the resources to participate. It also shows power and gives a manager the opportunity to turn the idea in a direction that is personally more advantageous.

Executives who take the “but” position will tend to be your more experienced people. You will be able to easily identify and deal with the ones that gave a quick answer and do not

really intend to delay or kill your idea. You can then concentrate on working with the people with more serious concerns.

Be careful at this point. This is where most change projects die. You presented your idea and you did not get the support you wanted. When you think about this, what happened is not surprising. It is to be expected. To be successful in getting support for any new idea you need to understand three things. First, when presenting ideas you need to show how this change will benefit not only the company in total but also the specific individual and department you need. Before executives will accept your idea, he or she must see the benefit for them. In the real world, this is essential. In most cases, selling an idea is a one-on-one activity. Present it to the group only after you have individual support.

Secondly, you must understand the objections you expect to get before you present your idea and have good answers prepared ahead of time. Your answers do not need to be totally complete. You may want to leave details to others so they can get credit for their part of the effort.

Thirdly, you need to understand that you do not need total agreement before starting. The project effort itself will create momentum and support. This is where leadership becomes so important. You had the vision and experience to identify the change or new program. Do you have the confidence and courage to see it through? If you are not willing to stick your neck out in support of your idea, maybe it is not such a great idea after all.

Some of the most important efforts our management consulting firm has been involved in only had partial support at the beginning and had to prove themselves during development. This did not make them any less important or successful. In the end, everyone supports a great idea.

One of the roles of an executive is to have the vision to see the path to success and be able to identify the specific changes needed. His or her success will depend on how well they implement their ideas and, of course, how well they work.

A culture of success is one where every employee expects things to work well and expects their results to be better than any one else's, because this is what always happens. This only occurs when executives have the courage, experience and energy to make the changes needed to keep the company successful. People may complain from time to time about the pace you set and how hard they have to work but this is nothing compared to the disappointment and despair if the company fails and jobs have to be cut.

Success breeds success. Success is built on action and results, not just floating ideas and suggestions to see what will be supported. It is difficult to get in front and take the chance of being wrong but this is the only way to get things done. Remember the two buzzards and do something.

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