

Getting Buy-In Before Implementation

Part 2: When is Buy-In Appropriate?

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In our last issue, we challenged the practice of getting everyone's buy-in before making a change. While to some that may sound like good sense and the empowering thing to do, what we have seen in practice is that getting everyone's buy-in will result in greater frustration, confusion and takes too much time. We also contrasted this type of leadership with the traditional, autocratic hierarchy while building a case for leadership that is clear, decisive and empowering. The distinction is that INVOLVEMENT is not the same as BUY-IN; involvement focuses on how to best make the change, while buy-in focuses on whether or not the change should be made.

So how do we know when it is appropriate to get buy-in before making a change? When the change involves a new or clarified direction that management has determined is critical for success or survival, it is inappropriate to get buy-in. This does not mean that you fail to get input from affected parties; it is critical to get input from people to gain a more complete perspective. However, if you need buy-in in order to proceed in making a change in direction, you will generally end up with resistance, anger and confusion, since people will either argue of the status quo or have their own desired approach to change based on their fear, comfort or some political objective. The desired outcome and direction of a change is generally a larger decision that is based on a multitude of factors that few in the organization may fully understand.

When you attempt to get buy-in on a decision that involves moving in a new direction, you automatically create conflict for people who do not see the whole picture. They do not have a context in which to understand the need for the change, and without the context, they cannot grasp the purpose of making the change. To you, the change is a necessity and not an option; yet to the employees affected by the change, maintaining a sense of stability is a greater goal because they cannot see the larger or future picture. Beware of thinking that all you need to do is take more time to educate and inform them so that they may see the big picture. This is important, but can easily become a black hole. Communicating and sharing information is always important and should be a primary consideration in any change effort.

As you communicate the change or direction, keep in mind that each person will "hear" the change in their own way, and not everyone will reach a point of understanding at the same time. For example, some people will have to see the change take place before they will understand the reason behind the change. For them, no amount of communication would have elicited their buy-in before the change took place. It is critical to communicate the context of the change and to continue reinforcing and reiterating that context throughout and after the change. Leaders often focus their communication efforts before the change and stop communicating after the change effort has begun.

Unfortunately, they miss out on the support of those who buy-in once they see the change taking place.

It's important to understand that communicating the change and the need to change won't, by itself, help people buy-in. Along with the communication, employees need to see a demonstration of the commitment of management to the new direction. The degree of safety and support employees feel in taking action will be in direct proportion to the depth and sincerity of commitment they see in management. The commitment of management won't be judged by the effectiveness of your communication but by your actions. The sincerity of management will be judged by how closely your actions match your communication.

Once the direction is stated, it is up to the leadership to guide people in being involved in the process of accomplishing the desired outcomes and direction. It is critical at this point to create a role of the teams that includes planning the efforts for successful implementation at each of their levels of authority.

While planning their strategy and implementation, they must get involvement with their strategies and efforts from all affected parties.

As they attempt to proceed and work toward a successful implementation, they will inevitably encounter differences. The only time these differences can be resolved is when the parties in conflict are all accountable for the same desired outcomes that were clearly expressed by upper management. If the direction is unclear or unstated, each department is left to interpret their own direction. Unless by luck or coercion, they all come to the same understanding, and the situation almost always results in unresolved conflict.