

PATHWAYS TO PARTNERSHIP

*Take your department from
the department of NO to
the department of GROW*



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Battling Perceptions

The most common trend in organisations today is to ask staff to do more with less. Sometimes it is driven by tough market conditions, sometimes by evidence of inefficiency or over investment and sometimes it is driven by the general overwhelm of information, regulation and stakeholder demands.

As the pressure mounts, all eyes turn to the support functions in organisations. The “overheads” that appear as a budget line item on the forecasts of the “producers” in the organisation. And what are many of those producers thinking? You and your support function are not adding anywhere near that kind of value. In a Bain and Co survey 60% of business executives said they “believe their organizations’ support functions are ineffective, cost too much or both¹.” And I bet you most of the other 40% believe their support functions are more complex than they need to be and put more of a restriction on the business than is needed.

While perceptions such as these persist, it makes it difficult for leaders of support functions to drive cultural change. There are varying levels of resistance. From a tendency of the business to delay engagement with the support function through to outright distrust of the intent or competency of the function. And if the perceptions are driven from the top they are incredibly difficult to break down. Staff listen to the messages

from the senior leadership team, however, they act as their leaders act. If senior leadership are overriding policies or breaking rules themselves, others quickly follow. If such behaviour is not checked, there is a risk of a stampede of staff shunning requirements.

You and your team exist for a very good reason. You are supporters and enablers of the business. When you are not working well with areas of the business those areas are either underperforming or at much higher risk of underperforming. It is more likely they will miss something critical and there will be a whole lot of rework or a whole lot of management time trying to salvage the situation. Worse still, the organisation is at risk of having to front external stakeholders to explain how “it” could have happened.

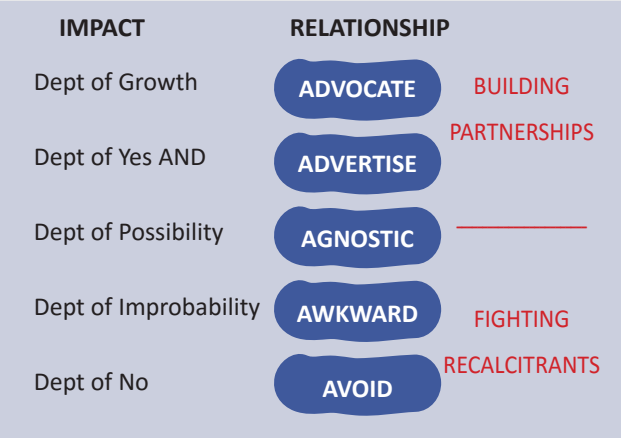
What’s at Stake?

If you are deeply in the situation described above, you probably feel like you are fighting recalcitrants rather than building lasting business partnerships. Partnerships that are full of not just respect, but highly productive ones that help drive the organisation towards its goals.

To get a little more of an idea of the scale of the opportunity you have if you build strong partnerships, have a look at the relationship ladder in the margin of this page. Have a think about your relationship with your various internal clients.

1 Michael Heric, Paul Cichocki, Adnan Qadir and Peter Stumbles, Break out from the G&A cost treadmill: How support functions can delight their customers, not just cut costs. Bain and Co. 2013.

Relationship Ladder



They Avoid You

Being at the bottom of the ladder is obviously the worst place to be. This is where those you and your team need to engage with are avoiding you. Sometimes it is subtle in that they postpone and postpone meetings until it is too late. Leaving you with little room to manoeuvre to help them in the way you feel is best for the organisation.

These clients most likely see you as the Department of “NO!”. As being solely in existence to put a handbrake on their progress. They feel the policies, processes and systems you have put into place are ludicrous and that they can’t run their business if they comply in anything other than the smallest way.

Hopefully you don’t have too many of this type!

They are Awkward Around You

When the relationship is awkward your client is most likely “playing the game”. They know they have to deal with you, they know you have a certain level of authority and they don’t like it. If they don’t play the game at least a little nicely they might get told to comply. They do the minimum. They often agree with your advice and then do something different that suits them. They offer a range of explanations when you ask why they chose the different path.

These clients are still definitely recalcitrant and, while they don’t see you as outright blockers, they feel it is highly improbable that you are going to add any value to their business beyond what they already know and do.

They are Agnostic Towards You

If they are agnostic towards you, it is almost as annoying. They will do what is needed. They know how it works. They want to get it done with the least amount of angst. They don’t get the value, however, they are practical types. They know the organisation would not be spending as much as it does on you and your team if it was not seen as necessary by the executive.

Most will even entertain the possibility that what you do helps them on occasion to get better results. After all, they don’t see themselves as perfect. Not like the ones avoiding you!

They Advertise You

Now we move into much more comfortable territory. This group of internal clients get what you do and do it. They are good advertisements for you and your team. They engage and work with you and the results show. Many of them will even acknowledge the good work you have done for them and will say so in presentations to their management hierarchy.

BW



The reason they advertise you is because they understand that you are not saying “no”, that you are saying “yes and”, meaning that they feel you are working with them to find solutions. Or at least compromises to help them get the results they need in a sustainable way.

They Advocate for You

I hope you have a few of these types of internal clients right now. They are great to work with. They not only get what you do, they have their own insights into how what you do can help them. They push you to higher standards than you even thought possible. They set you challenges, they seek out your creativity, they relish the prospect of you bringing back your solutions to their problems so they can build on them. They achieve outstanding results.

They don’t just acknowledge your great work with their management hierarchy, they actively promote you to other departments. They even question why other departments are not working with you as they do.

They see you not as the Department of “No!”, but as the Department of Growth. The department that provides them with not just a good reliable service, but one that provides them with valuable insight and in turn challenges them to work to higher standards than they perceived were possible.

Map Them

Take a few moments, grab a piece of paper or open an electronic note, and map your internal clients to each of the levels on the Relationship Ladder. As you identify those that avoid you through to those that are advocates, make a few notes about have labelled them so. What are some examples of behaviours that drew you to your conclusion?

Now ask yourself how many staff in each department are supporters of you and your team. Is it none, one, a few or many? Is there a correlation between the number of supporters and the strength of the relationship? I bet there is. That is logical. Now ask yourself, “Why?”. “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?”. In other words, do you have supporters in one department because of good past performance and you lack supporters in another because of poor past performance? Perhaps you have supporters in another department because you designed policies, processes and systems that made sense to them AND you explained their benefit so the business bought in. Perhaps you lack supporters in another because you did not explain yourself as well, they developed negative perceptions and have not bought in. Perhaps you have a good business partnership with one or more departments because someone from your team transferred into that department and they were able to explain your policies, processes and systems clearly to their new colleagues.

Whatever the reason, the correlation between number of supporters and the quality of your relationship with a department is no coincidence. Advertisers and advocates for you are both a symptom and a cause of business partnerships. If your list has more recalcitrants than partners you should definitely read on. If you have mainly partnerships and you are the type of person that always wants to improve or who knows the status quo is a temporary phenomenon that you should always be monitoring and working on, then you should also read on.

Experts Need Advocates

Ultimately you and your team of support function experts need advocates within the business departments you serve. You need advocates who understand the importance of what you do, how you do it and, most importantly, do it. If they know and understand the why, the what and the how they can be your eyes and ears. And if you have nurtured them well they will speak up when their department is mocking, avoiding or brushing over your policies, processes and systems.

Advocates will be your persuaders of the leadership within departments you wish to partner with.

Advocates will ensure that in the long-term, you have a strong business partnership, one where you help each department you serve to grow in strength and achieve outstanding results.

Therefore, you need to nurture advocates with an appropriate sphere of influence. Ones that do not only have access to their leadership, they are also seen as trusted advisors. Advocates without the appropriate level of seniority and ability to persuade simply won't cut it for you. It will leave you with too much work to do because you can't be everywhere.

It Can Get Even Better

What would be better than having a few advocates in every department that have the appropriate sphere of influence with their leadership team? Turning those advocates into an organisation-wide **tribe of advocates**.

Bestselling American author Seth Godin has a fantastic personal story about what can be done when you build a tribe. In 1984 at the age of 24 he joined a tiny software company called Spinnaker. He was charged with acquiring science fiction stories and turning them into adventure games. He was given no staff and no programmers directly assigned to him. He was lent 3 programmers from the pool of 40 working on other key projects. He needed many, many more programmers to meet his Christmas deadlines.

He started a twice weekly newsletter about his little tribe's quest, telling the story of what they were working on and what they were achieving. Seth made photocopies for each of the one hundred plus staff and



dropped it into their in-trays. Within a month, six more programmers were working with his group whenever they had spare time. “Then it was twenty. Soon every person in the entire department was either assigned to my project or moonlighting on it.” They made their deadline with five products and everyone of them went “Gold”.

He told this story in his appropriately named book *Tribes* which I highly recommend you grab a copy of after you finish this paper.

Building a Tribe

The first step in building your tribe is selection. Your preference should be for working with the leaders you wish to partner with and guiding their selection of staff who you are going to nurture. Obviously, there will be a bit of a trick on how you couch this. Using the term tribe is not necessarily the best approach at first. A safer option, as an example, is expressing the need to develop a Community of Practice.

Once you have identified your tribe members your objectives should be to nurture collaboration amongst the team, challenge them and help them develop creative solutions to drive the outcomes you are seeking.

Collaborate

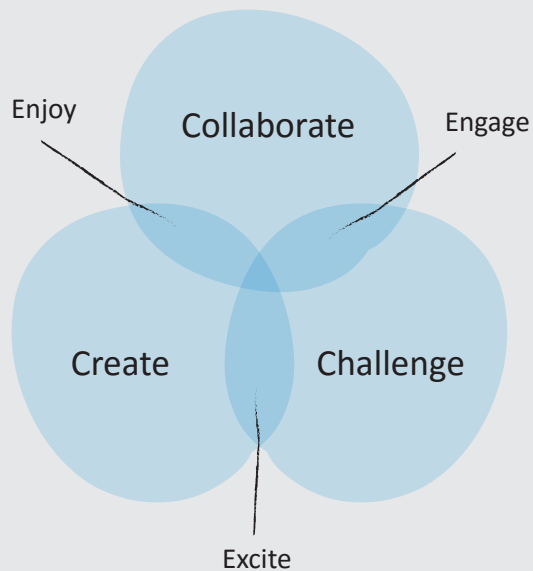
You need this team to be collaborating as a team. The more they collaborate the more they will gel, despite not being co-located. The more they gel, the more their collective wisdom and collective efforts will play out.

Challenge

People like a challenge and a team of people that have gelled like a challenge even more. Work with them to identify the problems they can help you solve. A really, really common one is that support functions are overlooked or forgotten prior to the big decision being made and is thrown to you for implementation. You either have to tell them how dumb they are, in the nicest possible way, or you have little time to patch up the gaping holes. I’m sure you won’t have too much trouble identifying and prioritising problems.

Create

This is where the rubber hits the road. You need results. You need them to either create solutions in their own departments or give you and your team a design roadmap so you can design what is required to



support them. If something needs streamlining, then make sure you get to the root cause and test design concepts before you go into full design.

Building a team that is collaborating, is challenged and is creating great stuff can be highly rewarding. Next are a few tips on what to focus on as you build the team.

The Three Es

When you are building your tribe always remember the three Es. In order to ensure strong collaboration, you will need to focus on how best to **Engage** them. When you set challenges, focus on what is most likely to **Excite** them. And above all, make sure the tribe **Enjoy** themselves. Create the right environment and facilitate with the three Es in mind and you are most likely to end up with a high performing team.

If you think about it, what you need to do is what your favourite teacher used to do. The classes that you remember most were the ones when you needed to collaborate to tackle the challenges set by developing creative solutions with your classmates. You were engaged, excited at the prospect of taking on the challenge and you enjoyed the process of creating your solution.

Pathways to Partnership Program

I have long been winning over Boards, Executive teams and been fighting recalcitrants on behalf of my clients, whether they be from finance, HR, risk, compliance, IT, audit or a raft of other support functions. I know your value and I know how to help others value what you do. What I love most is helping you to create a team of advocates. Not only do you and I get to see the penny drop on the value you can bring to their part of the business, we also get to see the penny drop on what the team can do for the organisation as a whole. We get to watch them grow in excitement about the prospect, excitement about the challenges set and excitement about the friendly competition we create amongst them. You will find it a tremendous motivator for you and your team.

My Pathways to Partnership Program is designed to deliver a tribe of advocates. It is three facilitated workshops with your chosen team of advocates. It includes tools and templates that can be customised to assist with team selection, team communication and team collaboration. My facilitation techniques include highly interactive activities that ensure everyone has fun as that is when we learn best.

The outcome is a team of advocates preaching your mantra that will take your team from the perception of being the department of “No!” to the department of *growth* across the organisation you serve.

Why should talk to me about my Pathways to Partnership Program

I started this paper with the proposition that a majority of executives feel they are not getting value for money from support functions. Why then should you spend money and utilise their resources on developing a team of advocates for you?

While it will seem counter intuitive to them, there are very good reasons. In the same Bain & co article where 60% of business executives said they “believe their organizations’ support functions are ineffective, cost too much or both”, the survey also found that when organisations tried to cut the cost of support functions “... only 19% sustained their savings after two years².”

This tells us that while we all want our cake and eat it too, we can’t. The optimum situation is when the support function is as lean as practicable. As lean as practicable means all the policies, processes and systems designed by the support function must:

- Blend as much as possible into the way business is conducted.
- Find a balance between freedom of choice and restrictive policies.
- Be supported as close to the business user as possible.

Who better to deliver on these three needs than one of their own team?

If you are confident you are already on the right track or are keen to give this a go yourself I recommend you read Tribes by Seth Godin and get cracking.

If you would like help, drop me a line and let’s have a chat to see if I might be a good fit for you and your organisation.

² Michael Heric, Paul Cichocki, Adnan Qadir and Peter Stumbles, Break out from the G&A cost treadmill: How support functions can delight their customers, not just cut costs. Bain and Co. 2013.



About the author

Bryan is passionate about helping organisations to set direction through making the best decisions possible given the uncertainty with which we all live. He has been doing so by working with strategic leaders across all sectors over a career spanning 30 years.

While Bryan works directly with boards and executive teams Bryan also works with their key advisors and internal policy setters such as those in finance, legal, HR, IT, audit, risk and compliance. He gives them a new perspective on how to deliver value to the organisation. He brings the world of board and executive and the world of their advisors together more powerfully than ever before.

Bryan's goal is to help organisations live comfortably with uncertainty through the implementation of processes that ensure smarter, faster decisions. Empower staff in this way and you have a powerful organisation.

Bryan published *DECIDE: How to Manage the Risk in Your Decision Making* in November 2015. He designed the Persuasive Advisor Program in early 2016 and Pathways to Partnership early this year.



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