Does Anybody Listen to You?

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**HOW DO YOU
STEP UP
FROM MERE
CONTRIBUTOR
TO REAL
CHANGE-MAKER?**

I know that if you read this column, you care about your career. You're smart, passionate, and driven to do better.

And the people you work with probably know that about you, too.

But does anybody care? When you raise your hand to share an idea, does anybody listen? How likely is it that an idea of yours would get implemented?

I get emails all the time from readers who just can't seem to get the people in charge to listen to their ideas. I totally get their frustration. It's really confusing when that happens, especially when you're smart, passionate, and driven—and you know that other people know that about you, too.

So where's the disconnect?

How do you step up from being a star contributor to a serious innovator and change-maker in your organization? How can you get people—those who make decisions in your company—to listen to you?

Read on to find out.

An idea on its own is not worth much. Just because you think you know a better way to do something, even if you're right, no one is required to care.

Making great things happen at work is about more than just being smart. Good ideas succeed or fail depending on your ability to communicate them correctly to the people who have the power to make them happen.

When you are navigating an organization, it pays to know whom to talk to and how to reach them. Here is a simple guide to sending your ideas up the chain and actually making them stick. It takes three elements: the right people, the right time, and the right way.

1. THE RIGHT PEOPLE

For most decisions, there will be a number of stakeholders who need to buy in to your idea: your manager, any other department leads who would be involved, maybe even your executive team.

Before you do anything else, you should identify exactly who needs to sign off on your idea. Who are the key stakeholders? Why do they matter? Who is least likely to be on board? Who is most likely?

Think about how each of these people functions in the organization and what your relationship to them is. Your relationship with each of these people matters and will influence how receptive each is to your ideas. Don't underestimate your power to influence anyone in your organization—even if you're relatively low ranking in the company—through good relationships.

To build those relationships and influence, however, you have to start working on them *before* you ever need to pitch an idea to anyone.

If you don't yet have relationships with the biggest influencers and decision makers in your organization, that should be your first order of business. Ask people to coffee,

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find ways to add value to them, and get to know them.

Then when you're ready to pitch your idea, move in an order that makes sense; don't be random or just start where it's easiest.

It usually makes much more sense to approach people one on one at first, rather than holding a big meeting and making an announcement. This way you can get feedback on your idea, answer specific questions, and slowly build momentum so that by the time everyone hears your idea, it is a foregone conclusion that it will be adopted.

2. THE RIGHT TIMING

Have you ever had somebody come to you with a minor request when you're buried under important work with a tight deadline? How excited were you to jump to their assistance, when you were already busy with something else? Probably not very.

Now multiply that by 10, and that's how your manager or executive team will respond to an idea that's presented at a time that doesn't make any sense. A good idea presented at the wrong time is likely to fail. Focus is one of the keys to business success, and people aren't excited about adopting ideas that look like distractions.

So if your team is focused on hiring, for example, and that is your top priority this quarter, any ideas for improvement in other areas will probably be disregarded.

Once you've presented an idea and had it disregarded by your leadership, it can be much more difficult to get anyone to listen to it in the future. They'll be thinking, "Didn't I already say no to this? Why are we talking about this again?"

Make sure your idea is worth the effort right now. The change must be measurable and likely to result in a great improvement for the organization.

And it goes without saying that raising any new idea and investing in its success should happen only when all of your regular work is done, and done well. No one will be receptive to your ideas if you aren't already shining in the areas you're expected to work on.

3. THE RIGHT WAY

At certain companies, great ideas succeed when they're presented as narratives. At other companies, slides are king. Other leaders love data and numbers.

How you tell your story and pitch your idea matters.

While you may think, "A good idea is a good idea, right? Any smart person will be able to see that," this is not 100 percent true. A person who relies on data to make good decisions won't find a hypothetical story about a customer convincing. Someone who wants to see slides might not connect with an idea they just hear in a meeting.

Speak to people in their language; that's the only way to be sure they hear you.

Try to imagine every question each person will ask you (these will be different for every person; the finance department cares about different issues than the software engineers), and make sure you have an answer ready before they ask the question.

If you're not sure what style your leadership likes, think back to some recent meetings you have attended. How have the leaders expressed ideas themselves? That will give you a good guide to what they prefer and how they think.

Think also about other ideas that have been adopted recently. How did the person who proposed the idea convince the people in charge and the influencers? If you don't know what the person did, ask. Odds are, people who

get their ideas passed are influencers, too, and it is good to have a working relationship with them.

How do things get done where you work? Who doesn't listen to you at work? Whom do they listen to? Hopefully this article has given you some direction on getting your ideas out there. Now it is time to go make them happen.

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