

Barriers to change

Tread with baby steps when reinventing the wheel

Question:

The majority of my negotiations focus on trying to convince a prospect to change a system that has been in place a long time. Some prospects see the value within a short period of time, while others are flat-out resistant to the idea of change. Do you have any helpful hints to help me get prospects to more readily accept change?

Answer:

Inescapably, in everyday business life, we find ourselves dealing with people whose position we want to change. Using rationale and common sense can be futile when someone's decision is deeply rooted in emotions.

Samuel Goldwyn once said, "Don't bother me with facts when my mind is made up." In other words, logic and reason fail when emotion prevails.

As a species, we are all afflicted with "neophobia" — an initial aversion to change — to some extent. Depending upon the degree of a perceived threat, some people will put a stake in the ground, while others will at least keep an open mind.

When negotiating with someone who is change-adverse, you must be gentle and move slowly. Begin by asking questions to uncover what is most important to them and why, before presenting your story. People do things for their own reasons, not yours. Once you have gathered sufficient information from the prospect, review the details and determine how to strategically position your recommendation so it aligns with the prospect's vision of the solution.

One indication the other party is moving from resistance to acceptance is when he or she moves from sitting back in their chair and leaning away from you, to leaning forward and asking you questions.

Top-selling professionals are not naturally patient. They want things to happen now. But the prospect drives the buying process. Learning how to identify the barriers to change may help you understand what is happening, why and how you can influence the outcome.

Here are the four most common barriers to change:

- 1) Comfort with the known:** Familiarity with what is (as bad as it is from your perspective) creates a tolerance for the situation. The idea of change is too overwhelming.
- 2) Fear of risk:** For some people, the risk associated with progress is frightening. Choosing to stay put rather than face a volatile situation where potential risks may throw a monkey wrench into the situation is too frightening.
- 3) Vested interest in "The way we've always done it."** When employees hear repeatedly, "this is the way we've always done it, and this is the way we will continue to do it," a powerful message is sent: tradition is more important than progress. Creativity is stifled, and progress moves at the speed of comfort, not potential.
- 4) Need to be accepted:** Deep within most humans is the need to be accepted. For some people, that means going along with the herd, despite latent desires.

With a large percentage of business professionals concerned about their job security, the idea of making a change that might fall

out of line politically is intimidating — even when it's in the company's best interest.

Your best chance of success with this prospect is to make contact with someone higher on the executive ladder; a person who has the power and authority to say "yes" or "no." Otherwise, move on to another prospect altogether.

When you encounter a situation where the payoff is potentially large and you need to find a way to work with the other party, follow these simple tips and be amazed at the change that does take place:

- 1) Never be confrontational:** Abstain from any urge to express your frustration with the other party. In other words, bite your tongue. While you may be steaming on the inside, you must be calm, relaxed and gracious on the outside. Being too aggressive, assertive or abrasive risks igniting a defiant response and this is certain to close the door on any potential opportunity.

Earning the other party's trust is key. And one way to do that is to be predictable. Make commitments and follow through — every time.

You also must be humble. Find opportunities where they can help you out. For example, if you are completing some computations and need numbers calculated, ask them if they can assist you. Show your humanness. Be vulnerable. Use self-deprecating humor. All of these subtle strategies work to help you make a personal connection.

- 2) Leverage areas of agreement:** It's always advantageous to learn as much as possible about the other party and what is most important to him or her prior to presenting your offerings. When positioning your ideas, integrate the information you received from the other party to

emotionally close the gap between where you are and where they are. Remember, the tone of your voice has to match the words you choose. It's best to come across relaxed and friendly, like their next-door neighbor, as opposed to the intense, driving sales person.

3) Maintain trust: When negotiating with someone who resists change, building trust is critical. Demonstrate flexibility, acknowledge concessions, never spring new ideas without notice and when the prospect says “no” to an idea, attempt to understand their thinking and validate their feelings. Immediately readjust your original position and incorporate these newfound concerns and expectations into your message.

As your experience proves, it is not easy to get people to change, even when it's in their best interest to do so. Continue to take your prospect's pulse and demonstrate flexibility when it makes sense to do so to create a bridge between your positions.

Persistence, patience and ongoing repositioning are the keys to inspiring those who are resistant to change to embrace even baby steps toward acceptance.



Christine McMahon is the owner of Christine McMahon & Associates, a training and coaching firm in Milwaukee. She can be reached at 414-290-3344, via fax at 414-290-3330, or e-mail her at: ccm@christinemcmahon.com.