

■ Going Beyond the Brainstorm

9 Ways to Turn Good Ideas into Great Achievements

by Tom Terez

So you have a great idea, eh? Perhaps it's a new product or service. Or an overhaul of a key work process. Or a tweak to part of the process. But you're frustrated because no one shares your wide-eyed excitement. Whenever you explain your idea, colleagues listen politely, nod robotically, ask a token question – then get on with business as usual.

Welcome to the drawing board as graveyard.

Most good ideas never come close to implementation. You've heard Edison's comment about invention being 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration. Well, it often turns out to be 100 percent expiration. Think about your own work history. You probably have a tombstone or two on that drawing-board graveyard marking your own good ideas that saw an early death.

That's the bad news. The good news is that it doesn't have to be that way, as long as you're willing to facilitate, strategize, persuade, convince, compromise, and more. Hey, we never said it would be easy!

■ For starters, try to involve your colleagues when the idea is still on the drawing board. Develop the concept together, so your seed of an idea becomes their idea. This is tough. It requires you to give up some ownership. It takes more time. And it can lead to ideas that are far afield from your original vision. But it's the surest way to create a powerful group of advocates.

■ Make sure the idea is fully developed before trying to move it beyond the drawing board. A vague concept will stir up scant support, plenty of questions, and an excess of skepticism. You say you want to trim the approval process so customers can get quicker service? Fine – but exactly *how* will you trim it? What steps will be eliminated? Think through all the details.

■ Give the idea as much tangibility as possible, so people can experience it instead of just hear-

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ing about it. For instance, if you and your team have conjured up improvements to a data-entry system, create several mock computer screens to show how the system would appear to users. If you're recommending the installation of ergonomically friendly keyboards, then have a sample at hand so people can try it out. What if you're proposing changes to a process that can't be easily demonstrated? No problem – create an oversized flowchart that provides “before” and “after” illustrations.

■ Once the idea seems well-conceived and ready to roll, become a strategist. Contemplate the forces that will work for and against the recom-

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■ Going Beyond the Brainstorm *continued*

mended improvement. Pinpoint the probable barriers. Identify the likely allies. Then come up with a plan to make the most of the situation. Perhaps cost-cutting has become a top priority, and your idea will trim 15 percent off a costly process. Bingo – you’ve got your leverage point. Maybe there’s a key decision-maker who always rants against organizational bureaucracy. Then show how the idea will simplify things. It could even be that the timing isn’t right; if you wait one month, a new budget cycle will begin and your idea will get a warmer reception. By being a smart strategist, you’ll find the best approach.

■ Link the new idea to the organization’s or department’s reason for being. If the mission emphasizes quick service to customers, and the idea will reduce waiting times by 25 percent, emphatically say so – but be sure to have solid projections to back up your claim. If the strategic plan calls for making inroads into a new market, and your smart suggestion will lead the way, again, show the connection.

■ Be ready with a cost-benefit analysis that shows some sort of return on investment. Work up the initial outlay, the long-term costs, and the expected return. Provide three scenarios of varying optimism. Even if the idea is relatively simple – say, your group is recommending a new scheduling system for four help-desk employees – still crunch the numbers and show the financial implications. What if the ROI is negative? Then show other likely benefits, like increased customer loyalty, that will justify the investment.

■ If possible, try out the idea on a test basis. Use the insights to tweak the plan and generate some early results. For example, have ten of 100 staffers try out the new keyboards for one week. Keep track of productivity and work quality, and gather the ten users for a focus group at week’s

end. Use their feedback to evaluate and refine the improvement. Also, compare the test data to productivity and quality rates with the old keyboards. If there are gains with the new equipment, you’re well on the way to building a solid business case.

■ Understand your liabilities, and make sure they don’t undermine your efforts. If you get queasy just hearing the term “cost accounting,” then enlist the help of your number-crunching colleagues when developing the cost-benefit analysis. If you tend to think in broad brush strokes, figuring that someone else will handle the details, then make sure your team has people who are ardent planners. If you get so excited about new ideas that you assume others will go along from the get-go, force yourself to take a strategic pause to assess the terrain, pinpoint the barriers, and identify those early supporters.

■ Accept the fact that all of the above is a messy undertaking. Your idea is certain to mutate as more people get involved in shaping it. You’ll have to be painfully patient as the decision-making gears creak and groan. And you’ll need to reach beyond your own comfort zone of tendencies and skills. Whatever you do, hang in there. As Edison himself put it, “Many of life’s failures are people who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up.”

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