

PART I

Get Ready

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The path to buy-in begins well before you sit down at the proverbial table and pitch your idea. First, there's important work to be done: both on yourself, and on understanding the bigger picture. Before we can 'Go!', we need to 'Get Ready'.

Abraham Lincoln once famously stated, 'Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.'

Let's get sharpening ...

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CHAPTER 1

SHIFT

Choose the power of buy-in

Let's be the first to send a man to the moon.

Let's make cameras digital.

Let's set up a network of private drivers who'll take people wherever they want to go.

We need \$250 000 and four new staff to upgrade our customer database system.

We should trial driverless cars.

I need management to support a 5 per cent pay rise for my team next year.

Darling, I'd really like to have another child.

Let's make another Police Academy movie!

Every one of these ideas needed the instigator to bring other people willingly and enthusiastically on board to breathe life into it. Each required some careful persuasion, a lot of negotiation and probably some persistent nagging, but the outcome couldn't be a reluctant 'All right, do what you want'.

To be successful, the outcome had to be ‘I’m with you on this... Let’s do it... Sign me up’. Head and heart had to be on board and action had to follow closely behind.

In your own organisation, you probably hear comments like these every day:

- ‘I know what it will take to improve team performance.’
- ‘I know how to improve our product so we’ll get fewer customer complaints.’
- ‘We know what our new strategic direction needs to look like.’
- ‘I know how marketing can better support us in the field.’
- ‘I know what we need to do to stop losing market share.’
- ‘We know why morale is low and what to do about it.’
- ‘I know how to make sure everyone puts their cup in the dishwasher.’

Yet how many of these ‘I know’ statements make it from idea to implementation? Too often they are accompanied by an exasperated ‘If only I could get others to think or feel the same way’.

A great idea will stay just that—an idea—unless you can get others to work with you to turn it into a reality.

This is especially true in the context of the modern organisation, where your idea is competing for attention with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others.

Politicians need us to buy into their policies and vision in the same way that senior executives need their shareholders to buy into the vision of their organisation. Managers need the buy-in of their teams, while team members need the buy-in of people across the business to implement new ideas and projects. The implications of getting this wrong are too great to ignore.

The cost of getting it wrong

In his book *Leading Change*, renowned thought leader John Kotter reports that 70 per cent of change initiatives fail. That's a lot of wasted money, time, energy and resources—not to mention the sheer frustration! One reason for this type of failure is a lack of buy-in from the people needed to bring that change to life.

In 2005 Australian airline Qantas learned this the hard way when its leadership team announced it was introducing a new parts management system called *Jetsmart*. Things did not go smoothly for the senior leaders, who were heavily criticised for failing to engage with engineers, operational staff and unions. As a result, Jetsmart (nicknamed 'Dumbjet' by Qantas engineers) became mired in endless disputes and problems, all of which took place in the public spotlight. Three years and \$40 million later, Qantas announced that it would retire Jetsmart and start over.¹

The costs associated with a lack of buy-in from the relevant stakeholders and parties can be catastrophic.

Here are some more examples to get you thinking:

- In 2014, the product development team in a company I was working with had created a very nifty piece of software designed to help its customers manage their account with the company. The software promised to make customers' lives easier and to help retain customers. Yet the only way to get customers to use the software was for the sales team to introduce them to it. Despite promises to the contrary, the folks in sales simply weren't signing customers up for the tool. The software sat on a shelf gathering dust, while tensions between product developers and the sales team quickly escalated.

- Craig, a software engineer, wanted to shift his team to a new product management methodology. Against the backdrop of a fast-changing industry, Craig saw it as critical that project teams worked at a much faster pace, trying new things and finding ways to experiment with new approaches. Craig had experienced the benefits of the change first-hand in his previous job, and thought it was a no-brainer. But several months later, Craig found his efforts stalling in the face of a lack of buy-in from his leadership team and also from many long-standing staff, who couldn't see how the change would be good for them. Craig's frustration led him to leave the company less than twelve months after starting there.
- A professional services firm, another of my clients, once announced a series of workshops for its staff designed to equip people with the skills to improve their productivity. The only problem was, no one enrolled. After some investigation, initially aimed at finding more suitable dates, it became clear that the people who had purchased the workshops hadn't done enough to get buy-in from the different parts of the business. In fact, it turned out that the announcement to run the program had been taken as an insult by many of the managers, who felt they were being told they weren't productive enough!

Do these scenarios sound familiar? Have you experienced something similar in your own organisation?

In each of the above examples, what started out as an idea, ripe with potential, ended up becoming a problem that failed to achieve buy-in. And the cost? Large amounts of money being spent trying to bring projects to life that were doomed to failure—or to rescue them from the clutches of defeat. Add to that the lost value of the failed opportunity, and you already have a pretty hefty price tag.

The costs continue to add up, including the strain on people's time, energy and relationships, as they battle into various stages of resistance. This dampens everyone's morale and causes disengagement, resulting in a learned helplessness that eventually has people shrugging their shoulders and saying, 'What's the point? No one will listen, so I may as well just stop trying.' People disengage, resign or—worse still—hang around giving off one hell of a bad vibe.

Change doesn't happen in the executive boardroom, as all of these examples show. It happens on the frontline of an organisation and involves a number of people, from board members to employees. Without buy-in from all of those involved, you're hammering a round peg into a square hole.

What is buy-in really?

For those who can win buy-in to their ideas and initiatives, the world is their proverbial oyster. But to understand how to build buy-in you first have to look at what buy-in is and what it is not.

The online *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines buy-in as 'the fact of agreeing and accepting something that someone suggests'. But that's not enough.

True buy-in requires willing and enthusiastic commitment. Creating buy-in is about building a genuinely voluntary choice, getting people to the place where they say 'Yes!' not because they *have to*, but because they *want to*.

Real buy-in goes much further than achieving compliance or conformity. It's the ultimate form of influence. It creates intellectual and emotional alignment between two or more people. It wins a share of someone's devotion, of their passion and energy. If you want others' creativity, engagement,

participation, advocacy and championship then you need to affect them under the surface, through their skin.

To get to this holy place, there can be no tricks of the mind, no manipulation, no threats, no forced hands and no hypnosis. These moves may sometimes work to influence people to act in the way you want them to act, but if it's genuine buy-in you seek, then people will subscribe to that only when they *choose* to and feel it's safe to do so.

Here's a simple example we can all relate to (whether parents or not):

Dad: Sam, have you cleaned up your room yet?

Sam: Yes.

Dad: [After a quick look into his room] That's not clean, Sam. Please go and tidy up your room as I asked.

Sam: After.

Dad: No, now please. [Sam does nothing.] Sam, you've got five seconds to go in there and start cleaning up your room or you won't be going to the park with us after lunch. Five ... four ... three ... two ... [Sam runs to his room.]

Do you think Dad is winning? Perhaps. Until a few minutes later, when he walks into Sam's room to discover him sitting on the floor playing with his toys.

Dad: Sam, that's not tidying up! You're playing! That's it, no park for you!

Sam starts crying.

Consider what happens when Mum enters the room.

Mum: Sam, why do you think Daddy wants you to tidy up your room?

Sam: Because he's bossy.

Mum: Yes, Daddy is bossy sometimes. But I don't think that's why he wants you to tidy up. Can you think why he thinks it's so important?

Sam: So I don't step on my toys and break them?

Mum: That's a great reason. Do you think that's important?

Sam: Yes, but Mum I don't like tidying up.

Mum: Me neither. But if we do it fast then maybe we can go to the park sooner. What do you reckon, should we see how fast you can tidy it up and how quickly we can get to the park?

Sam: Okay. Can we take the soccer ball?

Mum: That's a great idea. Let's get that room done first, shall we?

Sam: I'm going to be fast... like the Flash...

In this scenario, Dad could easily be a manager, and Sam his team member. Dad attempts to influence Sam by relying on his authority, his implicit right to call the shots, but let's call a spade a spade: it's coercion. Sam's not impressed.

Mum, however, creates a new perspective. She seeks not just Sam's compliance, but his *buy-in*. Mum has not only secured Sam's cooperation this time, but it's likely she will be successful in getting Sam to tidy his room next time as well.

When I share this example in my workshops, my participants usually exclaim how patient Mum is. Spot on. It's a big reason that she succeeds. When you're asking someone not just to hear and understand an idea, but to understand *why* the idea matters and to decide *if* they are willing to buy into that idea—that takes time and patience.

From ‘decree’ to ‘win me’ — a fundamental shift

‘Buy-in is critical to success. Organisations only succeed when many people are pulling together to achieve a common goal. Having buy-in materially impacts the success of the organisation’s ability to achieve this.’

**Ronnie Fink, Corporate Development Director,
SEEK Limited**

In the context of the workplace, the most traditional source of power is hierarchy and vested authority. The closer you are to the top of the tree, the more you get to call the shots. This gives rise to what I call *influence by decree*. In other words, if you have a stick that’s big enough and threatening enough, you can wave it at people and say, ‘Do what I am asking you to do. Listen to what I am saying... or else.’

Influence by decree has been common in organisations and institutions for a long time. It was an old favourite of folks like Alexander the Great and Henry VIII (not exactly contemporary role models of leadership).

Influence by decree is a mainstay of more traditional industries—those that are best represented by a factory model. The worker in that context is part of a large ‘machine’ that focuses on repeating processes to generate more product. In that world, entrepreneurship and creativity are the reserve of a select few, perhaps the owner of the business and those who sit around the executive table. For the rest, the message is simple: do your job, or we’ll find someone who can.

Of course, this model is still alive and strong in some organisations—and it probably always will be. But we’re now living in an age when newer industries, those fuelled by ideas and creativity, have begun to dominate—information services, communication and media, research and development, consultancy and design.² This is an era when ideas represent the greatest form of currency. When organisations that truly

thrive know how not just to create the ideas, but also to bring them to life—fast.

The age of buy-in

Any company serious about keeping pace with a market that's evolving faster than ever—whether through innovation, speed-to-market or customer responsiveness—must create an environment where ideas can truly thrive. They must let go of slow and cumbersome models of leadership born in the industrial age. Managers must loosen the reins and ask people to think for themselves, to generate ideas and find ways of bringing them to life, without waiting for someone with more authority to tell them what to do.

Exit decree; enter the world of win me, where people collaborate across teams and influence without authority. Welcome to the age of buy-in.

Aside from its strategic importance, the emphasis on generating buy-in is something employees expect. Companies are asking more than ever of their people: more of their creative genius, more hours, more ownership, more initiative, more flexibility, more tolerance of ambiguity, change and chaos. In return, employees in this creative economy need and expect more—and that doesn't just mean money. It means more autonomy and more freedom.

People who give more expect to have a voice. They expect to be heard and to be able to shape decisions about their work. They expect leaders to earn their support, not take it as a given. We want to work in organisations that match our own values; we want to be part of, and to initiate, company projects and initiatives.

David Noël, Head of Internal Communications at SoundCloud, summed it up perfectly when he said, 'We're seeing a generation of people who are making decisions about where to work

based on how their personal values map to company values. Today, more than twice as many employees are motivated by work passion than career ambition.³

Easy to say, but what to do?

It's one thing to talk about the importance of getting people's buy-in. It's another thing to achieve it.

When you seek others' cooperation in a busy organisation without relying on a mandate from management, all kinds of interesting tensions arise. In my own work, I regularly come across managers who are struggling to let go and give their team members the space to experiment, create and even (gasp!) fail.

Often, these practices are at odds with the diet of management on which they themselves have been raised. It makes them feel uncomfortable. It seems chaotic and risky. At the same time, managers still need to manage, so how do they do that without managing by decree?

Some teams also struggle to embrace the degree of autonomy and entrepreneurship that is offered to them. Suddenly faced with a multitude of people they need to work with, and without a clear instruction manual from management, their mindset and skills are put to the test. *How do I cope with this freedom to create results, to develop and deliver strategies and to be accountable for the choices I've made? Do I know how to make those kinds of decisions? Do I know how to get others on board and eager to cooperate with me?*

This is where teams and organisations can easily fall over: by failing to create a culture where people are able influence and lead others, even when they're not in a position of authority, and by failing to equip them with the skills and understanding to do so.

Well, there's a new kind of power in town. It's the power that comes to those who are able to cut through all of these challenges—by engaging others and building buy-in.

A gentle art

Yes, building buy-in is a skill that comes more naturally to some than to others, but the good news is it can be learned and mastered by *anyone*.

TOP TIP

To master the gentle art of buy-in, you need a blend of the right skills, attributes and mindset. I use the term 'gentle art' because it requires patience, empathy and careful thinking. You need to know when to yield control in order to maintain it. You need a healthy dose of emotional intelligence. You need to be willing to go slow to go fast.

Of course, having a good idea to begin with is always going to interest and excite those you're seeking buy-in from, but even the best ideas in the world can languish in the hands of someone who doesn't know how to engage and influence others—or worse, someone who simply puts people off.

Equally, buy-in shouldn't equate to paralysis. Many of us have worked in a team or a company where there was so much consultation and committee-style decision making that nothing ever happened. Where that's the case, your relationship with the idea of building buy-in might be a tad... strained.

You need to know when buy-in is a function of gentle persuasion and dialogue, and when it's a function of getting your train moving and asking others to jump on board.

That's why you have to learn to be a *champion of buy-in*.

Over to you

- 1 Think of one 'decree' and one 'win me' situation you've been in before.
- 2 How did the two situations differ?
- 3 How enthusiastic were you and were others during the buy-in process?
- 4 How did this affect the end result?

So far we've explored why buy-in matters. There are serious costs to getting it wrong, but also many opportunities for those who get it right, especially for businesses in the creative economy of ideas. So what does it mean to pursue 'win me' rather than influence by 'decree'? What are the choices you're really making? These are the questions we'll investigate in chapter 2.