

FOUR WAYS TO KILL A GOOD IDEA

fear mongering

This kind of attack strategy is aimed at raising anxieties so that a thoughtful examination of a proposal is very difficult if not impossible. People begin to worry that implementing a genuinely good plan, pursuing a great idea, or making a needed vision a reality might be filled with frightening risks—even though that is not really the case.

There are all sorts of ways to create fear. You have seen a half dozen in the library story. The trick is to start with an undeniable fact and then to spin a tale that ends with consequences that are genuinely frightening or that just push the anxiety buttons we all have. The logic that goes from the fact to the dreadful consequence will be wrong, maybe even silly. A story that reminds us of scary events in the past may not be a fair analog, but it can be effective in bringing up unpleasant memories. Pushing anxiety buttons is manipulative in the worse sense of the word. But it can be an effective tactic.

Once aroused, anxieties do not necessarily disappear when a person is confronted with an analytically sound rebuttal. If humans were only logical creatures, this would not be a problem. But we are not. Far from it.

Words often play an important role in these cases. If the failure of the Amtek project led to layoffs a few years ago in your firm, then the word Amtek will carry meanings that can arouse very unpleasant feelings. In a more general sense, the terms lawyers, fire, or big government can stir up fear and anger in some people.

In our story, Pompus tried fear mongering with his "Aha, what about this?!" with "this" being a newspaper article about a fire caused by a computer sold by Centerville Computers. The whole logic of his argument was weak, if not ridiculous, but fire is an emotionally loaded word. Spaci Cadetus later argued that expanding the space devoted to computers puts us on a slippery slope that will sooner or later send us down the mountain, where the library we love would be ruined. Her argument about how the library would turn into an all-purpose entertainment center was preposterous, but everyone has seen slippery slopes and many of us have suffered from them. Memories of suffering can evoke fear.

We see this problem all the time when people are trying to help an organization deal with a changing environment or to exploit a new and significant opportunity. In one typical case, a sizable change was needed inside a firm. With effort, some people did develop an innova-

tive vision of what changes would be needed and a smart strategy of how to make those changes. Then, in trying to explain this to others and achieve sufficient buy-in, the initiators ran into someone who noted (correctly) that the last time they tried a big change (in their case, the "customer centric" initiative), they were unsuccessful, and some of the consequences (impossible workloads for a while, a few good people's careers derailed) were very unpleasant. Anxiety began to grow as others used the words customer centric again and again. No one made a perfectly logical case for how the historical and current situations were comparable. But that didn't matter. An undercurrent of fear became a riptide, and the new change vision and strategies never gained sufficient buy-in to make the change effort successful.

Even if most people see an anxiety-creating attack for what it is, if those who don't see the fallacy of the logic constitute more than a small percentage of a group, you might still have a serious problem that must be handled with care. Even a single smart or credible person, if made fearful, can be tipped not only toward opposing a proposal, but also toward using attack tactics that tip still more people. Anxiety then builds like an infection. In this sense—the method used in the library story works like an antibiotic.

People use fear-mongering strategies with voices that are beastly or, more often, ones that are oh-so-innocently calm. People can know very clearly what they are doing and why, or they can be completely oblivious to the way they're acting. One doesn't have to be an unethical or a fear mongering self-serving person to use a strategy that raises anxieties and kills off a good idea. And that fact has huge implications reared what you must do to deal effectively with fear-mongering and all the other attack strategies.

delay

There are questions and concerns that can kill a good proposal simply by creating a deadly delay. They so slow the communication and discussion of a plan that sufficient buy-in cannot be achieved before a critical cut-off time or date. They make what may seem like a logical suggestion but which, if accepted, will make the project miss its window of opportunity. Death-by-delay tactics can force so many meetings or so many straw polls that momentum is lost, or another idea, not nearly as good, gains a foothold.

At least a quarter of the attacks in the library story employ some sort of delay strategy. Intentionally or not, Divertus tried right at the beginning of the meeting to

burn up all available time with a discussion of the library's over-all budget and even the city's budget. Later, the classic let's-create-a-task-force ploy was suggested and, had it been accepted, would have so slowed the buy-in process that Centerville Computer's corporate parent would probably have withdrawn its proposal.

Death by delay can be a very powerful strategy because it's so easy to deploy. A case is made that sounds so reasonable, where we should wait (just a bit) until some other project is done, or we should send this back into committee (just to straighten up a few points), or (just) put off the activity until the next budget cycle.

With a delay strategy, attention can be diverted to some legitimate, pressing issue, the sort of which always exists. There is the sudden budget shortfall, the unexpected competitor announcement, the dangerous new bill put before the legislature, the growing problem here, the escalating conflict there. These can require immediate attention, but rarely 100 percent of people's attention. With death by delay, the point is to focus people 100 percent on the crisis so that a good idea is forgotten or crucial communication is lost. Growing momentum toward buy-in then slows to the point that it can never be regained.

We recently saw a version of this, which you might call the "we have too much on our plate right now" argument.

It is possible to have too many projects, where clearly any recommended action should be cutting back, not adding more. But in this case, the proposal was for a very innovative automotive parts product, and no one could have logically defended the superior worth of all the other projects in the works. But those who were running some of the current programs, and receiving considerable resources for doing so, correctly saw the new proposal as a threat, which they successfully killed with a too-much-on-our-plate-right-now bullet.

Because it is so easy to use, death by delay is a weapon available to nearly anyone, which makes it particularly dangerous. Yet, as with the other three attack strategies, the many little bombs it creates can all be defused.

confusion

Some idea-killing questions and concerns muddle the conversation with irrelevant facts, convoluted logic, or so many alternatives that it is impossible to have the clear and intelligent dialog that builds buy-in. Heidi Agenda hit Hank with "what about, what about,

what about?" With that attack, it's easy for a conversation to slide into endless side discussions about this and that, and that and this, and don't forget about ... Eventually, people conclude that the idea has not been well thought out. Or they feel stupid because they cannot follow the conversation (which tends to create anger, which can flow back toward the proposal or the proposer). Or they get that head-about-to-burst feeling, which they relieve by setting aside the proposal or plan.

Some individuals can be astonishingly clever at drawing you into a discussion that is so complex that a reasonable person simply gives up and walks away. This trap was built into more than a third of the attacks in our library story. Many people used them (though a Lookus Smarti type can be exceptionally skilled at this). A confused person might still vote yes, but only to stop the conversation and with no commitment toward making the idea become a reality.

A complex topic is not needed for a confusion strategy to work. Even the simplest of plans can be pulled into a forest of complexity where nearly anyone can become lost. Statistics can be powerful weapons, used not to clarify but to bewilder. "You are trying to solve a problem that doesn't exist. Just look at this [twenty-two-page] spreadsheet. I think if we study it closely ... rr Complex stories, about which most people do not know the details, can be lethal. "What about the Teledix project [which no one has ever heard of] and the competitive strategy we have for the TX line of products [a strategy that half the people in the room know nothing of]? I worry that the interaction of Teledix, TX, and this proposal will hurt third-quarter income, at least in Asia, which would be very bad. Don't you think soT

We see confusion strategies used all the time, sometimes by people who don't like a good idea, but also by a Lookus, who, perhaps unconsciously, has a need to appear to be the smartest person in the room, or by a Spaci, who just doesn't think very clearly. We recently watched a presentation communicated in PowerPoint slides, all sixty-eight of them, and many in impossible-to-read small print. Created by a Lookus, the slide deck "demonstrated" why a proposal to allocate many more resources to building a firm's business in Europe went too far. The document is incomprehensible (we have yet to find anyone in that firm who can explain it clearly), but it has successfully undermined support for a plan that is probably a very good one.

ridicule (or character assassination)

Some verbal bullets don't shoot directly at the idea but at the people behind the idea. The proposers may be

made to look silly. Questions may be raised about competence.

Slyly or directly, questions can be raised about character. Strong buy-in is rarely achieved if an audience feels un-easy with those presenting a proposal.

A Pompus can be exceptionally skilled at using this strategy. He raises an issue with an oh-so-innocent, yet subtly condescending look on his face. Without even saying the words, a question is raised about whether you are smart enough to have done careful homework on a problem, or visionary enough to see better alternatives.

In our meeting, we saw Bendi Windi, in her attempt to fit in with momentum going against the proposal, saying that the plan abandoned the community's long cherished values, which Hank apparently must not believe in, making him of questionable character. We also saw Avoidus Riski suggest that "no one else does this," which a thoughtful proposer would surely know, raising questions about competence.

Questions and concerns based on a strategy of ridicule and character assassination can be served with a dramatic flourish of indignation, but more often are presented with a light hand. There is a sense that the attacker feels awkward even bringing up a subject, but he nevertheless feels it is his duty to ask whether George's dinners with his admin assistant might ... No, no, that wasn't fair. Forget I said that.

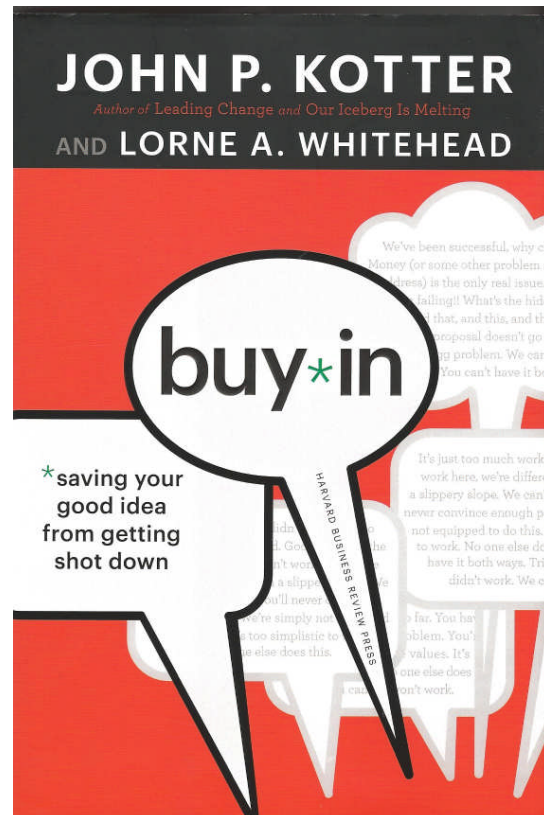
The ridicule strategy is used less than the others, probably because it can snap back at the attacker. But when this strategy works, there can be collateral damage. Not only is a good idea wounded, and a person's reputation unfairly tarnished, but all the additional sensible ideas from the proposer might have less credibility, at least until the memory of the attack fades.

ATTACKS DO NOT HAVE TO BE based on only one of these strategies. The biggest bombs often draw from two or even three. So an irrational, unfair, or nasty concern tries to create confusion and a delay or builds on character assassination and fear mongering. Clever attacks based on multiple strategies can be very powerful.

Because the strategies, individually or in combination, can be so deadly, once you have been hit with them a few twenty-four attacks

The four attack strategies actually get executed using about two dozen very familiar, very generic, difficult-to

handle questions, arguments, and concerns, any of which can hurt or kill a genuinely good idea. Over time these attacks have become so common and widely used that almost anyone will recognize them. And anyone might employ them, even if he or she is not consciously trying to be unfair or nasty.



1

THE METHOD

"We've been successful, so why change?!"

ATTACK:

We've never done this in the past, and things have always worked out okay.

RESPONSE:

True. But surely we have all seen that those who fail to adapt eventually become extinct.

The question of "We've done well, so why change?" is perhaps the most fundamental of all when a new idea is offered, especially in a setting with no crisis.

Warning 1: this question (like all the twenty-four) can shoot down a genuinely fabulous idea.

Warning 2: anyone who clearly sees the need for change can hear attack number 1 as moronic and treat the person asking the question accordingly—which is a big mistake.

There are many ways to try to honestly deal with this question, the vast majority of which are not helpful. Most responses drag you into a level of detail that can create endless debate. What is success? How do you measure it?

How has the world changed? What data do you have to prove this change has occurred? Even with change, why won't the "proven ways" still work? To answer all the questions, you could respond with a fifty-two-page "business case," and people do, and it sometimes works. But what can seem like a solid, fifteen-point response can also easily put some people on the defensive. Defensive people often hurl all sorts of additional attacks.

The best response seems to be something simple, accurate, and basic: essentially, "life evolves, and to continue to succeed, we must adapt." Everyone knows this fact (the Roman Empire and General Motors being cases in point) and can be gently reminded, if necessary, with well-known examples or more specific ones known by the audience.

2

THE METHOD

"Money (or some other problem a proposal does not address) is the only real issue."

ATTACK:

Money is the issue, not ... (computers, product safety, choice of choir songs, etc).

RESPONSE:

Extra money is rarely what builds truly great ventures or organizations.

In one form or another, money (often "the budget") is always raised when you talk of something expansive and new. One form is "Money is the real issue; your concern is not."

A money attack is tricky for many reasons. First, money is almost always a significant issue because resources are always limited. Second, money easily becomes an emotional issue. Third, like attack 1, this can drag you into an endless, unhelpful discussion about numbers, numbers, and more numbers. And the discussion easily wanders away from your idea and into a black hole. "Why are our revenues down? I think that's because marketing got a budget increase of ten percent, we got six percent.

This makes no sense, and let me explain why." There is no way that you can be prepared for all possible ensuing arguments and statistics thrown your way—it's inevitable you will seem unprepared, which chips away at your credibility. And before you know it, you've lost control of the discussion, your proposal and its merits are lost in the fog, and people become irritable.

You need to dispatch money-is-the-real-issue attacks quickly and bring the conversation back to your idea or plan. One way is with a powerful, and again simple, truth: yes, more funding would be nice, but great organizations, products, or activities rarely come from a money-is-the-real-problem attitude. Examples are everywhere:

Steve Jobs working in a garage; Thomas Edison without fifty PhD scientists; George Washington with a hugely underfunded army.

3

THE METHOD

"You exaggerate the problem."

ATTACK:

You are exaggerating. This is a small issue for us if it is an issue at all.

RESPONSE:

To the good people who suffer because of this problem, it certainly doesn't look small.

One basic way to attack the need to deal with any issue is to argue that it is trivial. "We are all busy. We have better ways to use our time than ..." A smart person can debate you to death this way by raising issue after issue after issue that arguably needs just as much, if not more, attention.

Another simple, accurate, powerful truth can draw the discussion back to the merits of your idea. It draws upon our capacity to empathize or at least sympathize with others.

Virtually all new ideas are, in one form or another, trying to help people. Saying something is trivial, or implying that a problem is trivial, basically says that those people and their needs, hopes, or pains are trivial. Reframed that way, this attack usually loses its power and can raise questions about the attacker's motives rather than yours.

And it never hurts to have available the presence or voice of someone whose problems are being implicitly trivialized. Almost anyone can empathize with a cause if confronted with a real live person who has suffered and will benefit from the change.

4

THE METHOD

"You're implying that we've been failing!"

ATTACK:

If this is a problem, then what you are telling us is that we have been doing a lousy job. That's insulting!

RESPONSE:

No, we're suggesting that you are doing a remarkably good job without the needed tools (systems, methods, laws, etc.), which, in our proposal, you will have.

Anything that might possibly be interpreted as an attack on the capabilities of others (even though that is not even remotely the case) invites a counterattack.

And new ideas can easily seem to suggest that someone isn't doing his or her job. If those others aren't liked or respected, the bullets from this sort of attack might bounce off you.

But the people who would benefit are usually entirely capable and hardworking. They're simply suffering from a less-than-optimal situation (in this case, poor equipment).

One effective response to this attack is to reposition either-or with both-can-be-true. There is nothing inconsistent with the assumption that people are competent and your proposal is needed.

More is needed than their personal competence to make the activity or organization function well. More is needed to make them function as well as they could. And the "more," or at least a part of it, is your idea or proposal.

5

THE METHOD

"What's the hidden agenda here?"

ATTACK:

It's clear you have a hidden agenda and we would prefer that you take it elsewhere.

RESPONSE:

Not fair! Just look at the track record of the good folks behind this proposal! (And why would you even suggest such a thing?)

Sometimes it will be subtle and sometimes not, but often you will be accused of making up a problem in order to push an idea for your personal benefit. We've all seen enough hidden agendas in life that if we are at all skeptical about a proposal, we might wonder if a hidden agenda is involved. And that is why this attack can be damaging.

You can start your response with a friendly, relaxed "Well, no." Getting defensive yourself is an easy trap here and very unhelpful. Then work off a simple fact: any good proposal will have some supporters who have good reputations or who are well liked. In this case, they are the shields that keep the bullets from doing harm.

"Surely you are not suggesting that [highly respected] Barry is lying to us about his motives." Served lightly and with no disrespect, an honestly skeptical person will think, "Good point," and back away. And a self-serving schemer will be put in a position where it is hard to press the issue.

6

THE METHOD

"What about this, and that, and this, and that ... "

ATTACK:

Your proposal leaves too many questions unanswered. What about this and that, and this and that, and ...

RESPONSE:

All good ideas, if they are new, raise dozens of questions that cannot be answered with certainty.

A common way to shoot down any new idea is to raise dozens of questions, most of which cannot be answered well, because the idea is new and therefore has not been tried before. The attacker may even feign support-"I want this to succeed, which is why you should answer [a million questions] before commencing."

If not death by delay, after twenty questions shooting at the proposal from twenty different angles, then this tactic is at least death by confusion.

The best response in this case is first to gently cut off any attempt by an attacker to hit a crowd with fifty questions. Don't allow a confusion or fear-mongering strategy to work. Then be appreciative of the concerns (respect!)-because they may seem very logical to the anxious, the risk averse, and the highly skeptical.

And then point out another simple truth: all new ideas may raise many more questions than can be answered with certainty. That's the very nature of a simple new idea or a grand new vision.

History will never provide data that leads to 100 percent certainty that a new idea will work. But living life with a standard of nothing-new-without-100-percent-certainty will kill off many ideas that could greatly benefit us. In challenging times, it could lead to disaster.

7

THE METHOD

"Your proposal goes too far/doesn't go far enough."

ATTACK:

Your proposal doesn't go nearly far enough.

RESPONSE:

Maybe, but our idea will get us started moving in the right direction and will do so without further delay.

"Doesn't go far enough" or "Goes too far" are common attacks that apply to almost any issue. They work when they have some minimal face-validity and when the proposal should not or cannot be adjusted easily to "go further" or "go less far."

An effective response in either case will present several ideas:

- (1) Good, we agree there is a problem.
- (2) I'm glad to see that we agree that the direction proposed is in fact the right direction.
- (3) So let's get started, at least.
- (4) If the proposal goes too far, we will see that at some point and slow down and stop. We (including you, Mr. Attacker) are smart enough to do this.
- (5) If it doesn't go far enough-doesn't fund the project properly, for example-this, too, will be eventually clear.

We then would use whatever successes we would have had to date-and if it's a good idea, there will always be some successes-in order to mobilize people into keeping the effort going.

8

THE METHOD

"You have a chicken-and-egg problem."

ATTACK:

You can't do A without first doing B, yet you can't do B without first doing A. So the plan won't work.

RESPONSE:

Well, actually, you can do a little bit of A, which allows a little bit of B, which allows more A, which allows more of B, and so on.

Problems can seem unsolvable when framed as the old "without a chicken there can be no egg, yet without an egg there can be no chicken." So you're stuck. No sensible action is possible.

It helps greatly to anticipate this problem in advance and to start working on the solution before an attack can come at you. Almost always, the answer is to push along two or more activities at the same time. So you don't even try to embark upon and finish some single activity. You create a little of A which is possible without a completed B. Then you do a little B, which is certainly possible with only support from a little, uncompleted A. And so on, with small steps over time. What looks like an unrealistic idea really is realistic.

Example:

You can't invest in a college course until it is clear that enough students will take it. Yet you can't attract the students until the course is available. So you seem to be stuck. But no, there is a way out. You start small and expand. A small investment produces a small seminar, which only needs fifteen students, who will surely sign up if the idea is a good one. When the seminar is seen to be interesting, because it was a good idea, its small success will attract more students the next time. The dean then sees the justification to allocate resources to turn the seminar into a small course. The success of the small course ... And so on.

9

THE METHOD

"Sounds like [something most people dislike] to me!"

ATTACK:

Your plan reminds me of a bad thing (insert totalitarianism, organized crime, insanity, disease, dry rot ...).

RESPONSE:

Look, you know it isn't like that. A realistic comparison might be ...

You would think that comparing an excellent plan to something unconnected and undesirable would immediately backfire, but instead, such images often stick in our minds and therefore do harm. Worse, you can do even more harm by overreacting. So quickly dismiss the comparison for what it is. Then replace a harmful image with one that is undeniably compelling, simple, and attractive—so it helps, again, to have one prepared in advance.

Example:

"You're trying to shove this down our throats. What is this, Russia under Stalin?!"

"Let's be sensible. Stalin killed twenty to forty million people. So I don't think that's exactly a fair comparison."

We are being assertive. I admit that. But it's because we believe so much in this plan. A better comparison might be a person who has a good idea. His fellow employees must buy into it, or it won't be used. But they all have a hundred things on their minds and are running to the next meeting. So he does have to stand up on a soapbox and speak louder than normal. That's all.

"Is there another question or concern?" And you move on.

10

THE METHOD

"You're abandoning our core values."

ATTACK:

You are abandoning our traditional values.

RESPONSE:

This plan is essential to uphold our traditional values.

This can be a challenging attack. What are you going to say, that our traditional values no longer matter or that this isn't about values? There is usually no win there.

An effective response is based on a simple insight.

Much more often than not, a really good idea upholds key values in the face of change.

"So, our proposal does change your [employment practices, computer systems, buildings, etc.], but this will help you maintain a key value [freedom, family, or equal opportunity]."

"Yes, we propose to do advertising for the first time ever (didn't our founders hate advertising?). We think this is a good idea because it's needed to help us grow, which is essential to offering more jobs and more promotion opportunities, which has been absolutely at the core of what our founders deeply cared about."

So our proposal, which might look like an abandonment of traditional values, actually is very important to uphold those values."

11

THE METHOD

It's too simplistic to work."

ATTACK:

Surely you don't think a few simple tricks will solve everything?

RESPONSE:

No, it's the combination of your good work and some new things that, together, can make a great advance.

At some point, a few simple components of your plan may seem to stand out and, to some, may seem to "be" your plan. Opponents can seize on this. So they say, correctly, that those few elements are too simplistic to solve the problem.

For example, they might criticize increasing the size of a police force by saying, "Guns and badges won't stop crime." The best response often emphasizes the combination of new and existing elements, including the current "talented police officers."

So, you say something like "That's undoubtedly true, but that is not what we are proposing. It's the combination of the force's systems, structures, our new prevention activities, excellent people, and additional help that will make the difference."

This is true, undermines "simplistic," and puts an attacker in the position that any comeback may sound like he or she does not think the current force is "excellent," a risky proposition at best with police officers and their friends in the audience.

12

THE METHOD

"No one else does this!"

ATTACK:

If this is such a great idea, why hasn't it been done already?

RESPONSE:

There really is a first time for everything, and we do have a unique opportunity.

A very reasonable question is, If this new proposal is good, why don't we see others using it? Surely someone would be.

A good response is simple. "Any idea has to be used a first time. That's common sense. So why not us?"

If you are asking for something dangerously risky or very expensive, this response probably won't work—at least by itself. Sometimes the added line is just, How do you know? The world is a very big place, and someone could be implementing your idea right now and you wouldn't know it.

If the attacker is being aggressively nasty, you can take your response to the point that it suggests the attacker seems to be insulting your organization, community, or group. "You are saying that we/you have no capacity to innovate? To ever do anything on the leading edge? That we/you must forever meekly follow others? Frankly, that sounds sort of insulting to me."

Of course, if you know you will be hit with this attack, go look for some person or company who has used your idea (or something close) before.

13

THE METHOD

You can't have it both ways!"

ATTACK:

Your plan says X and Y, but they are incompatible. You can't have both!

RESPONSE:

Actually, we didn't say X or Y—although, I grant you, it may have sounded that way. We said A and B, which are not incompatible.

Often, someone will distort two things you have said to build an apparent contradiction. Such an attack can be very effective because, as the attacker frames the issue, he or she is correct.

For example, "You said this equipment would not be expensive, but later you acknowledged it will have to be strong, which will logically cost more money. What do you want, strong or cheap? You can't have it both ways!"

In a case like this, the best response is to be understanding and to gently point out their error. Something can be "not too expensive" and "not too weak," which is what your proposal actually says, and that is entirely different than saying both "strong" and "cheap."

14

THE METHOD

"Aha! You can't deny this!" ("This" being a worrisome thing that the proposers know nothing about and the attackers keep secret until just the right moment.)

ATTACK:

I'm sorry-you mean well, but look at this problem you've clearly missed! You can't deny the significance of this issue!

RESPONSE:

No one can deny the significance of the issue you have raised, and yes, we haven't explored it. But every potential problem we have found so far has been readily solved. So in light of what has happened again and again and again, I am today confident that this new issue can also be handled, just like all the rest.

This is the "gotcha" problem. It usually has an element of undeniable truth and is often deliberately kept secret from you so it can be used to embarrass you at the worst moment. Caught off guard, you can be left stumbling, which is what the attacker wants. But there is an effective response that will work Virtually all the time.

First go ahead and point out honestly, that you are indeed hearing this for the first time. Trying in seconds to come up with a great solution to the new problem suggested by the new information is risky, at best. So don't try.

Then say that quite honestly, you will have to look into the issue. But, point out a simple and logical truth. For every other issue that you have studied, you have found a solution. In light of that fact, is it really unreasonable to say that the same will happen in this case? So thanks for alerting us to the potential problem, George, and, by the way, thank all of you here who have already alerted us to problems-which have all since been solved.

15

THE METHOD

"To generate this many questions and concerns, the idea has to be flawed."

ATTACK:

Look at how many different concerns there are! This can't be good!

RESPONSE:

Actually, if there are many questions, that's good, because it shows we are engaged, and an engaged group both makes better decisions and implements them more successfully.

This attack can be tricky to counter because too many concerns can be the sign of a real problem. But more often, this tactic is used as a means to kill a plan. The best response is, again, a simple truth.

You acknowledge the issue (showing respect) and then point out that raising many issues is actually good, for three reasons. First, it demonstrates that the problem or opportunity being addressed is important, or people would not put their energy into such a discussion. Everyone is busy, so we shouldn't be working on unimportant issues.

Second, much debate can be a useful test to see if what you are convinced is a good idea really is a good idea. With few concerns from those who need to buy into an idea, the idea is not really tested. You don't want untested proposals.

Third, good questions and concerns can help you to make useful adjustments to a plan that is fundamentally sound.

16

THE METHOD

We tried it before-didn't work."

ATTACK:

We tried that before, and it didn't work.

RESPONSE:

That was then. Conditions inevitably change (and what we propose probably isn't exactly what was tried before).

Your plan may be new, but often someone can claim that it is not-that a plan with essentially the same characteristics was tried some time ago and failed, thus proving that your plan is doomed. "We did that back in oh-five, and look at what it got us. Nothing. And it cost ... "

It doesn't hurt, as a part of your preparation, to learn about earlier similar efforts. Then, when hit with the attack, you acknowledge the similarities between what the situation was before and how that plan has elements of your current plan. But, you point out, if it is a good idea now, either the plan is different or the situation has changed or, more likely, both.

You could go into great detail to explain your point (or be drawn into greater detail), but that can be another trap. The attacker can keep raising issue after issue after issue, and you may not remember or know the details associated with all those issues. So point to what cannot be argued: times change and the situation today is inevitably different.

It really is that simple ... so keep it simple.

17

THE METHOD

"It's too difficult to understand."

ATTACK:

Too many of our people will never understand the idea and, inevitably, will not help us make it happen.

RESPONSE:

Not a problem. We will make the required effort to convince them. It's worth the effort to do so.

The tricky thing about this attack is that the attacker can pose as your ally. She loves your plan and wants it to happen, but sadly, the "others" will misunderstand, and that's that.

The truth is that almost anyone can understand an idea if time is spent explaining it clearly and simply. Yes, an incompetent communication effort can bog down the effort and absorb an unjustifiable amount of resources.

But being clear and simple is at the heart of "competent" and clarity also tends to be remarkably efficient and is always possible. So, you might say, "Since you agree that the plan is good, then of course it's worth the effort to communicate it."

"We just need to be clear in what we say.

"And let's not allow some failed experiences in the past to make us cynical about explaining a proposal to 'them.' Our people are often smarter than you might think."

18

THE METHOD

"Good idea, but this is not the right time."

ATTACK:

Good idea, but it's the wrong time. We need to wait until this other thing is finished (or this other thing is started, or the situation changes in a certain special way).

RESPONSE:

The best time is almost always when you have people excited and committed to make something happen. And that's now.

This is often a ploy in which the opponent (once again) pretends to like your plan, but at the right time. Which is not now.

You can always find an example or two where it probably was sensible to wait until something was finished or something else was started or the situation changed in some way. But death by delay is so common that a good rule of thumb, whenever you have a good idea, is to never procrastinate.

Another attack ploy is to say, "We already have twenty-four projects, so we can't add a twenty-fifth right now."

A good response is, "You make an excellent point. No one can handle twenty-four projects well. We need to weed out and stop all of those that aren't as good as this plan and do so immediately."

Which, when done, can be of enormous benefit, not just to your good idea but to the health of an organization.

19

THE METHOD

It's just too much work to do this."

ATTACK:

This seems too hard! I'm not sure we are up for it.

RESPONSE:

Hard can be good. A genuinely good new idea, facing time-consuming obstacles, can both raise our energy level and motivate us to eliminate wasted time.

This attack can be powerful when people are genuinely feeling overworked and underpaid (not a rare problem these days). But, once again, there is a sensible response.

To paraphrase John F. Kennedy when he spoke of the moon mission, "we can be the ones to succeed, not because it is easy, but because it is hard." That may sound counterintuitive, but it is in fact very insightful.

While worthwhile endeavors may be hard, often they don't feel that way, because their value gives us strength. A wonderful thing about being human is that a worthwhile cause can raise us from feeling tired to feeling inspired. History shows us that inspired groups—even just a little bit inspired—can achieve more than would seem to be possible.

Here is where your description of the idea is so important. There is a big difference between "the whole idea is to upgrade the computers to MLX standard" and "this will help the librarians, who have done so much for us over the years, and will offer kids with little access to computers a crucial resource they must have to get into college or get almost any job these days."

20

THE METHOD

"It won't work here; we're different!"

ATTACK:

It won't work here, because we are so different.

RESPONSE:

Yes it's true, we're different, but we are also very much the same.

The "we're different" ploy is frequently used because it has face validity. We are all different. The best response is never to argue that point but to make another observation.

With a well-educated group, that observation might be, "As you know, whether it's a teenage Korean girl or an American male retiree, we all share about 99.99 percent of the same genes. In a very basic sense, people are remarkably similar all over, aren't they?" So are organizations, as anyone who has traveled the world helping customers with IT problems, for example, well knows.

As with all effective responses, a simple example, with which an audience can easily relate, is helpful. And finding that example when preparing for a meeting or writing a memo or speech is easier than you might think.

21

THE METHOD

"It puts US on a slippery slope."

ATTACK:

You're on a slippery slope leading to a cliff. This small move today will lead to disaster tomorrow.

RESPONSE:

Good groups of people-all the time-use common sense as a guard rail to keep them from sliding into disaster.

"If you make this one small move, then you will not be able to refuse the next one and the next, and so on, and this will eventually lead to disaster." It's another good attack because almost all of us can think of at least one example from our own experience where that seemed to be the case. But it doesn't have to be that way, especially if you are sensitive to the slopes and certainly if you use nothing more than common sense as a guard rail.

A good response to this attack is a counterexample with which people can obviously relate.

"We now let a ten-year-old have access to material-on TV, for example-that we would never have allowed a century ago. A reasonable crowd could debate whether that is good or bad. But there is no chance we will allow this to slide into a decision that gives a ten-year-old the right to drive a car or vote in a presidential election. Although we might wonder at times, common sense does give us guard rails."

Here, you can also respectfully remind people that good organizations maintain standards through their steadfast values, judgment, and wisdom. This allows you to point out, "And we are a very good organization."

Will the attacker argue with that?

22

THE METHOD

"We can't afford this."

ATTACK:

The plan may be fine, but we cannot do it without new sources of money.

RESPONSE:

Actually, most important changes are achieved without new sources of money.

Earlier (attack 2), we discussed the objection that the only problem is a lack of money and that your idea is focusing on a non-problem. This is different. Here, the critic acknowledges that there is both a problem and a sensible solution. But it's hopeless to implement the good idea inside our organization (or group or family), because we realistically cannot afford it unless we take funds from something that we know is needed. Just look at the budget!

The simple answer here is, sure we can: we can reprioritize; we can borrow; we can beg. The fact is, in many, many cases where a new idea has been carried out well, the money had to be found. It wasn't just sitting there. But because people had truly bought into a proposal, they just found it. People do, and all the time.

23

THE METHOD

"You'll never convince enough people."

ATTACK:

It will be impossible to get unanimous agreement with this plan.

RESPONSE:

You are absolutely right. That's almost never possible, and that's okay.

This is different from the earlier proposed problem (others will not understand"). Here it's suggested that no matter how thoroughly the good idea is explained, there are some people in this organization who will simply never agree, and that this is a fatal problem. It is hard to argue with the first point (you won't get everyone to agree) since it's generally true. But that doesn't prove the second point (that you then have a fatal problem).

The best response, therefore, is easy. It's basically, "You're right. It's never possible to get one hundred percent consensus on anything. It's tough to get eighty percent. Yet new ideas and plans and visions become a reality all the time. So reality shows us that near total agreement is not necessary."

But never forget, a mere 51 percent raising their hands will almost never get the job done. The bigger the idea, the more people you need to buy in and do so with enthusiasm.

24

THE METHOD

"We're simply not equipped to do this."

ATTACK:

We don't really have the skills or credentials to pull this off!

RESPONSE:

We have much of what we need, and we can and will get the rest.

Margaret Mead, the world-famous anthropologist, once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has," And she was right.

All the time, groups do not have all the skills or credentials required to implement a good idea. But they have some of them. And they somehow find a way to identify and eventually attract the rest.

By the way, some of the most thoughtful people who support your idea will often be the ones to express such self-doubts. To help them, some local examples of great success despite the initial lack of some skills could make this concept more credible.