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

By: John Kotter & Lorne Whitehead

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You've got a good idea. You know it could make a crucial difference for you, your organization, your community. You present it to the group, but get confounding questions, inane comments, and verbal bullets in return. Before you know what's happened, your idea is dead, shot down. You're furious. Everyone has lost: Those who would have benefited from your proposal. You. Your company. Perhaps even the country.

It doesn't have to be this way, maintain John Kotter and Lorne Whitehead. In Buy-In, they reveal how to win the support your idea needs to deliver valuable results. The key? Understand the generic attack strategies that naysayers and obfuscators deploy time and time again. Then engage these adversaries with tactics tailored to each strategy. By "inviting in the lions" to critique your idea--and being prepared for them--you'll capture busy people's attention, help them grasp your proposal's value, and secure their commitment to implementing the solution.

The book presents a fresh and amusing fictional narrative showing attack strategies in action. It then provides several specific counterstrategies for each basic category the authors have defined--including:

- Death-by-delay: Your enemies push discussion of your idea so far into the future it's forgotten.
- Confusion: They present so much data that confidence in your proposal dies.
- Fearmongering: Critics catalyze irrational anxieties about your idea.
- Character assassination: They slam your reputation and credibility.

Smart, practical, and filled with useful advice, Buy-In equips you to anticipate and combat attacks--so your good idea makes it through to make a positive change.
My Synopsis:

Influence is important to getting things accomplished in all areas of our lives, and in more instances than not, we can’t go at it alone, we need help from others. We need people to work with us and help us to accomplish many of our goals, yet they need to buy-in to the solution, to be able to take ownership in some way so that they give their all.

This book does a great job talking about how you can help gain buy-in from those you need, but ultimately it’s about you taking the responsibility to prepare yourself with information (and patience) to gain buy-in and build relationships before you need them.

My Notes:

p.7 Attacks that derail good ideas can come from all sorts of people.
p.8 Our requirement to implement good ideas is a central part of what life is all about.
p.9 To get people to truly buy into a new idea, you can go into the arena, armed with the knowledge in this book, and encourage them, not stop them, from sending in the lions.
p.9 We focus on how you keep those (good) ideas from being shot down and how you build sufficiently strong support around them so that successful action follows.
p.16 Attacks that confused: sink a good idea by so muddling a conversation in peoples' minds that they begin to wonder if your proposal really makes sense.
   ▶ Death by delay
   ▶ Fear-mongering (emotional hot buttons that raise anxieties)
   ▶ Ridicule and character assassination (attack the person, not the idea)
p.20 Start with the problem or opportunity
p.26 We all know that those who fail to adapt eventually become less and less successful.
p.27 The goal is not to win the hearts and minds of all those who disagree with a proposal...the goal is to win the hearts and minds of the majority.
p.29 Always trust people with respect.
p.34 You need a lot more people feeling (no just thinking) that the idea is important (not just logical).
p.41 People can “what if” you forever.
p.48 How well he is dispatching the zingers using his basic formula of respecting everyone, keeping his answers simple and sensible, constantly watching the entire audience.
p.74 Fear-Mongering – an attitude strategy aimed at raising anxieties so that a thoughtful examination of a proposal is very difficult if not impossible.
p.76 Memories of suffering can evoke fear.
p.76 An undercurrent of fear becomes a riptide.
p.77 Delay – an attitude when questions and concerns can kill a good proposal simply by creating a deadly delay.
p.77 Death by delay tactics can force so many meetings or so many straw polls that momentum is lost. Or another idea, not merely as good, gains a foothold.
Confusion – an attitude involving idea killing questions and concerns that muddle the conversation with irrelevant facts, convoluted logic, or so many alternatives that it is impossible to have clear and intelligent dialogue that builds buy-in.

A confused person might still vote yes, but only to stop the conversation and with no commitment toward making the idea become reality.

Ridicule (character assassination) – verbal bullets that don't shoot directly at the idea, but at the people behind the idea.

Strong buy-in is rarely achieved if an audience feels uneasy with those presenting a proposal.

Don't scheme to keep potential opponents, even the sneakiest attackers, out of the discussion. Let them in. Let them shoot at you. Even encourage them to shoot at you.

Without people's attention, you really won't have a chance to explain a hazard or an opportunity, along with your good, practical solution.

A virtue of drama and sparks is that they attract attention.

When people are paying attention, their minds become engaged.

Don't try to overcome attacks with tons of data; logic and yet more logic; or lists of reasons why unfair, uninformed, or sneaky attacks are wrong, wrong, wrong. Instead, do what might seem to be the opposite.

We are often taught by our experiences that common sense may be a casualty of the modern age.

Don't try to crush attacks with ridicule, counter attacks, or condescension, even when it seems as though people deserve it, even when a part of you really wants to do just that, and you have the skills to do so.

You need to win hearts and minds to gain true buy-in.

It is difficult to overstate the negative effects caused by an attitude of disrespect.

When respect draws a sympathetic response, you are, so to speak, winning over the heart.

Don't be pulled into a debate where you focus on a small number of disruptive debaters instead of the large number of judges.

Don't waste your time trying to convert a minority that is so emotionally committed to an ideology that they will never support your idea unless it is changed to fit that ideology.

With weak buy-in, people may abandon a plan when they hit the first obstacle.

Don't try to wing-it, even if you know all the facts thoroughly, even if the idea seems bulletproof, and even if you expect a friendly audience.

Preparation can significantly build confidence and reduce your anxiety.

Gain people's attention by allowing the attackers in and letting them attack.

Win the minds of the relevant, attentive audience with simple, clean, and commonsense responses.

Win their hearts by, most of all, showing respect.

Constantly monitor the people whose hearts and minds you need: the broad audience, not the few attackers.

Prepare for these steps in advance.

Surely we have all seen that those who fail to adapt eventually become extinct.

Defensive people often hurl all sorts of additional attacks.
p.109  Life evolves, and to continue to succeed, we must adapt.
p.110  Extra money is rarely what builds truly great ventures or organizations.
p.111  More funding would be nice, but great organizations, products, or activities rarely come from a money-is-the-real-problem attitude.
p.112  To the good people who suffer because of this problem, it certainly doesn’t look small.
p.113  Almost anyone can empathize with a cause if confronted with a real live person who has suffered and will benefit from the change.
p.114  Rare is the proposal that does not elicit opposition.
p.122  All good ideas, if they are new, raise dozens of questions that cannot be answered with certainty.
p.123  History will never provide data that leads to 100 percent certainty that a new idea will work.
p.124  Our idea will get us started moving in the right direction and will do so without further delay.
p.137  There really is a first time for everything, and we do have a unique opportunity.
p.144  An engaged group both makes better decisions and implements them more successfully.
p.145  Good questions and concerns can help you to make useful adjustments to a plan that is fundamentally sound.
p.147  Times change and the situation today is inevitably different.
p.151  Almost anyone can understand an idea if time is spent explaining it clearly and simply.
p.157  The best time is almost always when you have people excited and committed to make something happen. And that’s now.
p.159  Hard can be good. A genuinely good new idea, facing time-consuming obstacles, can both raise our energy level and motivate us to eliminate wasted time.
p.159  “We can be the ones to succeed, not because it is easy, but because it is hard.” - JFK
p.159  A worthwhile cause can raise us from feeling tired to feeling inspired.
p.169  Most important changes are achieved without new sources of money.
p.172  “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” - Margaret Mead
p.173  Take stock of where you are, and make sure you have not forgotten anything obvious.
p.176  If the stakes are big enough, always set aside time for one or more brainstorming sessions.
24 attacks that are commonly used and 24 responses that will help prevent verbal attacks from stopping good ideas.

#1 "We've been successful, why change?!"
Attack: We've never done this in the past and things have always worked out OK.
Response: True. But surely we have all seen that those who fail to adapt eventually become extinct.

#2 "The only problem is not enough money."
Attack: Money is the issue, not ______ (computers, product safety, choice of choir songs, etc).<
Response: Extra money is rarely what builds truly great ventures or organizations.

#3 "You exaggerated the problem."
Attack: You are exaggerating. This is a small issue for us if it is an issue at all.
Response: To the good people who suffer because of this problem, it certainly doesn't look small.

#4 "You're saying we've failed??!!"
Attack: If this is a problem, then what you are telling us is that we have been doing a lousy job. That's insulting!
Response: No, we're suggesting that you are doing a remarkably good job without the needed tools (systems, methods, laws, etc) which, in our proposal, you will have.

#5 "What's the hidden agenda?"
Attack: It's clear you have a hidden agenda and we would prefer that you take it elsewhere.
Response: Not fair! Just look at the track record of the good folks behind this proposal! (And why would you even suggest such a thing?)

#6 "What about this, and that, and that (etc.)?"
Attack: Your proposal leaves too many questions unanswered. What about this and that, and this and that, and...
Response: All good ideas, if they are new, raise dozens of questions that cannot be answered with certainty.

#7 "No good! It doesn't go far enough" (or, "It goes too far")
Attack: Your proposal doesn't go nearly far enough.
Response: Maybe, but our idea will get us started moving in the right direction, and do so without further delay.

#8 "You have a chicken and egg problem."
Attack: You can't do A without doing B, yet you can't do B without doing A. So the plan won't work.
Response: Well actually, you can do a little bit of A which allows a little bit of B which allows more A which allows more of B, and so on.

#9 "Sounds like 'killing puppies' to me!"
Attack: Your plan reminds me of a thing disgusting and terrible (insert totalitarianism, organized crime, insanity, or...)
Response: Look, you know it isn't like that. A realistic comparison might be...
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#10 "You're abandoning our values."
Attack: You are abandoning our traditional values.
Response: This plan is essential to uphold our traditional values.

#11 "It's too simplistic to work."
Attack: Surely you don’t think a few simple tricks will solve everything?
Response: No – it’s the combination of your good work and some new things that, together, can make a great advance.

#12 "No one else does this!"
Attack: If this is such a great idea, why hasn't it been done already?
Response: There really is a first time for everything and we do have a unique opportunity.

#13 "You can't have it both ways!"
Attack: Your plan says X and Y, but they are incompatible. You can’t have both!
Response: Actually, we didn’t say X or Y—although, I grant you, it may have sounded that way. We said A and B, which are not incompatible.

#14 "Aha! You can't deny this!"
Attack: I'm sorry – you mean well, but look at this problem you've clearly missed! You can't deny the significance of this issue!
Response: No one can deny the significance of the issue you have raised, and, yes, we haven't explored it. But every potential problem we have found so far has been readily solved. So in light of what has happened again and again and again, I am today confident that this new issue can also be handled, just like all the rest.

#15 "To generate all these questions and concerns, the idea has to be flawed."
Attack: Look at how many different concerns there are! This can't be good!
Response: Actually, many the questions mean we are engaged, and an engaged group both makes better decisions and implements them more successfully.

#16 "Tried it before – didn't work."
Attack: We tried that before and it didn't work.
Response: That was then. Conditions inevitably change [and what we propose probably isn't exactly what was tried before]

#17 "It's too difficult to understand."
Attack: Too many of our people will never understand the idea and, inevitably, will not help us make it happen.
Response: Not a problem. We will make the required effort to convince them. It's worth the effort to do so.

#18 "This is not the right time."
Attack: Good idea, but it's the wrong time. We need to wait until this other thing is finished (or this other thing is started, or the situation changes in a certain special way).
Response: The best time is almost always when you have people excited and committed to make something happen. And that's now.
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#19 "It's too much work."
Attack: This seems too hard! I’m not sure we are up for it.
Response: Hard can be good. A genuinely good new idea, facing time consuming obstacles, can both raise our energy level and motivate us to eliminate wasted time.

#20 "Won't work here, we're different!"
Attack: It won’t work here because we are so different.
Response: Yes it’s true, we’re different, but we are also very much the same.

#21 "It puts us on a slippery slope."
Attack: You’re on a slippery slope leading to a cliff. This small move today will lead to disaster tomorrow.
Response: Good groups of people—all the time-- use common sense as a guard rail to keep them from sliding into disaster.

#22 "We can't afford this."
Attack: The plan may be fine but we cannot do it without new sources of money.
Response: Actually, most important changes are achieved without new sources of money.

#23 "You'll never convince enough people."
Attack: It will be impossible to get unanimous agreement with this plan.
Response: You are absolutely right. That’s almost never possible, and that’s OK.

#24 "We’re not equipped to do this."
Attack: We don’t really have the skills or credentials to pull this off!
Response: We have much of what we need and we can and will get the rest.