

Getting Buy-in:
The Essential Business Skill

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By Brett M. Miles, M.S.

Company executives seek to move tactical and strategic actions forward. In that way, they hope to reach company and personal goals. Since they cannot achieve without help from others, they require others to “buy-in” to targeted goals, objectives, strategies, plans and actions. The required buy-in often begins with the vision and company mission. Regardless, buy-in is essential to production. We propose that the essentialness of achieving buy-in is a given.

What is “buy-in”; can it be learned; and how can an executive experience it more?

Buy-in is a state of acceptance, as its most fundamental definition. Acceptance by a person toward an idea or request occurs when that person agrees to act consistently with the idea or request. For example, if the idea is to provide positive feedback to employees, a manager’s actions that would demonstrate buy-in, might include agreeing with the idea, thinking about how, when and for whom to provide positive feedback, and actually providing it. An observer of the manager might comment that, “there was buy-in to the idea by the manager.”

Can a person learn how to experience buy-in to their ideas and requests more often, where “experience” implies (1) holding the “right” attitude, (2) executing a process, and (3) using certain techniques?

Attitude

The key factor is (1) attitude, where attitude represents thought that supports people in wanting to act consistently with one’s idea or request. Attitude, as defined here, is a view, perspective or way of seeing the world. A positive, serving, win-win attitude, for example, will often solicit or induce a response consistent with it.

For example, if a manager “sees” employees as valuable contributors that support accomplishment of the company goals, then a request to work overtime may well be accepted by the employees. Of course other factors will undoubtedly influence each employee’s buy-in. Factors might include an employee’s previously scheduled plans, obligations or health issues.

In contrast, a manager with an attitude that employees are readily replaceable as parts of the company “machine” may find less buy-in for a request to work overtime. Here, employees may be offended by such an attitude and may even resist, rather than just decline the offer to work overtime. Attitudes that are perceived as negative usually create responses in kind.

If a person is to achieve the experience of buy-in from others more often, then the first factor to consider, and ideally master, is that of creating an attitude within oneself that is positive, serving, caring, considerate, respectful, appreciative and loving of others. Those who do express this attitude into the world will find greater acceptance by others to their ideas and requests. Thus, the first step in experiencing buy-in more often is to create and adopt thinking (beliefs and principles) that fall into the domain of the positive.¹

If there are exceptions, often those “exceptions” are in the eye of the beholder. The perspective is often that the other person is unreasonable or non-cooperative, etc. That’s why buy-in is not taking place. This may be true and it may be that the standards for performance are just not being met thus far. For example, sometimes a parent may expect a teenager to be “responsible” where the standard of performance is to call the parent when the teenager will be late coming home. If the teenager fails to call soon after the deadline, the teenager is deemed irresponsible and thus has not bought into being responsible. Is this the case? Perhaps the teenager has bought in to the importance of calling when late but doesn’t feel they are “that” late to warrant a call or there are special circumstances causing the lateness, etc.

As the person seeking to get buy-in from others, we are wise to remember that our definitions of things and our perspectives are ours. They shape our interpretations of how others are being or behaving. Our perspective limits our ability to see from another’s point of view and leads to us judging people.

Process

The second factor in experiencing buy-in is (2) the process by which one proceeds to interact or relate with another person. The process can also be thought of as an approach. How one approaches another person influences how that person interprets the situation. For example, if an employee had never been asked to perform a personal task for their manager, and didn’t ever expect to, then the manager should take into account that employee’s thinking and feelings on the matter. In this case, an approach by the manager that included consideration of who that employee was and what the employee might want or need would be more appropriate and effective toward getting buy-in than an approach that ignored those considerations.

Thus, a direct request by the manager to the employee to perform a personal task for the manager, where the employee does not expect to perform personal tasks, will more often than not result in no buy-in, at least initially. The employee

¹ David R. Hawkins, M.D., Ph.D., *Power vs. Force: The Hidden Determinants of Human Behavior*, (Carlsbad, California: Hay House, Inc., 1995), p. 146.

might be inclined to question the manager about such a request. The manager would then have to explain, coerce, plead or use some other form of influence.²

Given that people and situations are changing, it is best to consider each person and situation as relatively unique. Consideration is shown by asking oneself “who” this person is (thinking in terms of that person’s values, beliefs, style, education, skills and experience—to name a few). A manager that recognizes that their employee highly values time with family on the weekends rather than values more recognition for working overtime, will be more effective in experiencing buy-in by having adapted their approach to the employee’s wants and needs.

Four Step Process

The process or approach is the second key factor in buy-in. The process includes four steps. The first step is understanding who the person is. The second step is understanding what that person wants or needs. The third step is considering and suggesting solutions or actions. The fourth step is asking for and getting agreement to a specific action.³

The steps don’t have to be followed in exact order, before progressing to the next step. But generally the best results occur by emphasizing this order. The steps do represent differing portions of time spent. The first step represents approximately 40% of the process. The second step represents 30%, the third 20% and the fourth 10% of the process.

Step one, understanding who the person is, includes thinking about and appreciating who this person is with regard to their values, beliefs, style, education, age, gender, skills, experience, history, ethnicity, health, mood and even stress level. These factors may be appropriate to consider in how you approach an employee with an idea or request. Easier said than done. Those who are tuned-in, more focused on others, and have higher sensitivity to others will excel at “reading” and understanding a variety of people.

Step two, understanding what the person wants or needs, requires asking questions and listening skills. Even before asking a single question, we already know that people around the world want and need appreciation, acceptance, acknowledgement, admiration and approval.⁴ Dale Carnegie, the great author that explained how to win friends and influence people, said that people want to feel important.⁵ Do that, even before you engage a person with your idea or request, and you enhance the possibility of getting buy-in.

² Robert B. Cialdini, Ph.D., *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1993), p. 10.

³ Brett M. Miles, *Buy-in*, (self published article), 1995.

⁴ Brian Tracy, *Maximum Achievement*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 268.

⁵ Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936), p. 30.

Step three, considering and suggesting solutions or actions, is a natural outcome of successfully completing step two. Once it is clear to the employee, in step two, what they want and need, within the context of the situation in which the conversation is occurring, they will naturally see a solution or action they can take, consistent with what they want or need. For example, if an employee sees that they want recognition for working extra hard, the employee will naturally suggest that they work overtime on the weekend—given that is the request being made by the manager.

For complex problems, requiring complex solutions, the process within step two, of asking questions, may require several in-depth conversations exploring many aspects of the problem and possible solutions before a viable solution becomes clear.

Step four, asking for and getting agreement to a specific action, also naturally follows step three. Here, the objective is to specify exactly what action is being promised and by when the promise is to be completed. In the case of a manager asking an employee if they will work during a weekend, once the answer (solution, from step three) is yes, then the obvious action for the employee to promise to show up for work on the weekend. Some “solutions” may only require a next action to meet again to continue with step two for more in-depth exploration before the “final” solution is clear.

This is the process for effectively experiencing or getting buy-in more often. The art of following this process is developed by increased awareness of the interplay of the three factors: attitude, the buy-in process, and techniques.

Techniques

The third factor in experiencing buy-in is (3) using certain techniques. Techniques imply “how-to’s.” How does a manager assess who an employee is? How does a manager understand what an employee wants and needs? How do they know when a solution or action is appropriate to suggest? There are four key skills or techniques that correspond to the four steps of the buy-in process.

Associated with step one, “understanding who” is the skill of listening. Listening involves hearing, seeing, feeling and thinking. It involves thinking about answers to questions about the employee. What do they value? What are their experiences and skill sets? What is the employee’s current mood? What do the employee’s body posture, facial expressions and movement reveal about the employees feelings? What words do they use in communicating with the manager and what speed, pitch and tone of voice does the employee express? These are all clues for the manager to understand with whom he is about to engage regarding an idea or request.

Step two's corresponding skill is that of using questions. How is a question asked? Does the question solicit a broad answer or a narrow, specific answer? With what tone of voice and facial expression is the manager's question posed? In what sequence do questions flow? Do questions from the manager lead the employee to some end or do they seek to understand⁶ what the employee wants and needs? The manager's skill at asking questions will determine the frequency with which buy-in is experienced.

Step three's skill is that of suggesting. Suggesting is a skill, different from recommending, in that it implies wonder. Recommending is generally performed from a state of confidence and assurance. Suggesting that an employee buy-in to an idea or requested action, requires the subtle use of wondering or seeking understanding. A manager that wonders, if what they are hearing the employee suggest as a solution is in fact what the employee is saying, is demonstrating a desire to understand the employee. Any conclusion by the manager as to what the employee is saying or what the action should be by the employee may be premature and even cause the employee to feel forced to agree or buy-in. The goal of this step is to have the employee suggest a solution or action (to buy-in). The manager will want to only suggest solutions following sufficient questioning to warrant clarity in reaching a solution.

Step four's skill is asking for action. Asking for a commitment, a promise, is a skill. First, it often takes courage. It may even take awareness of the importance of securing a commitment. Asking also involves the ability to "frame" or put into context how a solution warrants a commitment. Often this includes reiterating the benefit, value or payoff for the employee buying in.

Experiencing buy-in more often is learnable and achievable. Adopting a positive attitude, following an effective process, and mastering⁷ the four skill techniques will increase the frequency and ease of experiencing buy-in.

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⁶ Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 40.

⁷ George Leonard, *Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-term Fulfillment*, (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), p. 5.

Helping companies work through on-going change and organizational development, Brett leads strategic off-sites, helps develop individuals and teams, teaches buy-in, communication, presentation, negotiation, and sales skills.

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