

RESPONDING TO NAYSAYERS AND SKEPTICS

Like so many of us, you have probably been there before, in a meeting room, standing in front of your colleagues, PowerPointing your way to getting buy-in on a business plan. You're just about to start the wrap-up when the saboteur strikes: "But we tried that two years ago and it didn't get us anywhere. And you think it's going to work now, in this economy?"

At best, the saboteur is a skeptic, but at worst—as is usually the case—you're facing a *naysayer*, someone who makes a habit of shooting people down, whether in a business meeting or at the local pub. "The role of a naysayer is a natural one," says Lorne Whitehead. "He or she is out there in all parts of society. It's simple human nature."

Whitehead is the-coauthor of *Buy-In: Saving Your Good Idea from Getting Shot Down*. Along with Harvard Business School professor John Kotter, Whitehead has written a virtual one-stop reference resource for turning congenital saboteurs or mere critics into true believers.

Whitehead and Kotter's advice for neutralizing critics and getting buy-in is counterintuitive. "It is much more effective to engage your attackers and draw them in than to draw a line and confront them," says Whitehead, who is Leader of Education Innovation at the University of British Columbia. "People, and I mean naysayers, will respect you more if you respect them, namely by acknowledging them and their criticism."

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Also, their attacks draw attention to your proposal and attention is very valuable. And, if you handle the attack well, you'll look good and win credibility.

The coauthors describe five tactics for disarming critics:

- Don't push the troublemakers out; let them in and allow them to shoot at you. Letting people in gets their attention, and when people pay attention their minds are engaged and you can get the intellectual and emotional commitment you need.
- Don't respond by giving a speech or dumping loads of data. Keep your response short so that minds don't have time to wander. Use common sense, not lists or data, and speak clearly, using simple, direct language.
- Don't get personal, no matter how badly you want to. "Disrespect is negative," says Whitehead, "and even though some attackers are narcissists or bullies, if you respect them you will draw an audience emotionally to your side."
- Keep your eyes on the whole group and don't get hung up on the attacker. You're not trying to win over those who want to shoot down a good idea; you're pursuing the majority of those that determine whether you will win or lose.
- Don't try to wing it. Prepare well and try to anticipate attacks. If the stakes are high you may benefit from holding a small brainstorming session to review and prepare for the different types of attacks you think are possible. And don't ever become defensive.

In their book, Kotter and Whitehead list 24 attacks that are the most common and offer the response to each that is likeliest to defang an attacker. They group the set into three broad categories:

Category One: "We don't need your idea, because the 'problem' it 'solves' doesn't exist."

Attack Example: "We've never done this in the past, and things have always worked out okay."

Response: "That's true. But surely we have all seen that those who fail to adapt eventually become extinct." The response is simple, accurate, and basic. It essen-

tially says that life evolves and to continue to succeed we must adapt. Examples will help your case.

Category Two: “Okay, there is a problem but your idea is not the solution.”

Attack Example: “You’re abandoning our traditional core values.”

Response: “This plan is essential to uphold our traditional values.” An effective response is based on a simple insight. Much more often than not, a really good idea upholds key values in the face of change. For example, “Yes, we propose advertising for the first time. This is a good idea because it’s needed to help us grow, which is essential to offering more jobs and promotion opportunities, which is what our founders really cared about. We’re not abandoning our traditional values, we’re upholding them.”

Category Three: “Okay, there is a problem, and this is a good proposal to deal with the issue, but you’ll never make it work here. It’s too difficult to understand.”

Attack Example: “Too many of our people will never understand the idea and inevitably they will not help us make it happen.”

Response: “That’s not a problem. We will make the required effort to convince them. It’s worth the effort to do so.”

“Whatever you do,” cautions Whitehead, “don’t be defensive. Always, always engage.”

SUSTAINABLE APPROACHES TO HUMAN RESOURCES IN A VOLATILE WORLD

Human resources practices, long the platform on which many companies built competitive advantage,

may soon fail many of those same companies unless they start rebuilding those practices. This warning—and what companies must focus on to attract and retain the best talent—is contained in a comprehensive report on global HR published by the Boston Consulting Group.

“Whether it’s because leaders have taken their eye off HR to manage the latest crisis or because companies have developed ad hoc programs at the expense of sustainable programs, the fact is that talent management has been neglected these last two years,” says BCG’s Steve Richardson. “Executives participating in our survey believe that managing talent, leadership development, employee engagement and strategic workforce planning are the critical HR capabilities going forward. Yet those same executives admit that their current practices for meeting these capabilities are inadequate.”

The BCG report, *Creating People Advantage 2010: How Companies Can Adapt Their HR Practices for Volatile Times*, is based on the views of 5561 HR and business unit executives in 109 countries. “Those companies that understand that they must have sustainable approaches to their workforce—rather than allowing themselves to be buffeted around by reality—are the companies that higher talent is going to want to go to over the next 20 years,” says Richardson. “These are the companies that are looking ahead. They’re identifying the capabilities that they’ll need and developing a systematic approach to building those capabilities.”

Anticipating future capabilities is just one of the best practices that separate HR leaders from the laggards. “Leaders of top performers are more willing and able to use HR as a strategic partner,” says Richardson. “The best-practice companies focus on being flexible, not on cutting back, and select and concentrate on fewer, carefully chosen initiatives than lower performers, who seem compelled to develop a program for every event or situation.”

High performers also:

- Develop metrics to assess training programs, and measure their ROI.