

SPOTLIGHT

ARTWORK Mauro Perucchetti, *Notre Dame* (detail), 2003
Acrylic and urethane jelly babies, 76" x 76"



Get the Boss to Buy In



Learn to sell your ideas up the chain of command.

by Susan J. Ashford and James Detert

A**N ENGINEERING MANAGER** at an energy company—we'll call him John Healy—wanted to sell his boss on a safer and cheaper gas-scrubbing technology. This might have been an easy task if his boss, the general manager, hadn't selected the existing system just a year before. Instead it was, in Healy's words, "a delicate process." Fortunately, user reviews of the new technology had become available only in the past several months, which Healy tactfully mentioned in his presentation to the GM and other senior executives. He also included a detailed comparison of the two systems, drawing on implementations at comparable plants; the data suggested that the new system would remove contaminants more efficiently and reduce costs by about \$700,000 a year. Because the GM was still on the fence, Healy brought in a bio-gas expert his boss trusted and respected to talk about the new technology's merits. The company made the investment and adopted the new system.

Organizations don't prosper unless managers in the middle ranks, like Healy, identify and promote the need for change. People at that level gather valuable intelligence from

direct contact with customers, suppliers, and colleagues. They're in a position to see when the market is ripe for a certain offering, for instance, or to detect early signs that a partnership won't work out. But for many reasons, ranging from a fear of negative consequences to compliance with a top-down culture, they may not voice their ideas and concerns. As we know from our research and others' work in this area, not to mention recent news stories, such silence can have dire consequences—like "regulatory capture" in banking and unchecked product safety risks.

Even when they do speak up, most managers struggle to sell their ideas to people at the top. They find it difficult to raise issues to a "strategic" level early in the decision-making process—if they gain entry into such conversations at all. Studies show that senior executives dismiss good ideas from below far too often, largely for this reason: If they don't already perceive an idea's relevance to organizational performance, they don't deem it important enough to merit their attention. Middle managers have to work to alter that perception.

Their task is easier if certain contextual factors are in place—for instance, a track record

of strong individual contributions, which enhances credibility, and a culture in which it's safe to speak up. Whether or not those stars are aligned, managers can improve their odds of success by using powerful methods of persuasion. Consider John Healy's approach: He presented his idea with emotional intelligence (making sure the GM didn't look bad for buying the current system), supported it with strong evidence from similar companies, and brought in a carefully chosen outside expert to bolster his argument.

Since Jane Dutton and Susan Ashford (a coauthor of this article) introduced the concept of "issue selling" into the academic discourse, more than two decades ago, many studies have proposed tactics for effectively winning support for new ideas. In a recent study of our own, we examined what actually works in organizations, across a range of roles and industries. Our participants described their experiences selling three basic types of ideas: new products, processes, markets, or customers to pursue; improvements to existing products or processes; and ways of better meeting employees' needs.

Issue sellers who accomplish their goals, we found, look for the best ways, venues, and times to voice their ideas and concerns—using rhetorical skill, political sensitivity, and interpersonal connections to move the right leaders to action. In particular, they employ seven tactics significantly more often than people who don't succeed in gaining buy-in. In this article we pull those tactics into a practical framework that managers can use to gain traction for their ideas, and we illustrate them with examples from our research. Each tactic should be part of an extended campaign to win attention and resources.

TACTIC

Tailor Your Pitch

1 More than any other tactic in our research sample, tailoring the pitch to decision makers was associated with success. It's essential for issue sellers to familiarize themselves with their audience's unique blend of goals, values, and knowledge and to allow that insight to shape their messages.

That's how one regional sales manager in the Canada division of an international oil company persuaded senior executives to restructure the sales organization and change its approach to attracting and motivating talent. Although sales teams in the oil industry are usually organized by customer, at this company each one covered a region. Because

**Middle managers
are more likely
to speak up
when they:**

• **Identify with the
organization**

• **Have a positive
relationship with
their audience**

• **Feel psychologically
safe in the
organization**

• **Think someone above
them will take action**

• **Care enough about
the issue to invest
energy in selling it**

many customers had offices in multiple regions, teams often undermined one another's efforts by offering competing deals to the same clients. The organization's poor structure led to misaligned incentives and a fragmented customer experience. Making matters worse, most of the reps worked for salaries rather than commissions. "That's why a competitor managed to poach more than half my division's sales force," the regional manager said. Unsurprisingly, nearly all the top performers had left. Having a sales structure so inefficient and out of touch with standard practices made such attrition practically inevitable. Although the executives who had created the structure were competent, they lacked sales experience. The remaining sales team, similarly, was technically knowledgeable but inexperienced, and the force was too small to sustain the business, let alone grow it.

When the regional manager initially shared his concerns with his boss and a few other executives, they disagreed, saying that the solution was simply to push people harder. "That sounded very risky to me, given that the division had just lost more than half its sales team," he told us. He made little progress until he asked other leaders in the division—those with greater decision-making power—what they expected from sales. He met with the new vice president of marketing and sales for Canada, for example, who wanted to prevent teams from working against one another and damaging credibility with clients.

In light of the feedback he'd gathered, the regional manager drafted recommendations and explained how they would help the division double revenue within four years (a target the CEO had recently announced to shareholders). Assigning sales teams to clients rather than to regions, he pointed out, would keep reps from stepping on one another's toes—which addressed the Canada VP's concerns. The manager also argued that attracting and retaining seasoned salespeople was essential to increasing revenue within the CEO's desired time frame. He emphasized the division's high attrition rate for reps—about 40% walked out the door each year—and described how that could be fixed by following the industry's best practices for recruiting and managing sales talent. Commission-based compensation would attract experienced people and give them a reason to stay. Training would help greener reps develop important skills for managing customer relationships.

Idea in Brief

THE PROBLEM

Middle managers glean valuable insights from their contact with customers, suppliers, and colleagues—but they struggle to sell their ideas to decision makers at the top. As a result, their organizations fail to seize opportunities and solve problems.

THE SOLUTION

Research shows that managers who gain buy-in from senior executives use seven tactics more often than managers whose ideas don't go anywhere.

THE BENEFITS

These tactics provide a powerful framework for leading change from the middle ranks. By using them in an extended campaign for support, you can persuade senior leaders to take action and accomplish your goals.

The Canada VP approved the plan and, more important, provided the resources to carry it out. “We added a dozen experienced people to the sales organization,” the regional manager said. “And after implementation we had only one person leave in four years.” That reduced the once-sizable turnover costs to almost nothing. The division also invested \$75,000 in training, which more than paid for itself with a contest to see who could sell the most using the methods learned. (That alone brought \$2.7 million in new business in one week.) Although the division missed its four-year target, it doubled revenue in five years.

In light of those benefits, executives no longer blamed laziness for the problems the sales force had experienced. And good people stopped leaving in droves, thanks partly to the shift in mindset at the top and partly to the improved structure and talent practices.

The regional manager attributed the inroads he made to his carefully tailored pitch. In addition to speaking directly to the Canada VP's and other leaders' goals, he said, “I had to show how my ideas could help meet the CEO's revenue expectations.” That allowed him to move from one-on-one and small group meetings to a written proposal and a presentation he could share at a more senior level, where the initiatives got the support they needed.

the big picture, they'll be more willing to devote resources to it.

Similarly, if you're a unit head presenting one of your directors to top management for promotion, you'll want to say that she exceeded her targets and spell out how she can contribute to key goals. You can describe how moving her into a more strategic role will help turn around a struggling department, for instance, or bring energy and creativity to a modestly performing part of the business. By framing her as a leader the organization needs instead of simply letting her impressive work speak for itself, you create a sense of urgency for decision makers. This isn't just someone who has accomplished a lot and deserves to advance, whenever and however that's convenient. It's someone with the skills and drive to make changes that matter now.

As these scenarios show, it's often effective to highlight an idea's business benefits; the successful sellers in our research took that approach significantly more often than those who'd failed. For example, a chief investment officer at a financial firm described how he very gradually made the case that subscribing to a proprietary real estate database

TACTIC

Frame the Issue

2 An issue's place on your organization's list of priorities depends heavily on how you package the idea. A new technological development might seem like techie trivia until you explain how it supports a strategic goal, such as increasing responsiveness to customers. It then becomes important. Once people see how your initiative fits into

A new technological development might seem like techie trivia until you explain how it supports a strategic goal.

was “a need and not just a want.” Every six months or so, over a period of about five years, he would float the suggestion at a moment when access to the database would be useful, and a tech-savvy ally in the asset management department would vocally agree. But they needed broader support for the idea, because most people viewed it as a luxury. “We are a lean-running organization that has historically resisted adopting new technologies,” the chief investment officer explained. Eventually he identified a relevant need in another part of the business: The database could help the accounting department meet its public-reporting and audit requirements. That was the tipping point. He’d spelled out the business benefits for multiple departments. The firm decided to subscribe.

Moral framing appears to be less powerful than business framing. In our research, the few instances of moral framing were associated with failed attempts or uneven results. When issue sellers peddle their principles too aggressively, people may react negatively to what they perceive as a judgment of their character.

Although focusing on business benefits is often safer, sellers may need to underscore the urgency. They might, for instance, present the idea as an opportunity that shouldn’t be missed. Our successful sellers were significantly more likely than the others to explain what the organization stood to gain from their ideas. Emphasizing the positive can give your audience a sense of control over the situation and inspire optimism and buy-in.

Highlighting a threat—a consequence of not adopting your idea—can also create pressure to act. But it can backfire: When decision makers focus on potential loss, they sometimes then bury their heads and avoid the issue. The amount of threat framing did not differ between successful and unsuccessful selling attempts, perhaps because it was viewed as a mixed bag: It’s hard to predict whether it will spur action—the classic “fight” response—or result in “flight.”

Finally, issue sellers often find success by bundling their ideas with related ones. For instance, someone lobbying to increase leave time for employees caring for aging or sick family members might allude to efforts to increase parental leave. When attached to a larger initiative, a small idea can gain prominence. It’s no longer just an elder-care issue; it’s a work/life balance issue.



Tailor your pitch

Where does my audience stand on this issue?

What does my audience find most convincing or compelling?

Frame the issue

How can I connect my issue to organizational priorities?

How can I best describe its benefits?

How can I link it to other issues receiving attention?

How can I highlight an opportunity for the organization?

Manage emotions on both sides

How can I use my emotions to generate positive rather than negative responses?

How can I manage my audience’s emotional responses?

Get the timing right

What is the best moment to be heard? Can I “catch the wave” of a trend, for example, or tap into what’s going on in the outside world?

What is the right time in the decision-making process to raise my issue?

TACTIC

3

Manage Emotions on Both Sides

Because issue selling is an interpersonal activity, often involving high stakes, it inevitably stirs emotions. Passion, if appropriately expressed, improves sellers’

chances of gaining attention and triggering action. There’s a fine line, however, between passion and anger. People sometimes propose initiatives because they are fed up with existing conditions or behavior. And as they encounter roadblocks to their selling efforts, their frustrations may intensify.

Though strong emotions can be channeled into a rousing appeal for action, when unregulated they’re more likely to diminish the seller’s influence. Decision makers who detect negative emotions from subordinates offering input tend to perceive those employees as complainers, not as change agents. Further, recent research by Wharton’s Adam Grant shows that people who keep their emotions in check—or at least control what they display to others—feel more comfortable raising issues and receive higher performance evaluations.

Our study supports Grant’s finding: Successful issue sellers paid much more attention to emotional regulation than those who failed. Indeed, the latter sometimes understood that their runaway emotions were partly to blame for their failures.

Important as self-regulation is, it’s equally critical to understand and manage the decision maker’s emotions—they, too, can make or break your case. John Healy, the manager in our opening example, did that especially well. Anticipating how his boss might feel about having selected the more hazardous and more expensive gas-scrubbing system, he was careful to point out that user reviews of the new technology hadn’t been available when that decision had been made. Sellers hoping to have their issues heard should seek to inspire positive emotions in the decision makers—by focusing on benefits, for instance, or showing how action is possible. In our sample, successful sellers reported doing this far more often than others.

TACTIC

4

Get the Timing Right

It’s critical to find the right moment to raise your ideas. That moment might be when organizational priorities shift, when certain players leave or join the company, or when a boss’s

preoccupations change. Successful sellers in our study reported greater sensitivity than others to timing, by a wide margin. The best sellers notice when more and more people are beginning to care about a larger topic or trend that's related to their issue, and they position their idea to "catch the wave."

For example, the managing director of an Ecuadoran holding company's luxury division chose just the right time to persuade his CFO and board to tap an unexplored market in Peru. He'd gotten the idea in 2007. Though it was a viable option then, he held off on proposing it, given Peru's recent civil unrest and the fact that his division still had room for growth in its home market. In 2009, after the recession, "Peru had the best-performing stock market in the world," the director said. So his team took a trip to assess the potential. "We looked at new construction developments, and the modern minimalism was in stark contrast with the high-walled constructions from the guerrilla and terrorist era." It seemed that Peru was not just doing well but primed for growth. "There was only one prominent shopping mall, and 'hard' luxury items such as designer-branded bags, watches, and sunglasses were scarce or sold informally," he explained. "Yet Starbucks cafés were full every day and expanding." The director and his team decided that a luxury boutique carrying various products but focusing on watches would be the best project to pursue. They knew that department stores wouldn't cover the demand, because customers would want the luxury experience. "We thought Peru was ready for it," he said. The timing was excellent for another reason: The market in Ecuador had become saturated by then.

The director got the approval he needed, and the company opened two luxury stores in November 2010. "The day we opened our first boutique we sold the entire inventory of perfume we had bought from the pharmacy next door," he said. "One customer came in and bought all our stock of ink for his luxury writing instrument out of fear of not finding the ink again." That store accounted for 40% of the division's profits over the following three years. By 2011 all the most prestigious luxury brands had entered the Peruvian market—but this company had gotten there first.

In addition to keeping a close eye on larger trends and events, it's important to be mindful of deadlines. If an idea relates directly to an imminent product launch or software release, by all means

Involve others

Which allies from my network can help me sell my issue, and how can I involve them effectively?

Who are my potential blockers, and how can I persuade them to support me?

Who are my fence-sitters, and how can I convince them that my issue matters?

Adhere to norms

Should I use a formal, public approach to sell my issue (for example, a presentation to upper management)? Or an informal, private approach (casual one-on-one conversations)? Or a combination of the two?

Suggest solutions

Am I suggesting a viable solution?

If not, am I proposing a way to discover one instead of just highlighting the problem?

speak up—now is the time to be heard. But as recent research shows, when a deadline is far away and decision makers are still in exploration mode, open-ended inquiry can be more effective than proposing a specific solution. Of course, sellers can't always know their audiences' deadlines. If you discover an immediate challenge, though, you can try to address it in your proposal—and shelve other ideas until people have time to really think them through.

TACTIC

5 Involve Others

Issue sellers usually are better off bringing others into their efforts than going it alone. Building a coalition generates organizational buy-in more quickly and on a larger scale as more people contribute energy and resources. One person might have access to important data, for example, and another might have a personal relationship with one of the top managers you're trying to persuade. Perhaps recognizing these advantages, our successful respondents were more likely than the others to involve colleagues in pitching their ideas.

Negotiation experts would tell you to mobilize your allies, persuade your blockers to support the issue or at least back off, and show the fence-sitters why they should care about your idea. When building a coalition, you can reach out to experts in relevant areas to add to your credibility, though a recent study of reactions to issue sellers suggests that it's just as important to include individuals the target audience trusts. Certainly tap members of your network, but also involve people whose networks don't overlap with yours. That will expand the pool of people who might advocate for your idea or lend their expertise.

TACTIC

6 Adhere to Norms

The tactics we've covered so far draw on two types of knowledge that successful issue sellers need: strategic (understanding the organization's goals, the plans to achieve them, and the roles decision makers play in those efforts) and relational (figuring out who will be affected by your issue, who cares about it, who might object to it, and so on). Here we'll discuss a third type: knowledge of organizational norms, such as what kinds of data your leaders like to use to make decisions, how they prefer to receive information, and whether they tend to get behind issues similar to yours. Grasping such norms

can give you a sense of how effective the other tactics described in this article will be. For example, a study of employees selling environmental issues found that the use of drama and emotion worked only if the organization already had a strong environmental commitment.

One important norm to understand is whether it's generally best to use formal or informal approaches. Casual conversations allow issue sellers to get an off-the-record read on their ideas and avoid putting their target audience on the spot in public. But formal approaches can convey seriousness and apply helpful pressure on decision makers to respond. Issue sellers need to consider these trade-offs in light of what's expected in their organizations. In one company we studied, senior managers claimed to want innovative thinking but were described, even at "blue sky" meetings, as chastising those who didn't present slide shows using company-approved templates. Not surprisingly, their employees reported selling in very formal ways while acknowledging the dampening effect this probably had on innovation.

Successful sellers used more formal—and fewer informal—tactics than those whose pitches failed. So it seems that many business settings require a certain level of convention and decorum, and that the best sellers adapt their behavior to fit that norm. Our qualitative data suggests that sequencing matters, though: People who succeeded tended to roll out their ideas informally early on, in order to gauge interest, and then switch to formal presentations.

TACTIC

Suggest Solutions

7 Clearly, people believe that if they're going to speak up about problems, they'd better suggest thoughtful fixes: This was the most frequently used tactic among both types of sellers, successful and not. And those who succeeded used it significantly more often than those who didn't. They pointed to specific solutions, such as adding a business operations team to address a systems flaw. They often included funding ideas when selling the need for something new.

Proposing a solution signals that the seller has put thought into the issue and respects leaders' time. Indeed, recent laboratory research shows that people think more highly of issue sellers who suggest solutions.

But here's the hitch: If people are less likely to raise issues for which they haven't identified a solution, as our data shows, organizations where problems crop up faster than people can devise fixes are at a considerable disadvantage. What's more, some problems are best solved by a group of people who bring diverse knowledge, experience, and expertise to the table. In these cases, expecting issue sellers to have solutions in hand may lead to poor decision making.

Sellers who feel strongly about an issue but don't see a solution can suggest a sensible process for discovering one. That way they follow the norm of being solution-focused while getting others constructively involved in a timely manner.

Create a Tactical Campaign

There's more to a pitch than a big presentation and a yea-or-nay decision. Those are just the most visible steps in the process. Leading up to them, you should carefully lay a foundation for your argument, tactic by tactic, as you acquire resources and knowledge. Here are some principles to help you make the most of the tactics we've described.

Choose your battles. Some ideas are just plain tough to sell—those that are too far ahead of the audience's current understanding, for instance, or too much of a stretch beyond the organization's norms. That's especially true of any idea that may seem an indictment of the status quo or, worse, of the audience's intelligence, judgment, or morality. In such

To determine whether to invest resources and social capital in selling an issue, ask two questions: How important is this to my company? And how important is it to me?

About the Research

We surveyed 77 men and 24 women, ages 24 to 52, and, with the help of research assistant Evan Bruno, interviewed 10 of them. Our respondents had 14 years of work experience, on average—about six years in their organizations and about two and a half in their current roles. They held a variety of jobs, from business analyst to director of marketing to principal engineer,

and worked in industries ranging from software development to consumer goods to law.

About half the respondents (randomly selected) were asked to describe a time when they successfully pitched an idea to decision makers; the other half, a time when they failed. All indicated how they knew that their efforts had succeeded or failed and rated the extent

to which they'd used each of the tactics in this article. We examined whether each tactic appeared more frequently in the success stories than in the failure stories, testing for statistically significant differences between the two groups. We also identified which tactics played the largest role in each success or failure.

cases, you may have an uphill battle no matter how skillfully you frame the issue and manage emotions.

Even the best issue sellers can't win every time, and sometimes the payoff isn't worth the effort. To determine whether to invest resources and social capital in selling an issue, ask two questions: How important is this to my company? And how important is it to me? That will help you assess how much risk to take on. Raising concerns about a company's approach to foreign labor practices or about managers' treatment of employees will probably elicit much more pushback than ideas for enhancing products or improving processes. But if the former issues are critical to the organization's well-being or your own professional identity, you might sensitively pursue them even if you know you won't succeed in the short term.

Combine tactics. In our regression analysis, we found that campaigns using multiple tactics succeeded more often than those using any single tactic. Indeed, the combined use of all seven tactics accounted for about 40% of the difference between successes and failures. We saw the same kind of impact in individuals' descriptions of their selling efforts. The engineering manager at the energy company managed the GM's emotions, suggested a solution backed by data, and turned to an outside expert for further support. The Ecuadoran managing director also combined tactics: In addition to choosing the right moment to launch the luxury goods stores, he adhered to his conservative organization's norms for proposing projects—starting with informal conversations, looking at proxy businesses in other industries (in this case, Starbucks), talking with customers and partners to gather insights, and finally building up to the formal review process, using traditional financial tools and outsourced market studies for analysis.

Approach the right audience. It's a common dilemma: Should you air your idea with your boss

and risk getting nowhere because he or she lacks sufficient power or interest to back you up? Or go straight to decision makers who will care—and quite likely pay a price for bypassing your manager? Wishing to avoid trouble, many sellers start with their boss and hope their ideas make their way up the hierarchy. But their issues often die right away or languish until senior management becomes aware of them. Sometimes the immediate boss doesn't even bother escalating the issue; other times the messenger isn't as skilled as the initial seller at making the case.

So ask if you can accompany anyone selling on your behalf, whether that's your manager or a colleague who has an "in" with a formal decision-making body. If that's not possible, do everything you can to prepare that person to sell effectively: Work out the details of the business case, help identify the right time and venue for presenting it, and so forth. If you decide to approach decision makers directly, keep your boss in the loop. Otherwise you'll need to have a very good answer when senior leaders ask why you've come to them instead of to your manager.

NO SET OF PRESCRIPTIONS can capture the nuances of every environment or remove the risks and disappointments of issue selling. But sellers who routinely and effectively use these tactics enjoy greater success than those who don't.

Issue selling isn't a discrete event; it's an ongoing process that requires groundwork, pacing, and patience. When midlevel managers do it effectively, their ideas get decision makers' attention and make a real difference. ▾

HBR Reprint R1501E



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