



# Experts need Advocates

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

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**60% of business executives believe their organisations' support functions are ineffective, cost too much or both.<sup>1</sup>**

**When it comes to cost savings on support functions, executives report "only 58% successfully delivered on their targets and only 19% sustained their savings after two years."<sup>2</sup>**

**When support functions fail to partner with the business an iceberg is cast afloat. For every mistake made only ten percent is immediately visible. The flow on effects are dramatic.**

<sup>1</sup>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.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

# 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 organisations’ support functions are ineffective, cost too much or both.”<sup>1</sup> 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 what 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 listens 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.

## The value you bring

Support teams are the glue that allow other departments to achieve, in fact without these roles the rest of the organisation can come to a halt. 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 a 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. A rule of thumb for the cost of rework is 10:1. Ten hours of someone’s time to rectify something that could have been done right from the beginning if one hour had been taken to do so.

Worse still, the organisation is at risk of having to front external stakeholders to explain how “it” could have happened. Then the iceberg principle applies. Whatever you calculate in people’s time, fees paid to investigators, lawyers and the like, that is 10% off the real cost. While management is distracted, they are not devising new strategies or implementing existing ones and they are certainly not focussed on fine tuning the areas of their team that are working well. They simply don’t have the time.

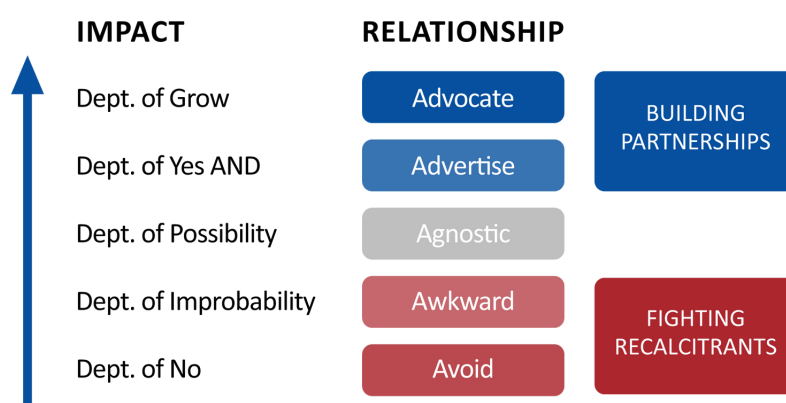
<sup>1</sup> Michael Heric, Paul Cichocki, Adnan Qadir and Peter Stumbles, Break out from the G&A cost treadmill: How support functions can delight their customers, not just cut costs. Bain and Co. 2013.

# 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, take a look at the relationship ladder below. Have a think about your relationship with your various internal clients.

## 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 why you 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. 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 why you 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, why you 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 every one 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.

When you design your tribe, don't think "sphere" of influence, it actually needs to be more pear shaped. That is, focused at the top on leadership and broader at the base, and juicy. If for example you are from finance or risk and you have finance or risk specialists in the business that you have been working with for some time yes, they need to be in your tribe to work across the broad base and to deliver the juice. However, you also need carefully selected influencers that are business savvy to understand what is best for you and their business and senior enough to deliver the message effectively.

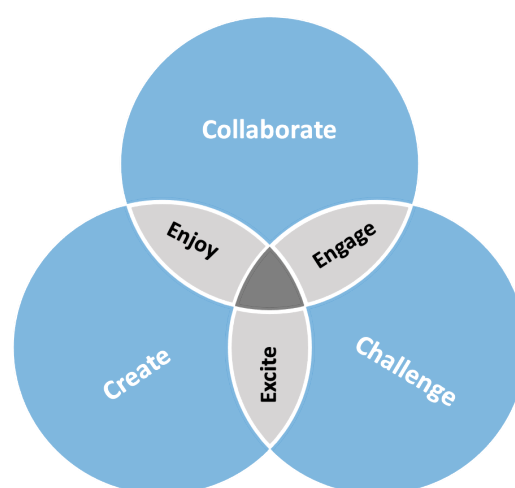
## Collaborate

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.

How to develop champions



## 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.

# About Bryan



Bryan is a management consultant operating since 2001. He is a specialist in risk-based decision making, strategic leadership and strategic planning born from his more than twenty years of facilitating executive and board workshops. Bryan's experience as a risk practitioner includes the design and implementation of risk management programs for more than 150 organisations across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Bryan is the author of **DECIDE: How to Manage the Risk in Your Decision Making**, a book for strategic leaders who wish to minimise the time taken to get to the right decision; **Persuasive Advising: How to Turn Red Tape into Blue Ribbon** that teaches you practical methods to cut through with your advice and make the impact you want to make; and **Risky Business: How Successful Organisations Embrace Uncertainty (#1 Amazon Best Seller)** that is a guide to the most successful way to design and embed an effective risk framework.

Bryan also authored the Australian Government's Risk Management Benchmarking Survey for more than 120 Government agencies from 2002-2005, lectured in the Principles of Risk Transfer in the Masters in Risk Management program of Monash University from 2002 – 2006 and designed and delivers the Risk Management Institute of Australasia's flagship Enterprise Risk course since 2019.

Bryan has assisted clients across all sectors including:

- Australian Government agencies such as the Departments of Foreign Affairs, Environment, Finance, Industry, Defence, Health and Social Services.

- State Government Agencies Fire and Rescue NSW, NSW Police, NSW Health local health districts, TAFE and the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services.
- Not-for-Profit organisations such as AWI, Cancer Council Australia, CBM, Cerebral Palsy Alliance, HCF, IRT, QSuper, Ronald McDonald House Charities, Uniting Care and Unitywater.
- Private Sector organisations such as Brisbane Airport, Brookfield Multiplex, Employers Mutual, FM Global, Downer, G&S, McConnell Dowell, Navitas, Pro Pac, QBE, Santos, Suncorp, Symbion, Weir Minerals and Xstrata.

Bryan was President and Chair of the Board of the Risk Management Institute of Australasia (RMIA) from 2013 through 2015, and is licensed by RMIA as a Certified Chief Risk Officer (CCRO).

Bryan is also a certified Virtual Presenter.

To hear first hand what Bryan's clients say about him, please check out this [video](#).

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