



How to Make Things Happen When You're Not the CEO

Thomas Barta & Patrick Barwise

Great ideas achieve nothing unless they're executed.

But as a technical expert, a manager, or even a senior leader, you have no formal power to make anything happen beyond your own team.

“In classical times, when Cicero had finished speaking, the people said, ‘How well he spoke.’ But when Demosthenes had finished speaking, they said, ‘Let us march.’” — ADLAI STEVENSON

You're an expert or manager in, say, marketing, IT, or distribution. Maybe you're even the head of that function—the CMO, CTO, or Distribution Director. You and your team have come up with a great idea that—if executed—will significantly benefit the company. But, like most important proposals, in order to be implemented, it will need the support of several other departments. Without that support, nothing will happen. Here are five ways to achieve it.

1. Show How It Will Create Value

Your proposal will create most value if, directly or indirectly, it meets both customers' needs *and* the company's needs, expanding what we call the "Value Creation Zone" ... or "V-Zone" for short.

You need to show how it will do this, using language that the CEO and other key leaders will recognize. For customer needs, that means leaders in sales, marketing, and customer support. For the company's needs, it means the whole top team, but especially the CEO and CFO.

Often, a proposal will create value directly on one side and indirectly on the other. For instance, an IT project that will cut costs—if the relevant other departments change their routines—will directly benefit the company but may have little direct benefit for customers. But customers will likely benefit indirectly from the company's increased ability to compete on price or invest more in product innovation.

Similarly, a project that directly benefits customers by improving the product, service, or customer experience will, over time, indirectly benefit the company through higher sales and prices.

Whatever the specifics, you need to spell out how your project will increase the V-Zone—ideally, putting a price tag on the long-term benefit to the company.

2. Hit the Head and the Heart

“A leader is a dealer in hope.” — NAPOLEON

Even with a strong rational case for your project—and a hefty price tag quantifying the potential benefit—you won’t get people onside if they don’t listen to you. So, to complement the facts and logical arguments in your proposal, you also need a compelling story that will capture their hearts as well as their heads.

A story that will get under your colleagues’ skin and engage them to support you needs three elements: Heart, Head, and How-To.

→ **Heart: An inspiring vision.** Ensure your story has a big aspiration that people can sign up for. But watch out: they will quickly turn cynical if your ideas aren’t realistic. To motivate people, your vision needs to be inspiring but attainable.

→ **Head: Credible evidence.** There will always be naysayers. To counter them, make sure you have credible evidence that shows that the project is doable and will deliver the intended benefits.

→ **How-To: Personal relevance for your colleagues.** Suppose you're listening to a leader's vision. Immediately you ask, "How does this affect me? What do I need to do?" Make sure your story answers these questions for everyone affected.

3. Walk the Halls

Getting things done isn't a one-off activity—it never stops. You don't send an inspiring email and then you're done. To mobilize people, you must get out of your office, share your ideas, listen to concerns, and create joint solutions—week after week, month after month, year after year.

Walking the halls is one of the key activities of effective change leaders. But it needs to be purposeful. To make it work, here's one of your secret weapons: LDC, which is "Listen, Decide, Communicate."

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Listen, Decide, Communicate

→ **Listen:** Seek out the key people who'll be affected by the change and briefly summarize your overall idea. Then shut up. Listen closely to their views. One successful leader told us, "The best advice I was ever given was 'Be humble and a good listener.' The word listen meant really observe. A person I worked with said, 'Watch people. Watch their body language. Watch their level of commitment.' I've tried to do that ever since. It's really helped me understand colleagues' perspectives and engage them in my projects."

→ **Decide:** Once you've gathered all the facts and views, decide on a course of action. In some organizations that means bringing together the leaders who need to make a formal decision. However you do it, get it done.

→ **Communicate:** Even if your top management has agreed to your plan, don't declare victory just yet. Instead, meet all the people from your first round. Tell them the decision that's been reached. Show how you've done your best to address their concerns. If you didn't choose their preferred option, explain why you didn't. It's crucial that they know they were genuinely listened to and their ideas fully considered.

4. You Go First

“A leader does not deserve the name unless he is willing occasionally to stand alone.” —HENRY A. KISSINGER

However great your idea and your story, the company’s top leaders want tangible outcomes. But how to create success when you can’t tell your colleagues what to do? You must start a movement.

→ **Dare to go first by showing how your idea works.** When One2One manager Dee Dutta had the idea of prepaid mobile phone fees, nobody liked it. Dee piloted the idea and, through successful tests, proved its potential. Turning prepaid into a reality involved a lot of executional challenges, but once Dee’s colleagues saw the potential, they rallied round to make it happen. It transformed the industry, vastly increasing the global reach of mobile telephony. Getting up first is risky, but as a leader you need to be willing to take risks—and people will respect you for doing so.

→ **Find those important first followers.** Once your idea is out, shift your focus and find followers who can start to fill the dance floor. This can happen literally, as at the 2009 Sasquatch outdoor music festival, when one guy started to dance—awkwardly yet joyfully. Hundreds of spectators wondered, What the heck is he doing? After a while, another brave guy joined the first dancer.

Still, the crowd only watched. Then, a third one joined in. This was the tipping point. Within minutes, people came running from everywhere, eager not to be left out. Finding the first followers is an underappreciated leadership skill, but it's crucial.

5. Know How You Inspire

As a change leader, you're in the inspiration business. Your boss can say no to your ideas. Your colleagues can choose to ignore your opinion. Even your team can drag their feet if they don't agree with your direction. Inspiration is an essential part of getting things done.

But how does one inspire? It's straightforward: to inspire others, you've got to be inspired yourself. It's that simple.

Try this: think about a topic you don't care much about—something boring at work, doing your tax return, whatever isn't your thing. Then, stand before a mirror. Imagine that your reflection is a colleague. For thirty seconds, talk to your colleague about that boring topic. Look closely at the reflected face as you speak. What do you see?

Next, think of a topic you genuinely care about, something that excites you, something you really like. Again, for thirty seconds talk to your mirror colleague, but this time talk about that cared-for topic. See a difference? We're certain that your face will show more excitement. A liveliness behind your eyes is the flicker of inspiration. If you show others that flicker which lives behind your eyes, they'll be inspired, too.

Inspiration is easy to spot and tough to fake. Body language and facial expressions are so subtle and complex that even the most powerful computers can't fully simulate them (yet). That's why replacing humans in movies with digital look-alikes still doesn't work. The flicker isn't real.

The key to inspiring others is through your own inspiration. There's no shortcut.

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Three Sources Of Inspiration

So what inspires you that can inspire others? Here are three options:

→ **Knowledge.** Knowing your stuff can be a powerful source of inspiration. People expect you to be an expert in your functional area and also to have a good general understanding of the company, the market, the technology and the main challenges facing the business. Do your homework. You can inspire others by your commitment, enthusiasm, and knowledge.

→ **Know what makes you tick.** You don't need the on-screen presence of a Marlon Brando or Laurence Olivier to inspire other people. Inspiring others is much simpler than that—and you're already doing it. Ask some people to tell you—anononymously—how you inspire them. In our seminars people often write things about other participants like: “You have amazing energy,” “You see business opportunities everywhere,” “You stand up for what you believe,” and so on. Find out how you already inspire people.

→ **Aim higher.** For decades, leadership books hammered home the idea that leaders should act with “the end in mind.” (e.g., “What do you want people to say at your funeral?”) In our research, too, having an inspiring vision for themselves and for the business was a big driver of leadership success. Do you have an inspiring vision that could inspire others, too?

Once you've discovered whatever it is that inspires you, double-up on it!

Just Do It

To make things happen, your technical knowledge and functional skills are just your entry ticket. They allow you to have that great idea in the first place. But once you have an idea, it's all about making it happen. And winning the critical support of your bosses and colleagues takes a very different set of leadership and influencing skills and behaviors from the technical knowledge and skills that enabled you to come up with the idea:

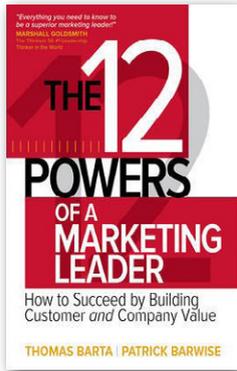
1. Show how it will create value
2. Hit the head and the heart
3. Walk the halls
4. You go first
5. Know how you inspire.

And Finally...

To tell the truth, even the CEO often finds it hard to make things happen. The most powerful person on the planet is the President of the United States. But, in 1952, when Dwight D. Eisenhower, a hugely successful military man, was elected President by a landslide (and with a narrow majority in Congress), his predecessor Harry Truman famously said, “Poor Ike. He’ll say do this and do that. And nothing at all will happen”.

60 years on, in a less deferential age, “command and control” is even less effective. Today, even the most powerful leaders (apart from a few dictators) have to convince their followers of the value of what they are proposing, capture hearts as well as heads, walk the halls, lead from the front, and inspire. **These are lessons for everyone.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS | Thomas Barta and Patrick Barwise are co-authors of *The 12 Powers of a Marketing Leader: How to Succeed by Building Customer and Company Value*. Barta is a former McKinsey partner and senior marketer who speaks, writes, consults on marketing leadership. Barwise is Emeritus Professor of Management and Marketing at London Business School and a prize-winning author, speaker and consultant. To learn more, visit www.marketingleader.org.

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