

Book Review

Buy-In: Saving Your Good Idea from Getting Shot Down

Author: **John P. Kotter and Lorna A. Whitehead**

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Why do good ideas get shot down? Is this because there is an inherent resistance to good ideas? Or, is it a problem of psychic inertia? How, if at all, given the propensity to shoot down good ideas, does change happen? These then are the sort of questions that should be of interest to anybody who finds himself in the executive or leadership function in firms. The interesting thing about this slim but riveting volume is that it will appeal not only to students of business policy and change management, but to just about any professional who has to manage or lead in these difficult times. In fact, I would also recommend this book strongly to those who are interested in seemingly unrelated areas like legal policy and public policy. The communications manual that constitutes the better part of this book can be used to train lawyers in the modalities of litigation. This then is a rather unusual book since it does not fall neatly under the rubric of communications, persuasion, rhetoric, or even logic but partakes a little of all these crucial areas. It also deploys a generic form that is partly storytelling and partly a reference book. It is therefore important for a reader to understand in what sequence he must read the chapters and what sort of a study path will help him to get the best out of the book. The authors do not ask the reader to take in the book in one gulp but to read the different parts using different reading comprehension strategies. Students of management may want to situate this book in the context of John Kotter's previous work on change management.

Kotter is not only the world's leading expert on change management, but has spent the better part of his professional career at the Harvard Business School and, subsequently, at Kotter International, studying the role of 'buy-in' during attempts at large-scale change management by both firms and governments. The notion of buy-

in is not reducible to merely selling ideas by putting them in a more persuasive form, but an attempt to grapple with the psychic-cum-linguistic forms in which resistance surfaces as inertial habits. The point for Kotter is not to blame anybody who resists change but to understand why we all resist change in our own way. So while ideas are necessary to re-vitalize firms, they are not sufficient. The ideational process must be tied up with the communications dimension in order to increase the probability of getting buy-in. This then is the essence of the argument that Kotter and Whitehead put forth in this volume. They however start by not putting this across as a theoretical proposition but by staging an imaginary dialogue in a library which receives an offer from a store that it will make computers available free of cost to poor children, if the town, where the library is situated, agrees to buy a certain number of computers in its turn. This simple proposal generates a heated round of discussions by the committee that is in charge of deciding whether or not the town and the library can co-operate to increase computer access for the poor kids of the town. Kotter and Whitehead look at the proposal and the arguments for and against from the point of view of all the members of the committee to understand the structure of the arguments that the members spontaneously invoke. The members do not necessarily know how to situate what each of them is up to.

Each of the arguments or cognitive styles that they represent is then taken up as the subject of a separate essay in the communications manual that is included in this book. The reading strategy that the authors recommend, if I understand them correctly, is to read the imaginary dialogue and their deconstruction of the cognitive styles of the various participants rightaway, and take up the individual entries for detailed study later as

and when readers encounter an impasse in their attempts to get buy-in for a proposal of theirs. Trying to understand the ubiquity of these patterns is important because the goodwill required to sell ideas or get buy-in from key stakeholders, members of committees, and so on is often lost when the person putting forth a good idea becomes indignant without understanding that those who participate in a discussion on the merits of a given proposal are often victims of their own thought patterns, and may not be conscious of what they are doing. My recommendation, in terms of understanding these cognitive-cum-linguistic patterns that constitutes the working manual in this book, is to ask how the unconscious is implicated in each of these cognitive patterns. It will then become obvious that these inertial patterns that think their way through people are symptomatic of world-views, which must be deconstructed before the participants can distance themselves from their own thought patterns. Having this kind of distance will make it more likely that discussions will take on mutually beneficial forms of give-and-take rather than degenerate into forensic exchanges of "I am OK; You are not OK". This then is the main advantage of this book; it not only helps the reader to identify his own cognitive style but help him to come to terms with its strengths and limitations through the indirect and tactful approach that Kotter and Whitehead invoke to get across something as sensitive as the problem of cognitive and/or argumentative style.

Reviewed by:

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