

Steve McNeely's Column

Buy-in

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(Hmm, 1-11-11)

Late one night a few years ago I mumbled, "I think I'm going to buy a motorcycle." Mary said, "Hmmm," turned over and went back to sleep. I heard, "Honey what a wonderful idea! You have worked so hard this tax season. I hope you buy the biggest, fastest, loudest motorcycle you can find."

It wasn't the first time motorcycles had come up. After all, I had a dirt bike and an on-off road bike in the garage. But I was talking real bike, something the Harley riders would see from a distance and think, "yeah, he could be one of us." Tax season having ended I had an appointment with my scheduled, annual mid-life crisis. Perfect timing.

Our next communication was from the motorcycle shop. I said, "I bought a motorcycle." This was to be our last conversation for two weeks. Reflecting back, I sometimes wonder if I could have done more to have Mary buy in to my decision. In reality she knows motorcycles are dangerous and cares about me.

What does "buy-in" mean? It means enthusiastic support for a decision, not just reluctant compliance. When you make a decision, don't you want people to implement the decision because they want to, not because they have to? Of course. People perform at higher levels doing what they want. Professionals comply skillfully with pronouncements passed down from on high, but they will never give that extra kick that comes from owning a decision and having skin in the game. Worst, grumbling obedience to position power eventually erodes unity. Gaining buy-in is a long-term best practice.

How do people buy in to decisions? By being an integral part of the process. When I can recognize a piece of myself in a decision-even in the smallest of ideas-I have a vested interest to make sure that decision is successful; it makes me successful. If I have no ownership, I'm a renter. And renters never care for things the way owners do. Be honest. We all are a little harder on a rental car than our prized jalopy-"I wonder how this minivan corners at high speeds?"

What if all of my ideas are rejected? I will tend to be more supportive if I know my input was

heard, understood, given full consideration, and I comprehend the rationale behind the final outcome. Gathering input is not democracy. Clear expectations have to be understood from the beginning of the process. Sometimes being heard is fair coin for the exchange.

How do we help people buy in to our decisions? Here are some thoughts to consider, you will think of more:

- Invest in building relationships first.
- Create an environment of trust by being trustworthy and trusting.
- Treasure the disagreement that sharpens, not the conflict that dulls. Know the difference.
- Hone the skills required to be an empathetic listener. Do not give an opinion on a matter until you fully understand the other person's point of view.
- Be transparent about the process; clarify expectations. All ideas cannot be grafted into a decision.
- Show genuine appreciation for input; write people personal notes, not a generic "thank you."
- Work for broad-based consensus, not a simple majority. But you will never get 100%.
- Sell the decision. Take the time to explain why. Most reasonable people will support a decision they understand, even if they don't fully agree.
- Have the humility to listen after the fact. You might have made a mistake.
- Publicize and celebrate input that gets used. It reinforces a positive, high-morale high-performance culture.

Gaining buy-in is hard work, takes more time, and may frustrate those who want to cut to the chase. In the long run the investment will pay off handsomely. I have 20 years to convince Mary that we should tour the U.S. in leather on the back of a Harley. Actually, because I didn't work for buy-in, it'll be a pretty cold day in you-know-where before she rides around the block with me. Buy-in. Get some.