

YOU HAVE TO SELL IT TO DO IT

BY RANDALL
BRETT

Recently, a friend of mine, who is the training director for a medium-size corporation in Chicago, related what has become a familiar tale of woe. After describing a beautifully constructed training program oriented toward first and second line managers and produced through Herculean efforts, he went on to discuss his senior management's reaction to it. That reaction can be summed up in one word: an emphatic "No!"

We pondered what went wrong; why the program did not gain approval. It was cost effective, original in concept, designed to meet stated needs. In short, it was what everyone said they were looking for. However, the program proposal was rejected and my friend could not understand why.

If this sounds familiar to you, it is probably because the same thing happens in most organizations at one time or another: Good programs are rejected for no apparent reason. Even though the concept appears sound, management will

not go along with it. The problem often is not in the program itself, but rather in how it is presented. In effect, programs are not "sold" to the user.

Wait a minute! Did I say sell? Should a training and development "professional" have to stoop to the level of a salesperson? After all, we are not in the canned program business, pushing our ideas like so many boxes of baked beans.

As with most complex questions, this one can be answered with a definitive "yes" and "no." While the training and development professional must view the organization with objectivity, and develop programs that meet actual needs, it does no one any good if the eventual user will not accept them. Consequently, the effective training and development professional realizes that the task is to insure delivery of what has been developed, and have acceptance of what is delivered. In other words, to influence, another word for which is selling.

Let's briefly look at the "Art of Influencing." There are many ways by which an individual can influ-

ence others. Best known, and most frequently used, is the "hard-sell" approach. At professional and managerial levels, the "hard sell" is not blatant, but rather is usually manifested in sophisticated versions that come across as "pressure," "name dropping" and "persuasion" (threats). In essence, all of these approaches represent an adversary relationship where one side is right and the other wrong. They lead to win/lose discussions. Even if the influencer (in this case, the training and development professional) gains acceptance of his/her ideas, no real commitment from the influence is gained because the loser feels a need to win also, and will probably look for an opportunity to scuttle (either covertly or overtly) the program later.

The outcome of the "Adversary Approach" (as this may be called) leads us to believe that an alternative approach is necessary; one that will not only gain agreement but also commitment. The task is to get the other person to look at the proposal in an objective, rational way; to develop a win/win

situation where both parties leave the discussion with commitment because both are convinced the best solution has been agreed upon. In short, to identify the needs of the user and to translate the facts of the proposal into benefits for the user.

The Influencing Approach

The "Influencing Approach" is based on the principle that for one individual to get another to change his or her mind or opinion, somehow the other person must internally — in the person's own words and own terms — see what is being presented and that this is indeed a "good deal." In the process, the influencer becomes a catalyst to help convince the influencee. In order for this approach to be successful, the influencer must have the sincere desire to obtain the other person's viewpoint and input into the program; to be prepared to understand the influencee's attitudes, feelings, and opinions, and to modify the original proposal accordingly. In short, to compromise.

The Influencing Model

STEP 1.

Explore the differences.

STEP 2.

Sharpen the differences.

Step 3.

Integrate the differences.

STEP 4.

Obtain agreement
and nail down the next step.

Step 1 begins as soon as the influencer gets a negative response to the question, "What do you think of my idea?" At this point, the influencer must step back and attempt to draw out the other person. Adding of additional information here will not help because the influencer will be back in the adversary position. The influencer must give the other person a chance to speak and explain. Sometimes it may be necessary to probe the influence using "Active Listening Techniques," such as open-ended questions, acceptance, etc.

While the other person is speaking, a curious thing often happens:

Not only will the influencer begin to understand the other person's viewpoint, but the differences will become less great. People often modify their ideas as they talk.

Step 2, "Sharpen the differences," is testing whether or not the influencer really understands the influencee's point of view. This is best done by the influencer summarizing his or her perception of the whole situation. For example, the influencer might say, "Let's see where we stand now. As I understand it, you agree with A, B, C, and D, but E and F present problems. Is that correct?"

The objective here is to focus on points of disagreement so that energies can be concentrated, rather than trying to deal with the program as a whole. If the answer to the question is "yes," the influencee can move on to Step 3. If it is "no," more exploring needs to be done.

Once the two parties agree on what their differences are, the influencer can help bring about a resolution by creating a climate in which the other person begins to weigh objectively the influencer's ideas and recommendations. This is Step 3 — "Integrate the differences." Here, additional data can be introduced in the form of alternatives. The alternatives provide the influencee with a set of yardsticks to compare the original proposal by and tend to place the influencee in a more objective situation. The influencer gains by knowing which alternatives and additional information are relevant to the other person's concerns. More important, though, the influencee has contributed to the solution. Ownership has taken place and commitment usually follows.

The fourth step is to "Obtain agreement and nail down the next step." Once the other person agrees on a course of action, the influencer should get agreement on what happens next, when and how. Immediately tying down the next step sets the agreed upon process into motion. Failure to do so means the influencer must come back at a later date and do this; coming back in effect places the other person in the position of hav-

ing to agree again, thereby raising many of the anxieties all over. Thus, nailing down the next step is a simple procedure, but, crucial if the commitment process is to be solidified.

Anticipated Results

While no model can be guaranteed to work 100 per cent of the time, the "Influencing Model" can improve the odds for a successful meeting of minds because it appeals to some of our basic needs: to be part of something; to contribute; to be in control of our own destiny. In the case of my friend, he prepared a superb program that appeared to solve his user's problems. By presenting it as "the solution" he was, in effect, implying to his user that management was inadequate in some way. Obviously, this is not a way to bring people over to one's side!

If the relationship is viewed by both parties as mutually beneficial, and if both parties have an opportunity to participate in the formulation of the final product, each will gain a greater appreciation for the other's point of view as well as a stake in the successful outcome of the program. This approach changes the situation from one of "selling" to one of "consulting" to meet the user's needs.

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Randall Brett is a senior associate with Drake-Beam and Associates, Inc. He has an extensive background in behavioral science theories and their practical applications. Prior to joining Drake-Beam and Associates, he was with Motorola, Inc., where he was both the personnel manager for the Communications Group Parts Department and an internal consultant to senior managers in other Motorola operations.