

How to Get 'No' for an Answer

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Manager's Journal
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Today it's more important than ever to get "no" for an answer from the people in your organization-if "no" is what it takes to avoid damaging mistakes, plug costly leaks and make vital course changes.

That's not easy, even when times are good. People tend to observe the unwritten law that the glass is always at least half full. But it's a lot harder for people to be negative when things are tough. They figure the boss has enough trouble without hearing more bad news. And, being human, they may think of the declaration attributed to Louis B. Mayer: "I don't want yes-men around me. Tell me what you think even if it costs you your job!"

So today it takes more than merely saying, "My door is always open." Astute managers are doing everything possible to elicit the truth-even when it's unpleasant-by creating a positive atmosphere for negative feedback, by rewarding nay-sayers as well as yea-sayers, and by setting an example of self-criticism.

Here's a sampling of useful techniques for emphasizing the necessary negative.

- **Remove the "Made by the Boss" label.** People speak more freely if they don't think they're knocking the boss's pet project. Lorian Mariantes, senior vice president of the Rockefeller Group, says: "Don't admit it's your idea at first. I say something like, 'Here are two or three possible approaches. What do you think?' " If the idea holds up under discussion, the senior executive can "buy into it" without admitting total authorship.
- **Hold a "negative brainstorming" meeting.** James Wesley, president and CEO of Summit Communications Group, says, "Don't let a bad idea get past the first meeting." Sometimes managers go through a charade of consideration of an unworkable notion to avoid looking autocratic. Subject each scheme to an acid test. Hold a session at which people are encouraged to take their best shots. Subject all ideas to this routine, whether their origins be high or low.
- **Build an atmosphere of trust.** "People must know they have nothing to fear when they bring bad news," observes a major oil company chairman. He emphasizes the importance of staying calm even when the news is hair-raising. "Impress on them that delay in reporting bad news is the cardinal sin." This atmosphere of confidence and openness can't be built over night. It's built up over the years. And it can be destroyed in one moment if the boss hits the roof when confronted with a not-so-hot report.
- **Help people say "no" to their own shaky proposals.** Constructive criticism should begin at home. People who are used to analyzing their own ideas will not only produce better ideas; they will be more adroit and confident about criticizing the ideas of others, including the boss. Carl Dargene, president and CEO of Amcore Financial, uses some key questions to get people to subject their own proposals to rigorous testing. For example:

"Have you considered this aspect (with particulars)?"

"What's the downside contingency?"

"Would you spend your own money on it?"

- **Relax the chain of command.** John McGlynn, president of Agfa Technical Imaging Group, says, "I encourage people at the lowest ranks to pick up the phone and -call me with their ideas and reactions." Mr. McGlynn knows some of his managers are uncomfortable with this short-circuiting of the chain of command. But the idea; is to have employees at all levels talking with each other with the

mutual purpose of doing a better job.

- **Make allowances for the times.** Executives who are accustomed to free speech from team members when business is good may assume that employees will feel just as uninhibited when things are tight. That often runs counter to psychological impulses.

William Fabian, executive vice president of Morey La Rue, a textile rental company, had been discussing possible down-sizing implications with a key manager. As he usually did with the manager (a trusted associate for many years) Mr. Fabian spoke in a theoretical vein, wondering aloud about a 30% reduction in payroll. The manager took this as a directive. Mr. Fabian had to step in to reverse plans that would have led to a harmful slashing of staff. The manager thought the notion was a bad idea -- but he inferred that the boss wanted it done. Now Mr. Fabian makes it a point to draw out objections that might be withheld because of the economic environment.

Executives can't dictate personal feelings. But they can make it clear that their people have the paramount obligation to beam the top candlepower of their brains onto every issue that comes before them, and to say "no" when no is the word that should be said.

Positive thinking is still, on balance, the best policy. But "on balance" is the operative phrase. The optimum mode is productive, positive attitudes tethered to reality by the occasional tug of the negative. "No." after all, is not a four-letter word.

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Article ID: 76

Last updated: 10 Apr, 2013

Revision: 2

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