

# Getting Buy-In Before Implementation

## Part 1: Avoiding Traps to Successful Culture Change

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Over the last 25 years, most organizations have evolved from autocratic hierarchies toward a more participate style of management. While that shift is generally seen as overwhelmingly positive, it's also possible that, in some cases the pendulum has been allowed to swing to far in the new direction. There is little debate over the benefits of things like customer input, employee involvement and cross-functional teams. There is a rising question, however, about the benefits of getting everyone's buy-in before making some kind of change.

For many years, I have been an advocate of getting buy-in from everyone involved before making a change. The thinking on the subject was clear; it is obvious that when people agree with a change they will have an easier time supporting and making change. It is also clear that, if in the process of getting buy-in the change is modified by those affected by the change; the change itself will be improved. The natural conclusion of both of these premises is that there would be less resistance, reduced frustration and that the overall change would take less time. In reality, what we have found is exactly the opposite. When making a change, focusing on getting everyone's buy-in results in greater frustration, confusion, and can easily double or triple the amount of time it takes to actually make the change.

In the old hierarchical system of management, change efforts were dictated from the top of the organization by people who were isolated from the operations that were affected by their decisions. Thus, many changes were fragmented, created more problems than were solved, and often didn't deal with root causes. There was there no place for getting buy-in, there was also no place for involvement for people outside of upper management. However, while command and control management never tried to get buy-in, there is a trend in current leadership practice that goes too far in working to get buy-in on all decisions made or actions taken.

This practice is an abdication of management's true leadership role and causes confusion, frustration, and a lack of action and commitment from employees. The irony is that more people in upper management believed that adopting a more participate style would enhance their image and help them gain new respect. In reality, the lack of clear direction and apparent indecisiveness has further promoted management's lack of credibility and created deeper dependency.

These are things that plagued their image for the past ten years or more. While the old criticism was that management wouldn't listen, now the criticism is that they can't be counted on stick to a direction, keep commitments or be accountable.

In one organization that was making a major restructuring change, the management formed task forces of employees at all levels to design the restructure. When the committees asked upper management for direction in designing the restructure,

management's response was, "We don't know, that is why you are empowered to make the decision." The committee was more frustrated than ever since they had no framework, no guidelines and no direction for the change. The situation soon became a battle of emotions and beliefs of committee members, which ended in conflict and stagnation.

Because many of the task forces came up with different criteria for their change strategy, the organization remained in a state of conflict for two years as they continued to sort out the fragmented design of the new organization. This approach led them to a place where they were completely stuck, unable to move forward or go back and start over. Unfortunately this result is far too common.

In another organization, a set of upper middle managers was given the directive to create Vision statement for their teams that would be shared at an upper level, and then throughout the organization, in order to ensure consistency in purpose and direction from a cross-functional perspective.

One manager wanted to get "buy-in" for creating a Vision statement instead of leading the group in the process of creating a Vision statement. Unfortunately, when he asked the group for their input on the value of creating a Vision Statement, about half the group objected to the process. While he never presented the context or rationale for creating the Vision, there was still a group of people on the team who liked the idea. For two hours, the team debated the value of creating the Vision Statement when, out of frustration, one of the team members said, "Let's just create the damn thing, instead of wasting everyone's time just talking about it." After an additional two hours, the team settled on a Vision, but without the enthusiasm or pride of ownership.

Another manager in the same organization, who had the same directive, went to his team and said, "We have been given the directive of creating a Vision that will be shared with the other teams in our division to ensure understanding, consistency and a clear direction. While some of us may not like the idea of creating a Vision statement, let's give it our best effort and demonstrate the clarity of our purpose and Vision as a model for the other departments in our division." The team spent the next hour and a half creating a Vision statement they were proud of and enthusiastic about sharing with others. They spent half the time and achieve a better outcome with a higher level of ownership and buy-in from the team.

While the first manager wanted to get buy-in up front, his approach and lack of leadership in giving clear direction to the team, created a situation where his credibility would be challenged. The second manager was honest and direct about the task, asked for their best effort, focused on getting their involvement and received buy-in from the team in the process of creating the Vision.

Some people are concerned that that we are advocating is a move back to an autocratic style of leadership. This is not true, and in this example there is a distinct difference. A traditional autocratic manager would have created a Vision statement for the team and then presented it to them. In contrast, effective leaders work to get involvement from

their team with regard to the implementation but not with regard to the direction. The important distinction is that involvement is not the same as buy-in; involvement focuses on how the change can be made or the assignment accomplished while buy-in focuses on whether or not we should make the change. In the next article we'll discuss further the difference between buy-in and involvement. We'll also give some clear examples of what this style of leadership looks like and how to carry-out effective communication in making the change.