

# JOHN P. KOTTER

*Author of Leading Change and Our Iceberg Is Melting*

AND LORNE A. WHITEHEAD



buy\*in

\*saving your  
good idea  
from getting  
shot down

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

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buy\*in

## **preface**

We have all experienced the basic problem addressed here, and in a very personal way, because it is an old, common, human, and increasingly important problem.

You believe in a good idea. You're convinced it is needed badly, and needed now. But you can't make it happen on your own. You need sufficient support in order to implement it and make things better. You or your allies present the plan. You present it well. Then, along with thoughtful issues being raised, come the confounding questions, inane comments, and verbal bullets—either directly at you or, even worse, behind your back. It matters not that the idea is needed, insightful, innovative, and logical. It matters not if the issues involved are extremely important to a business, an individual, or even a nation. The proposal is still shot down, or is accepted but without sufficient support to gain all of its true benefits, or slowly dies a sad death.

It can be maddening. You end up flustered, embarrassed, or furious. All those who would benefit from the idea lose. You lose. In an extreme case, a whole company

or nation may lose. And, as we shall demonstrate in this book, it doesn't have to be that way.

The competent creation and implementation of good ideas is a basic life skill, relevant to the twenty-one-year-old college graduate, the fifty-five-year-old corporate CEO, and virtually everyone else. This skill, or the lack of it, affects the economy, governments, families, and most certainly our own lives.

The challenge is that the amount of thought and education put into creating good ideas is far higher today than the knowledge and instruction on how to implement those ideas. In the world of business, for example, the field of strategy has made huge advances in the past twenty years. The field of strategy implementation, in contrast, has made much less progress.

It would be wonderful if the good ideas you champion, on or off the job, could simply stand on their own. But far too often, this is not the case. Whether it's a big bill before Congress, an innovative corporate strategy, or tonight's plan for dinner and the movies, sensible ideas can be ignored, shot down, or, more often, wounded so badly that they produce little gain. A wounded idea might still get 51 percent of the relevant heads nodding approval. But when true buy-in is thin, the smallest of obstacles can eventually derail a supposedly agreed-upon proposal.

This is not a book about persuasion and communication in general, or even about all the useful methods people use to create buy-in. Instead, here we offer a single method that can be unusually powerful in building strong

support for a good idea, a method that is rarely used or used well and that does not require blinding rhetorical skills or charismatic magic.

The method is counterintuitive in a number of ways. It does not try to keep naysayers out of the room. Just the opposite, it welcomes them into the discussion of a new proposal and virtually encourages them to shoot at you. It doesn't try to build a power base or use a powerful personality to steamroller over the unfair opposition. It actually treats the unfair, illogical, and sneaky with a large degree of respect. It doesn't try to overwhelm attackers, or preempt their advance, with selling-selling-selling, complex manipulations, or long, logical lists of reasons-reasons-reasons. Instead, it responds to attacks in ways that are always simple, clear, crisp, and filled with common sense.

We have seen that this counterintuitive method of walking into the fray, showing respect for all, and using simple, clear, and commonsense responses can not only keep good ideas from getting shot down but can actually turn attacks to *your advantage* in capturing busy peoples' attention, helping them grasp an idea, and ultimately building strong buy-in.

The ideas and advice offered here are not based on a hypothetical theory or just our opinion. They are based in part on extensive observation by Lorne Whitehead in his roles over the years as an entrepreneur, an executive, an administrator, and a professor of physics at the University of British Columbia. They are also grounded in an ongoing flow of research by John Kotter at Harvard Business

School and his work on the topics of leadership and change, published largely in four books: *Leading Change*, *The Heart of Change*, *Our Iceberg Is Melting*, and *A Sense of Urgency*. And while preparing this work, the authors also collected and incorporated numerous related observations provided by colleagues.

We present these ideas first with a story of a face-to-face meeting, where a brave few describe and defend an idea in a crowd of seventy-five, in a room, over a few hours. It is one specific setting, but we have found that the attacks shown in the story can be seen anywhere, and the best method for responding works anywhere: with back-and-forth e-mails across continents; ten people at lunch or in a classroom; a paper sent to a thousand employees; a series of two or twenty-two meetings; or dueling memos.

In part 2 of the book, we become analytical, showing explicitly what was happening in the story, discussing four common attack strategies, and explaining our method. We show the twenty-four generic and maddening attacks people often use, along with an effective response to each. We provide a few more examples of how this all plays itself out in real situations. We end with clear, straightforward advice on how to easily use this material, since, though we think our method is intellectually fascinating, our goal here is entirely practical: to help you save your good ideas from being shot down; to help you get the relevant people to strongly buy into an idea (or even a grand vision), no matter how difficult; and to help you make the rapid change in your world not only a hazard, but also an opportunity.

In the appendix, we explain the method within the context of efforts to produce large-scale change—an increasingly important topic Kotter has been studying for two decades. If you are involved in, or particularly interested in, large-scale change, you might be well served to glance at that material after you finish this preface and before starting the book.

For ease of reading, we have made our story, the issues, and the setting as uncomplicated as we can without losing the complexity of our subject. This has led us to a story of a public meeting in a small town library, concerning new computers. You are left to translate this example into contexts specifically relevant to you and to modes of interaction other than from public gatherings of a particular size: perhaps a lunch, an e-mail, a report, a videoconference, a meeting in the hallway. Trust us; you can make that translation.

We will spare you the details from neurology, psychology, and elsewhere that explain why a story can be a powerful learning mechanism, more powerful for most people than any analytical treatment. Let's just say that we hope you will find our story engaging, memorable, whimsical, and fun. But as you read the Centerville Library tale, don't underestimate the deep seriousness of either the subject or our intent. Whimsy is a means, not an end.

—John Kotter

Lorne Whitehead

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# the centerville story

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## part one



# 1.

## the death of a good plan

Your pulse is racing. Your turn is next, and public speaking isn't your favorite activity. You serve on the Citizens Advisory Committee for Centerville Library. The committee is meeting right now in open forum, which means anyone the library serves can attend the session, and about seventy-five people, in total, fill the room.

The chair is about to ask for your presentation. Earlier this month, you agreed to bring forward a plan for endorsement this evening. It's a proposal devised by you and some supporters of the library, one of whom is the manager of a prominent local company.

The proposal is simple. Centerville Library can't afford the twenty-five to thirty new computers it needs, much less up-to-date printers and networking and other support equipment (like computer-friendly, ergonomic chairs). The total cost, at retail, would eat

## THE CENTERVILLE STORY

up a huge chunk of its very tight budget. But the local computer store, Centerville Computers, has agreed to help. It has offered that for the next three months, for every six Centerville families that buy a new computer from it, Centerville Computers will donate one state-of-the-art, big-screen, new computer to the library, along with sufficient printers, networking, chairs—everything you could dream of.

The proposal is a rare opportunity that makes total sense for the library and the town. The facts and logic are compelling. It clearly will help the library take a big step into the twenty-first century, especially since you can't see how you would be able to find funds for this in next year's budget or in the year after next. It will assist librarians. It will benefit the less affluent kids in town who need, but don't have, easy access to good computers. Now the task is just to convince others, get their support, and move forward to execute the plan—and quickly, before Centerville Computers walks away.

Centerville Computers will need to get approval from its head office, and the library board will need to approve the commercial aspect of this donation as well, but the board almost certainly will do so as long as the plan is endorsed at this public meeting of the Citizens Advisory Committee. Unfortunately, the timing is tight—you need this endorsement tonight in order to get the approvals in time for the year-end buying season. Otherwise, the plan won't work.

You feel particularly strongly about the proposal—strongly enough to do the public speaking that you don't much like—because you know these easy-to-access computers would so benefit the less affluent children in town. Most can get to the library easily using public transportation. Many cannot easily reach the schools they are bused to, and the schools have shorter hours and are not open on the weekend. For the more affluent children, this is not a problem. They have computers at home, within a few feet of their rooms, if not in their rooms, and available whenever they want, seven days a week. Anyone in the next generation who is not highly computer literate is going to have a hard time in life. Failing to help everyone with this challenge, or worse yet not even trying to help, doesn't strike you as making any sense for the economy, the town, employers, or the children. For all these reasons, you've developed a deep, personal belief in this project; you really *need* its approval this evening.

When it's your turn to speak, you make a brief presentation and then ask for questions and comments before making a formal motion. There are a few minor, good-natured questions, and then it happens. Pompus Meani raises his hand and begins to speak.

Here's the thing about Pompus Meani: he usually values self-importance above doing good. He has been on the Citizens Advisory Committee for a long time, and at least his behavior is consistent. If something will make him seem wiser and more important,

## The characters

---

Not their real names (obviously).

But given the way they often behave,  
they might as well be called

—Pompus Meani

—Heidi Agenda

—Avoidus Riski

—Spaci Cadetus

—Allis Welli

—Lookus Smarti

—Divertus Attenti

—Bendi Windi

Your brother-in-law Hank

and you!

---

he supports it. And if not, he opposes it, sometimes stealthily and sometimes flamboyantly as a show of power. He wants to be elected chair of the committee later this year. Even though you have no interest in that role, Pompus sees you as a threat and wants you to look foolish.

He begins by faintly praising your efforts (*you have worked really hard on this, by the way*), and then he utters the dreaded word, “*but . . .*” In a serious, earnest-sounding voice, he says something worrisome, and a few heads nod. He adds another problematic comment, and others look both surprised and concerned. Finally, he makes a motion to defer this matter until it has

been possible to consider his concerns carefully and properly. The motion is seconded.

Your known supporters, at least a dozen people in the room, actually fear Pompus, offer no comment, and just look to you. And you've got . . . nothing! You just don't have a satisfactory response at your fingertips. You mumble that it will be very unfortunate to have such a delay as it may kill the project, which, you say, is a terrible mistake. But with the motion seconded, a vote must be held. The majority, around 55 percent, vote for deferral, and the plan is dead. All your work has gone up in smoke. An important opportunity to help the kids and the library and the town is lost. You feel embarrassed and incredibly frustrated. And you must restrain yourself from a maddening impulse to strangle Pompus Meani.

So what did Pompus say? And what could you have said in response? These are questions related to one of life's more fundamental skills, to crucial capabilities for those trying to transform institutions in an age of rapid change, and to abilities that, when missing, can leave us emotionally distraught, no matter the setting or our role in that setting.

Attacks that derail good ideas can come from all sorts of people, not just Pompus Meanis. For example, Pompus has a cousin, Heidi Agenda, whom you admire, but who has an undisclosed personal reason for opposing the plan—a reason that is more important to her than fairness or your friendship. Furthermore,