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Five Reasons Your Ideas Get Rejected

How to prevent your proposal from becoming a victim of circumstance or of your own folly

By Jeff Schmitt

There's a joke that companies punish innovation by making employees implement their own ideas. If only you could be so lucky as to get the ideas approved in the first place.

No, your bosses were friendly enough when you shared the "big idea." They promised to look into it and pass it up the chain. Too bad you know how corporate works. After a few months of pestering, you received a polite "no." At best, you were left with vague compliments such as, "They thought it was interesting, but they have other ideas."

Sure, you can sulk and swear back to your cube, vowing never to stick your neck out again. Or you can examine your big idea—and how you package it—from your superiors' perspective. Chances are, your arguments fall flat for at least one of five reasons:

1. Low ROI

The Problem: No one disputes that your idea has merit in theory, but your superiors still need to know how it translates to the bottom line. Your bosses usually aren't focusing on day-to-day operations. Instead, they're forecasting compound growth rates and dissecting East Asian markets. Sure, your idea will streamline processes and cut costs, but is it feasible to implement? Will it divert valuable attention away from other initiatives? Can the return be quantitatively measured? And will the snags inherent to any change eat up the return?

The Solution: Start by learning your leaders' priorities and speaking their language. When you get an audience, don't waste time with a long narrative. Open with an attention-grabbing, dollar-driven stat. Quickly summarize the issues, backing up your points with numbers that frame the issue in terms of time, labor, and dollars. Contrast the status quo with other organizations' operations, emphasizing how complacency will inevitably result in competitive disadvantages.

Your audience should be able to visualize your solution in practice, along with who benefits, why, and for how long. Don't discount the costs and institutional roadblocks to implementing your solution, either. Instead, share how your existing assets—both physical and intellectual—can be applied. Inject some passion and panache into your delivery, but don't jump the couch, particularly if your superiors are collectively more introspective. Most important: Keep your presentations short and to the point. Rehearse it and shave any clutter, so your audience and momentum don't get sidetracked.

2. Poor Planning

The Problem: You breezed into their office, spouting off about everything wrong with the workflow. Your diagnosis was flawless, but your solutions were a bit fuzzy. Even worse, you delegated the task of fixing the problems to someone else. You rushed in, flushed with emotion, without doing your homework. So they rightly dismissed you as a sloppy, lazy crackpot who doesn't respect them. You were better off not coming in at all.

The Solution: Remember that whatever makes your bosses' job easier makes your job easier. If you're serious about turning an idea into reality, do the work for them. Your superiors will quickly forget 80% of your presentation. So hand them a brief project plan on paper, replete with issue summary, solutions, cost analysis, and prospective resources, timelines, and benchmarks. Respect their time by stating how long you'll be presenting and what you'll cover. Anticipate potential questions and address them early. Enlist a champion within your superiors' sphere, so you stay on the radar afterward.

3. Little Credibility

The Problem: Your presentation was informal, packed with inside jokes and snark. They already were turned off by your shaggy hair and creased shirt. Now it's your know-it-all air, not your ideas, they'll recall.

Your superiors often form opinions about you before you start. Maybe your ideas were doomed because you'd previously blown an assignment. Or they remember you as someone who hunts the spotlight but has no intention of rolling up your sleeves. Your previous ideas could have been flimsy, or your personal life may be grist for the gossip circuit. No matter, your history is often held against you.

The Solution: Fair or not, they're mistaking you for the idea. They don't trust your competence or character, or simply don't like you. Before you take your idea to the next level, think about rebuilding that trust. Spend six months notching some visible accomplishments while polishing your persona and delivery. Otherwise, find someone else, preferably a superior, to deliver your message. You may not get the credit, but you'll reap the benefits if your idea truly has value.

4. Irrelevance

The Problem: There's nothing worse than blank stares and silence after you've presented. Maybe they're removed from the situation, unable to imagine the daily headaches and ultimate costs of the idea you're proposing. You may be speaking to the higher ups at the wrong time, when other priorities take precedence. Or you could have inadvertently tripped a political minefield: time to duck and cover.

The Solution: Before you schedule that meeting, test your idea on others. For example, hold a pre-meeting with a potentially receptive superior. Here you can learn hot buttons to push or areas where your arguments may have holes. This person may even save you some embarrassment by disclosing whether some of the underlying issues are being addressed.

Similarly, consider building grass-roots support for your idea. Collect sob stories to convey the gravity of the problem. Gather support from colleagues with important titles or institutional influence. Run a controlled pilot to produce data confirming your idea's viability. Clearly articulate how your solution aligns with initiatives currently in place. In case the higher ups aren't receptive, have alternatives available that could mitigate the problems. Open the forum up for their ideas, too. Remember, an idea always seems clear and constructive to its creator. But don't assume another will immediately recognize its merit or share the same enthusiasm for executing it.

5. Lack of Consensus

The Problem: Sure, you have *some* support. But your superiors have seen plenty of valuable initiatives crash and burn. Even if leadership buys in, you still need to sell it to the rank and file, who can passively undermine it. Plus, people can agree with your data and arguments, but not your conclusion.

The Solution: This is where the process gets messy and disheartening. Suddenly, your idea gets tainted by the

jockeying and compromise. Everyone has an opinion, and it takes only one or more disgruntled colleagues to sink your efforts altogether. As a result, your job is to focus on the big picture. Watch the process (and coach your advocates) to ensure the modifications still tackle the problems that inspired your idea. And keep your ego in check. In all likelihood, these changes are turning your idea into something more effective, politically palatable, and long-lasting.

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