

7 Ideas for Generating Buy-In

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Whole Foods Employees Vote for New Hires

Every new hire at a Whole Foods store is subject to a peer-based selection process. The newbie is provisionally assigned to a team, for example in bakery or produce, pending a 4-week trial and a team vote. After the trial period, that team votes on the newbie's suitability and ultimately his or her fate. A two-thirds majority vote is needed to achieve a full-time slot on the team.

Pret a Manger Employees Vote Too

Similarly, to secure a job at Pret a Manger, a British fast-food chain with locations in NYC, employees vote whether or not the new hire gets to stay. Because the fast-food industry suffers from an exceptionally high industry turnover, it is not surprising that the voting occurs after a 6-hour shift, instead of a 4-week trial.

Why all the voting?

The leaders at Whole Foods and Pret a Manger are strategically (if not unintentionally) leveraging the influences of "Cognitive Dissonance" and "Confirmation Bias."

Cognitive Dissonance

Everyone is influenced by a behavioral phenomenon called "cognitive dissonance." Here's how it works. If I vote for someone to join my team then I am more inclined to support that person once they're on my team. If I don't support the new hire after I just voted for them, then I must deal with my inevitable discord – my post-vote actions are conflicting with my vote. By not supporting the guy I just voted for, I am essentially disagreeing with myself.

That's cognitive dissonance and it never sits well with us. So we go to great lengths to alleviate it. How? By confirming our initial decision to vote them on the island. That way there's no discord in our two actions.

Confirmation Bias

The other behavioral phenomenon at work here is called "Confirmation Bias." Once we have a belief, a preconception influencing our actions, we take action based on that belief and then we look for evidence to confirm that belief. Here's how this works. I voted for the new guy to join the team, and now I am seeking out evidence to confirm that I made the right decision. I am looking to confirm my preconception about the new guy.

In other words, as soon as we have established a view about ourselves or others, we search for information that confirms that view, and at the same time we disregard, ignore, and refute any information that might bring that view into question. Any new information is scrutinized and filtered. If it supports our belief, we embrace it. If it contradicts our belief, we pay no attention to it, discount it, or unequivocally reject it.

7 Ideas for Leveraging the Voting Concept to Engage the Middle

Knowing that we are all influenced by these behavioral phenomena, we cannot ignore their impact. Instead we must leverage these influences, while taking some lessons from Whole Foods and Pret a Manger. At the core is the truism, people support that which they help create.

1. Ask People their Opinions. Even when you know the answer, ask people for their opinion. This simple act will go to great lengths to help them feel important in your decision. And ultimately this will kindle their support of your decision.

2. Ask People to Pick their Top 3 Choices. Whenever we launch a robust mentoring solution, we highly recommend that participants be allowed to vote for their top 3 choices of Mentors or Protégés. When they are then matched with one of those choices, they will go to great lengths to support the success of that relationship because they helped to create it.

3. Give People Something to Own. When you allow people to own some piece of your project, they will not only make their piece successful, they will support the entire project. They will feel a sense of ownership over its success.

4. Ask for a Testimonial. Ask people to write a testimonial and they'll start to believe the words they wrote, especially the more you publicize their words.

5. Hand over the Decision. When you give people the power to decide how something works, they will support that decision much more than if you had plunked down your decision. Just like team members at Whole Foods, people will feel like they're being heard and their vote counts.

6. Create a Task Force. When you ask people to help you solve a problem, they will support the solution because they were instrumental in creating it. This not only generates widely supported solutions, it quells complaining about the problem among the problem-solvers and their extended circles.

7. Create Champions and Organize Councils. Ask someone to be a champion of a program to their peers and cognitive dissonance won't tolerate anything other than their support of that program. Similarly, organize a council and you'll have instant champions. As an example, we always encourage the deployment of "Mentoring Champions" and we often see companies create "Diversity Councils."

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