"BUY-IN" versus "OWNERSHIP"

I think it is very, very important to **make a clear distinction between "buy-in" and "ownership"** and not present them as if they were the same or interchangeable. It is important because "buy-in" is what everybody talks about and because, more often than not, it doesn't work at all, or doesn't work well, precisely because it is the opposite of "ownership".

"Ownership" is when you own or share the ownership of an idea, a decision, or an action plan; it means that you have participated in its development, that you chose on your own accord to endorse it. It means that you understand it and believe in it. It means that you are both willing and ready to implement it.

"Buy-in" is the opposite: someone else or some group of people has done the development, the thinking, the cooking and now they have to convince you to come along and implement their ideas/plans.

You were not invited to sit at the table upfront while the goose was being cooked. They decided without you but now they need your "buy-in" because without you their great ideas and plans are worth nothing because they can't get implemented until they get your "buy-in". But since you were not part of the process this great idea is a strange one; you cannot fully understand its history or genesis. Since you were not part of the process you cannot be aware of all the other options that were considered and rejected, and of the thinking that went into these choices.

You feel ignored, imposed upon, pushed around, unappreciated and your immune system naturally kicks in to reject this foreign idea. You will eventually look like you agree to this new idea because you have no choice and your masters will cheer believing that you have "bought in" and that you are now as convinced as they are. Of course that will not be the case and your implementation will inevitably be a pale imitation of what it could have been had you been an "owner" instead of a "buyer-in" and be truly convinced.

What is wrong with "buy-in" is the notion that it is perfectly ok for a few to make the plans and decisions and then to impose them on all the others and

still expect that those others will be willing and able to implement them perfectly as if they had made the decisions themselves. **That is a total illusion**. It is an illusion that exists because in most organizations there is little or no evidence, or experience, showing the difference between what people can accomplish when they implement ideas they developed together versus what happens when they implement ideas that were imposed on them.

Most organizations have no clue about the value of true group enthusiasm and true group commitment because they have never or rarely seen it. And the reason they have never seen it is because they have rarely or never created conditions for groups of people to both develop and later implement ideas they own without reservations. Most organizations have no processes in place that could make this logistically possible.

When experts (or bosses) are working very hard at making plans for others (the ones they consider non-experts) to execute --or pushing so-called best practices from elsewhere-- it is impossible for them to consider, and least of all admit, that enthusiasm and deep understanding by those others (lower-rank, non-experts) could double or triple the impact of their expert ideas. It is even more difficult for them to consider that the group intelligence of a community of so-called non-experts properly tapped into has the capability of generating/inventing solutions as good or better as their own. That obviously would defeat their value as experts!!!

Deep understanding can only be achieved by going oneself through the journey of discovery and invention. Someone else's story of the journey will always be a pale imitation of the experience.

If leaders made the effort and took the time to involve UPFRONT all the people that will be involved later on in the implementation there would be **no need for buy-in** for the simple reason that there would be "ownership".

Of course the immediate reaction to such a proposition is that it is ludicrous because it is obviously impossible to involve everybody upfront. Wrong!!! It is possible! Just as it is possible to design processes to involve all the people in the implementation, it is also possible to design processes that involve them all upfront. And therefore the proper question is not whether people should

be involved but how. People that are affected will inevitably be involved; the choices are only about when to involve them and how to involve them. Fortunately there are many processes from which to choose depending on the circumstances.

Hence my message is: **ANYTIME YOU OR SOMEONE AROUND YOU THINKS OR TALKS ABOUT 'BUY-IN' BEWARE!** It is a danger signal telling you that your development and implementation process is missing the essential ingredient of involving all who should be. Reconsider your process before you waste a lot of time and energy or achieve mediocre results. The key is to not separate the development of ideas from the implementation of ideas: the same people need to be involved in both. This means developing one set of integrated processes.

My second message is: **ANYTIME YOU OR SOMEONE AROUND YOU THINKS OR TALKS ABOUT 'BEST PRACTICES' BEWARE!** I say this because usually best practices are imported from outside the organization and they can't be implemented properly without "buy-in".

"Best practices", if there is such a thing, do not exist on their own; rather they emerged within a specific context and from the interactions within a specific group of people. The notion that one can separate a "best practice" from its context and the people who developed it, then transport it to another context and a different group of people and have it implemented as in the original setting is obviously a gross oversimplification. It will never be the case; it will always be different even in those cases where the best practice is improved and turned into a "better-best-practice"☺☺☺.

Hence there is a critical process choice to be made when one is considering importing a "best practice". Will it be a process that is designed to:

- Impose it?
- Achieve "buy-in"?
- Achieve ownership?

There is probably a place and time for each one of those processes to be the most appropriate. The first two are used routinely but clearly the one that needs to be much more often considered is the third one, "how to achieve

ownership?" In complex situations it is the only one that is likely to generate superior results. It requires giving people space and time for self-discovery.

To conclude, trying to achieve "buy-in" is most often an attempt to compensate for a problem that should not have been created in the first place, namely the exclusion from the development process of all the people whose "buy-in" is now being sought. It is a little bit like the need to motivate people; more often than not it is a sign that the real need is to avoid de-motivating them in the first place.

I have of course oversimplified in order to make my point sharper. Debate around situations when what I wrote does or doesn't apply. Look back in your recent history and you will find plenty of examples to reflect back on. It should help in making the whole distinction between "buy-in" and "ownership" clearer.

Have fun kicking those ideas around,

Henri Lipmanowitz, former Chairman, Merck International, President of Plexus Institute Board of Directors.

"On n'entend bien qu'avec le coeur" Le Petit Prince