



ALL FOR ONE & ONE FOR ALL?

Managing the expectations and reactions of your colleagues – the ‘internal sale’ – can be as important as the external sales process.

SIMON BUZZA advises on how to set about it

FAIL TO PREPARE – AND PREPARE TO FAIL

Does this scenario ring any bells? You have a great idea for improving business performance – it makes absolute sense to you – and after some persuasive explanation, your team and your clients (customers, suppliers or partners) love it too. But it does not fly inside your own company, instead stagnating in the pending tray of your boss amongst all the other routine issues that are constantly overtaken by ‘more pressing matters’.

The whole sales and/or implementation process is halted because a critical element has been overlooked, the ‘internal sale’. This is the process of getting the ‘buy-in’ from your own business and it is often more difficult than selling the proposition externally.

Why is this? Predominantly, this type of situation occurs because you have been amateurish in planning and preparing the launch of your idea or project. You have ignored the interests of your own stakeholders and do not have their buy-in. Few business functions have the resources and authority to accomplish assignments unilaterally and, consequently, need cross-functional support. You need to recognise that far from being the sleek, efficient machine you wish your company was, it is in fact a complex entity that needs to be coaxed and guided to new and different ways of doing things. In many cases, the internal sale is a more sensitive issue than the external one and is riddled with negative reaction or stagnation. This may be because of a fear of failure, concerns about costs and return on investment (ROI), or from memories of previous bad experiences when new ideas were unsuccessful. It may also be as a result of an impending shift in the balance of power as a result of your new initiative, and this could lead to over protectionism and ‘blocking’ of changes. Understanding these issues is key to overcoming them.

This is a challenge for more than just the sales team. Every cross-functional team will need to convey their ideas persuasively to the rest of the organisation, so internal sales skills are needed by a very broad church. But sales leaders clearly hold some advantages.

MANAGING THE STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

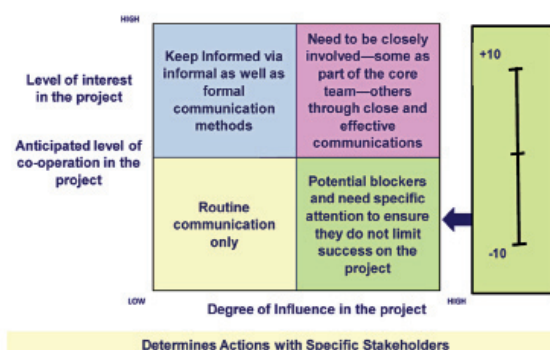
Communication with the stakeholders is a given. But stakeholder management principles are really important in managing the internal sale. These are generally based

on a simple Boston matrix measuring interest/co-operation in the project against degree of influence and power over the project (see the diagram below). The positioning in this matrix determines the appropriate actions to be taken when managing the stakeholder. Interest tends to focus on the bottom right quadrant (the potential blockers). Use a graded scale (+10 to -10) to determine the level of blocking you might expect from certain stakeholders.

It is sometimes helpful to consider another perspective. When we step back from the detail, there are only four positions stakeholders can take:

- 1. Stop it from happening** – Identifying stakeholders with this attitude is a must. Then you can decide how to deal with it
- 2. Let it happen** – Most stakeholders are likely to be in this group
- 3. Help it happen** – This group should include the key decision-makers and influencers. Get this piece wrong and your project will stagnate or be rejected
- 4. Make it happen** – Unfortunately, this could just be you, but it could also include a number of other stakeholders with a vested interest in making the proposition successful.

A common situation is the ‘diagonal nod’, whereby the stakeholder appears to be indicating agreement and support, but is actually firmly in the ‘stop it from happening’ camp. This situation is best dealt with by recording decisions and agreement in writing as they are made. Do not allow leeway or delays, as the more unscrupulous stakeholders will exploit this to avoid making firm commitments.





◀ SUCCESSFUL INTERNAL SALES – DO'S AND DON'TS

We invest considerable time and effort in developing external sales and marketing skills, but all this could be wasted if our own colleagues will not support us. Consequently, we need to devote some more time and effort, and a professional approach, to the internal sale, and to developing a robust business case as to why it should happen. First and foremost, this means understanding and adopting the five key 'Do's and Don'ts' of internal sales:

DO:

Understand the internal decision-making process

Understand how decisions are made internally; map out who the decision-makers are, and also the key influencers and stakeholders. Who are the supporters and who are the blockers?

Communicate value

Develop value propositions that meet internal business needs and satisfy the key decision-makers, such as a compelling business case, ROI, and business benefits for the internal stakeholders. You will need to be smart here to determine different value propositions for different stakeholders. For example, the value proposition for the CFO will be different to that of the CIO or COO (remember WIFM – 'what's in it for me?'). Finally, make sure that your proposal is clearly linked to a business imperative or need such as, "I have an idea that fits perfectly with our goal of ...", as this helps to defuse emotional arguments.

Prior preparation and planning

Prepare, plan and rehearse your 'sales pitch' so that it is persuasive, effective and efficient. Practise dealing with difficult contingencies, objections and questions from key stakeholders such as the CFO who says "we cannot afford this right now" or the adviser who says "we can't do this because it breaks the regulations". Expect to meet some resistance and make a plan for dealing with it. In doing so, you will build your own self-confidence and belief in your project.

Personal briefings

Plan visits to see individual stakeholders prior to key decision meetings, so you can make your pitch and they have a chance to address their key concerns with you privately (rather than embarrassing them in front of their colleagues). Often these internal meetings will hinge on highly emotional conversations. So, treat your internal customers with the same amount of respect that you would expect to use with your external clients. It is important to listen carefully, be respectful of the other person's position, defuse the emotion and re-focus on business benefits. Finally, do not forget to say thanks, a lot, and with sincerity, because this word is hugely appreciated but sadly very under-used.

Have passion

Believe in your proposal. Passion and optimism are force multipliers and are infectious. Perhaps more importantly, indifference and self-doubt are highly detectable, equally infectious and potentially disastrous. If you are not fired up with passion and enthusiasm for your plans, then it is unlikely that anyone else will be very positive either.

DON'T:

Underestimate the importance of internal selling

Failure to understand the importance of the internal sale, or worse, ignoring its importance, are fatal mistakes. Prepare, plan and rehearse for it as you would for an external customer sale.

Assume others will support you

Do not expect someone else in the

organisation to be as positive and supportive about your good ideas as you are. Do your stakeholder analysis extremely diligently, as they may need persuading or, worse, be in the 'stop it from happening' group. Look at internal resistance as the need for more information. Don't be impatient, demanding or overly protective of your ideas and plans.

Undervalue emotional arguments

Ignoring the emotional arguments from some stakeholders is a serious miscalculation. People tend to make emotional decisions and then find a plausible rationale to underpin them. Let them air their concerns and fears, but bring them back to the business imperatives behind your thinking. Giving individuals the opportunity to talk to you about their reservations has the dual effect of making them feel better, whilst ensuring that you are made aware of the full scope of the issues that concern them.

Personalise errors or shortcomings

If you want to succeed, you should not embarrass key stakeholders publicly by communicating current shortcomings in front of others. This can create ill-feeling and long-term vengefulness. Work with them to improve the situation rather than apportioning blame.

Make big 'kick-off' announcements

You are setting yourself up for failure. Focus on the people who need to know and who are going to help implement your ideas. Then build on successes and manage pace and momentum.

USE YOUR ADVANTAGE

The good news in all this is that the potential problem of the internal sale is eminently manageable. Sales professionals already understand the processes, behaviours and attitudes required for a successful client sale. These same principles need to be applied by them to the internal sale – plan and prepare properly, understand the value proposition, get attention early, sell benefits not features, anticipate objections and ask for the business.

Just because you are in sales does not mean you can ignore the importance of the internal sale process. Both sales and non-sales leaders will have to 'sell' to internal stakeholders. You already have relevant sales knowledge and skills, but awareness of the issue is the first step to success. If you can then apply these methods, adhering to the do's and don'ts, you will significantly improve your internal sales performance and raise your profile within the organisation – for all the right reasons.

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