

Successful Supervisor Part 53

Getting Management Buy-In

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In this article I will discuss one of the most vexing problems facing professionals of all kinds, including supervisors. Supervisors are often faced with the dilemma of getting full buy-in for an initiative that they know will advance the organization.

A typical complaint might sound like this, “I know bringing in this training would pay huge dividends for my operation, but I cannot get their attention long enough to make my case. If I turn up the volume, then I am accused of getting emotional, which lowers my chance of getting what is obviously needed.”

Let’s explore the root causes of this problem and suggest some potential antidotes. Note: this problem is so pervasive that fully resolving it may not be possible.

Why isn’t Top Management Listening to Your Ideas?

There are likely numerous answers to your question. Let me suggest a few of the more common causes of managers failing to get behind initiatives that are proposed at lower levels.

1. Isolation and Preoccupation

Many top managers work in a kind of bubble where they interface with the managers who report directly to them but have a lot less contact with people lower in the organization. Their days, and nights, are full of thought patterns relative to how they can keep the ship moving in the right direction, so they appear to be very preoccupied with details and hard to reach for different ideas.

When they are at work, every minute in every meeting is often spoken for. A new initiative might feel threatening to them as if it might cause some distraction from their primary agenda. Trying to get a new idea or initiative on the agenda, no matter how brilliantly conceived, will require some creative thinking.

One tip that can help is to always focus in on the benefits that will accrue from your idea before describing the steps that need to be accomplished. If your idea will reduce an organizational problem, be sure to stress this first to get the attention of the top brass.

2. Working Through Layers

Often the supervisor or person with a great idea has to work through a layer or two of other managers in order to get air time on the agenda at the top. These other layers have been put in place primarily to allow the senior leaders time to work on their agenda. It is common for a manager to come back from the top level meeting and explain that even though she had gotten your idea on the agenda, it never surfaced at the meeting because there were more urgent topics to resolve.

The tip here is to find a way to get your idea exposed to the top leader yourself. If you count on your boss or her boss to take your case to the top, you have less chance of success. Your agenda will get watered down significantly as it moves through the layers. Rather than allow another person to pitch your idea, explore creative ways to get before the decision makers yourself.

This technique can be tricky because your boss has to justify her role as well. You might suggest a route to the top with an approach like this: "I really want to present the idea to Mr. Big myself this time. Would you be willing to tee up the conversation and arrange a lunch meeting for the three of us?"

3. Chain of Command Issues

The well intended professional may not have enough recognition at the top of the organization to gain share of mind. The supervisor may have a wonderful idea, but the top leader will never know it because he assumes her direct boss is the one who should pass judgment on the idea.

The tip here is to get a chance to surface your idea at a meeting where both your direct boss and the top leader are there together. Ask for the support of your boss ahead of time, so when you surface the idea she can provide immediate support in front of the top layer. That approach has three benefits: 1) the top layer hears your idea in the way you describe it, 2) the senior person knows you have done your homework, and 3) you have an opportunity to make your boss look good in front of the senior leaders.

4. Insufficient Credibility

The top leaders may not be adequately aware of your prowess in terms of seeing and executing innovative opportunities for the organization. If this is the case, you need to start small and generate several small successes. It also helps to volunteer for leadership roles in furthering the causes already being pushed from the top. Be strategic because credibility is earned over time, but the equity can be destroyed by a single misstep.

5. Not Invented Here

NIH thinking permeates the mind of people at all levels. If you are three levels below me in the organization and you come up with a magic solution to all my problems, what force makes me want to displace the solutions that are coming out of my head to give your solution a try?

The top leaders may fear that the changes you advocate will lead to loss of control or some side effect that will cause extra effort or cost to unscramble. To fight this problem, you need to present the idea as simple, logical, and bullet proof (low risk). It also will add to your credibility if you have thought through some potential problems and have solutions to offer if these might arise. When you present a balanced and thoroughly investigated idea, it lowers the risk.

Some Other Tips

I will suggest some ideas here, but recognize that individual differences will make them successful or not depending on the circumstances. Maybe the best advice is to build a reputation for excellence and innovation in the areas you control. A track record of excellence is your best calling card.

1. Don't Appear to be Overly Anxious or Disgruntled

If you lose your cool out of frustration, then not only will you not get approval for your project, but you will damage all future proposals. Always remain respectful and helpful. Keep stressing the benefits and remind superiors that we are all on the same team.

In some circumstances, you can even ask for a "favor" to allow your idea to be executed. This approach shows that you really care about the organization and have the initiative to bring up solid solutions. One good technique to accomplish this is to suggest a "pilot program" that can demonstrate the benefits with a lower risk.

2. Always be a Team Player

Seek out allies and friends at all levels. Make sure you are doing more than your share of the work and be generous with your praise for others. If people genuinely like you they will go to bat for you in many ways.

Also, foster good relationships with the administrative helpers of people higher in the organization. These people have more power than is sometimes realized by people lower in the organization. For one thing, they control the time agenda of the people in power, so if they like you it means you can get more access.

In addition, the administrative assistant is privy to discussions that go on when you are not around. If the person likes you, he or she will tip you off if you are coming on too strong or in some other way hurting your own agenda.

3. If You Get Approval, Make Sure to Express Appreciation and Report Results

Work is really a series of initiatives, so you do yourself a favor by praising the big boss if you are granted the opportunity to show how your idea will help. Do this in writing (not texting or email). Make sure to report back the fine results of the implemented idea with expressions of further gratitude.

Basically, you want to develop a groove or pattern of successful implementation of ideas. This pattern will make future proposals have a higher chance of success and will often lead to eventual promotions for you.

Gaining and maintaining a reputation that causes senior leaders to be eager to hear your ideas is a daunting task, but it is possible to accomplish through the application of excellent political skills. Selling your ideas is an ultimate test of your professional capability. Study the ideas above and add more to your repertoire through your own experiences.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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