Owning the Outcome: How Leaders Create Natural “Buy-In” and Ownership

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“Buy-in” is a term we often hear in our society. We can “buy-in” to a franchise, “buy-in” to an idea, “buy-in” to a new way of thinking or way of life, or “buy-in” to a potential solution. In a business setting, it can mean a lot of things, but let’s focus on “buy-in” as it relates to choosing a business strategy or solution. Once you’ve “bought it,” by definition you become an owner. In the case of buying into a solution, you become part of a movement that hopefully improves your team and your work environment. But, as we all know, lack of “buy-in” can cause problems down the road. Here’s a story that illustrates the point.

A few years ago, a man named Bryce was working in quality control and was tasked with choosing between upgrading his team’s QC software or starting from scratch. After spending significant time researching the pros and cons of each option, Bryce went to his boss, Kathy, with a proposal. Kathy was the QC director, and she “bought-in” to Bryce’s recommendation to upgrade rather than start over with something new. Together, they pulled the trigger and got the ball rolling for the new install.

Bryce and Kathy were excited about the upgraded software because it had all the bells and whistles. It was going to streamline everything and make everyone’s job easier. A plan was made for backend development and roll-out with an estimated implementation time of six months. Bryce got to work bringing over all the different tests, results, and certificates that needed to be hard-coded into the system. He spent months building in all the steps and making sure it could be used by everyone to save time. There was just one thing Bryce and Kathy had neglected to do. They had neglected to involve one of their key internal partners - production.

Ninety days before implementation, with most of the system built out and money already spent, Bryce and Kathy approached the production director, Dave, with their idea and new process. They showed Dave how the entire flow could be streamlined, with no more back and forth between the two departments. After making the pitch and providing Dave with his login credentials, Dave simply said, “No.” He had no interest in making any changes and stated, “We have our own software, and we don’t want to spend the unnecessary capital retraining our staff.” Crushed and out time and money, Bryce and Kathy walked away with heads hanging low. They hadn’t involved Dave early enough in the process and had learned an expensive lesson about the importance of the “buy-in” principle.

A former governor once said, “It’s more important who you tell before you tell, than what you tell.” That is, letting people in on the idea early or at the right time may affect their “buy-in” as much as the substance of the idea itself. This is particularly relevant to ideas that are strategic in nature. People generally don’t like to be the last to know. And they especially don’t like finding out after the fact.

Leaders sometimes mistakenly believe that “if I build it, they will come.” A more accurate statement would be “if I build it with them, they will come.” Giving stakeholders a voice early in the process creates natural “buy-in” which results in others owning the outcome.

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