

# ENTERPRISE

## Four-step process is powerful technique to make sure your ideas get listened to fairly



### Negotiation strategies

■ Raphael E. Lapin

“How can I make sure my ideas are being heard? Just last week I was in a meeting during which I suggested a solution to a problem. They totally ignored me. Twenty minutes later, someone else suggested exactly the same idea almost verbatim and, low and behold, the entire group embraced it enthusiastically and gave him the credit. It is so frustrating — what can I do?”

I have been asked this question or some variation of it numerous times and thought it would be of value to address it in my column.

Let's use the following scenario as an illustration: Bob from New Product Development, Sara from Marketing and Jack from the engineering team are in a meeting with you to discuss the development and launch of a new customer relationship management product.

Bob is excited about the potential of this new product and thinks that it could revolutionize the way companies manage their customer relations. He also feels that it can give your company a huge competitive boost.

Sara is concerned that all the capabilities and features together with the associated price of this new product are beyond what most companies would require which would make marketing hard and would limit the potential customer base.

Jack is feeling somewhat overwhelmed by what he perceives to be a complicated and intricate engineering project and has concerns about resources, costs and schedule.

An innovative idea occurs to you that

appears to address all of their concerns. Here are some tips to make sure your idea gets heard:

- **Demonstrate understanding of their concerns.**

Paradoxically, the key to being heard is to first make sure that the other(s) are feeling heard and understood. This is accomplished by reflecting back to them how you have understood them and checking for accuracy. The importance of this first step cannot be overemphasized.

You might say: “Bob, if I understand you correctly, you see enormous potential for this new CRM product in terms of impact on our bottom line, while you, Sara, are concerned about it being too much for the typical user thereby limiting our market. And Jack, you expressed concern about the engineering challenges involved. Have I understood you all accurately?”

As they confirm your understanding, you will almost hear an audible sigh of relief as they experience the validation of being heard and understood.

- **Offer your idea.**

Once you have demonstrated understanding of their concerns, you are now qualified to offer your idea by saying: “Having understood what your concerns are, an idea that may be worth consideration is to design a base system with the option of the various add-on features as required by specific customers, much the way automobiles are sold with add-on options as suited to each individual buyer's tastes”

By first demonstrating understanding of the other party's point of view, they will be much more receptive to hearing your thoughts.

- **Explain how your idea addresses their concerns.**

When you present your idea it is important to bring it full-circle by explaining how it appears to address their concerns.

In our example you could say: “If we were to

go with the add-on options idea, it would broaden our target market, Sara, rather than limit it. Jack, it would seem to me that by breaking the project up into separate add-on components, it would make it more manageable.”

It is very compelling when you link your ideas explicitly to their concerns, and show them how their concerns are addressed. In addition, they feel a degree of ownership over your idea in as much as their concerns helped to drive your creativity. (In fact it is a good idea to acknowledge explicitly how their concerns contributed to your thinking).

- **Conclude with a question.**

As a final measure to make sure that you have been heard, it is useful to conclude with a question that elicits a response. This will check the extent to which they were listening and also engage them in further discussion of your idea.

You might conclude by asking: “What concerns are not addressed by this idea or what might be new concerns that this idea raises?” Another useful question is: “What variations or refinements are there that you can think of that could further develop this idea?”

Using this strategy of closing with an open-ended question, forces them to tacitly acknowledge your idea thereby precluding them from ignoring it only to have someone present it later as their own.

This four-step process is a powerful technique to get your ideas listened to. Practice it until you use it fluently, seamlessly and intuitively because it is key to the mastery of influence and persuasion.

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