

Making Your Case: A Practical Approach for Managers on Getting Funding and Support

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Abstract

Middle and senior management positions come with many challenges, but one of the biggest is in garnering support and funding for new initiatives. A manager is given a staff and a budget and is expected to utilize effectively both sets of resources to achieve certain priorities. However, when it comes to new programs and innovations that require additional resources, managers are typically on their own in terms of how to make that happen. They are expected to shift resources, and this is especially true in times of shrinking budgets. This pressure has been the root of failure for many good managers, and it can lead some to stop seeking challenges and opportunities to innovate. It may seem as if the ability to get funding is a mysterious gift – some people have it, others don't. However, with practice, anyone can learn to be more effective at obtaining resources. This paper will discuss a practical approach that can be applied to any situation.

Introduction

Getting support for great ideas is a standard part of moving anything forward. Anyone who has been in the situation of trying to get more resources knows it is not as straightforward as simply making one's case and asking – in fact, it's not straightforward at all. If it were, we wouldn't find ourselves scratching our heads when, for example, two people request funding and one gets it and the other doesn't, or an administrator doesn't support an initiative that doesn't cost anything. When these things happen, managers may feel compelled to just shrug their shoulders, accept the decision of the "powers that be" and settle for the status quo. And of course, that is an option, but it can lead to problems long term, especially if one plans to move into an administrative position. The most effective leaders are able to acquire resources and support from their superiors. This skill is very important for middle managers but absolutely essential for library deans and directors.

Knowing as we do that this is a critically important skill, why are so few people good at it? One obvious answer is that no one teaches these skills, so those who have the natural instincts tend to be more successful, and those who don't are less so. Another possible reason has to do with the way we are conditioned. Most of our working lives are highly structured – we have policies and workflows, and (even in academia) there is a prescribed chain of command. Because so much of our work lives are structured, we expect things to make sense most of the time. This is why people so often love to use data to make a case – data is empirical; it provides proof of one's argument. And yet, in many situations, data doesn't always succeed.

In the author's experience, requests for additional resources and support are more emotional than logical. These decisions do not typically follow rules (that's why sometimes they don't seem rational), and the reality is that resources aren't always distributed in a fair and equitable way. Rather than being based in any kind of structured policy, the distribution of support tends to be political and symbolic (more on this in a moment). Without any rules, managers can feel at a loss as to how to proceed. But there is a positive side to this: if there are no rules, there are no boundaries. If there are no boundaries, you can ask for anything.

A Theoretical Model

When thinking about organizations and trying to develop a particular approach to a problem, it is useful to have a theoretical model to refer to. There are of course various models that could be used; an excellent one is the “four frames” model originally described by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal in their book, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*. This simple yet profound model is easy to understand and apply to any situation.

Bolman and Deal identify four frames: structural, human resources, political and symbolic. Each frame constitutes a way of viewing the organization or a particular situation. Oftentimes, managers rely on one frame more than others. The ability to use “multi-frame thinking” – to look at the situation or problem through all four of the frames – can be very powerful because it can provide a more complete understanding, help one appreciate other’s viewpoints and uncover additional possible approaches.¹

Using the frames to analyze a situation means considering which frame(s) are most important in that particular scenario, as well as which frames the people involved are likely to be using. When requests for support fail, it is often because the requestor is framing their argument incorrectly. In other words, one shouldn’t make a structural argument to someone who is operating from the political frame.

As stated earlier, requests for new resources tend to be political and symbolic, meaning the managers who are listening to those requests tend to filter them through the political and symbolic frames more so than the structural or human resources frames. This is especially true with higher-level administrators who tend to “live” in this space. Bottom line: When building a case for new resources, one should look at all of the frames, but most especially the political and symbolic frames, which are often overlooked because they are more complex.

The Politics of Asking for Support

The political frame is largely about relationships. In order to frame a request politically, it’s important that the decision maker believes in you. From their point of view, they are investing in you more than the project. This is why it’s often much easier to get support from someone who knows you well and respects you. This doesn’t mean having an established relationship is required before making a request, but one should be capable of gaining respect and showing trustworthiness. The political frame is also about give and take. For this reason, it is important to think about how the decision maker will benefit from providing the support. What are they getting? It can be tangible or intangible, but they must see it as a win.

When the political frame is ignored, it can lead to some mistakes. For example, when the person to be approached has more power or authority in the organization, one might act more as a supplicant than an equal. In this case they are framing the situation structurally; however, in the political frame, people are on a more equal footing because every relationship potentially has a payoff, especially if you can offer something of value. Approaching as a supplicant may not gain respect and could be a factor in having support denied.

Another common mistake is when requestors behave as though they are entitled to the funds that the manager oversees. When viewed from the structural frame, this might make sense, because it might seem as though budgets are a “given,” distributed every year. Or perhaps from the human resources frame, one might have an expectation of an equitable

distribution of resources. But when considered from the political frame, a different truth emerges. The funds a manager oversees are often hard-won. They may have to continually fight to protect those funds, and they probably have more requests than they can cover. So, why should they give them to someone who doesn't seem to understand or care about that struggle? This is where trust and respect come in to play, and how you make your case is critical.

The Symbolism of Asking for Support

The symbolic frame is about the greater meaning of the work we do. Symbolism is highly important to senior leaders; this is why the “sexy projects” tend to get supported while the more mundane may not. When seeking support, it is important to think about the symbolism of the project – does it move the organization forward or in a new direction? Is it focused on the future? And does it elicit emotion and excitement? It is important not to oversell an idea, but if the requestor believes in a project then it is easier for others to see it as a potential success.

It should be no surprise that symbolic leaders will themselves respond to symbolism – a moving anecdote, a photograph, even data if it is presented in a way that is succinct and powerful. They like quick talking points and illustrative stories to share. They are busy people who don't have time to listen to or read a lot of detailed data. This should all be taken into consideration when preparing a request. The adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is apt in the symbolic frame. A photo of a long line of students waiting to checkout a laptop can have more impact than circulation data. When framing a case symbolically, be creative.

It should be noted that there is overlap between the four frames and, in particular, between the political and symbolic frames. The high profile project that gets funded is a symbol for the leader who supports it and potentially a political win as well, because it might bring more power or resources or relationships. For this reason, it is important to think about both of these frames.

Preparing “The Ask”

With a basic understanding of the four frames, and in particular how the political and symbolic frames influence support decisions, it is possible to discuss the “mechanics” of actually asking for support.

An obvious first step is to think about the person being asked – in what frame do they tend to operate? Through what frame will they view this ask? If you are not sure, look at past decisions and behavior – what does it tell you about what this person values? What words will they be wanting/not wanting to hear? Next, articulate your own perspective. You know what you want and presumably have a rationale – from what frame is your argument based? If you were to present your rationale “as is” to this person, how would they respond? Then think about how to reframe your rationale so that the giver will be more open to hearing it. Remember to consider how the support will benefit them, to give them talking points and stories to tell, and use symbols that are powerful and reflect their values.

It is important to note that this can be challenging. Trying to reframe a structural argument into something political can be very difficult. It may require a lot of reflection, or you may even need to ask for help. Find the most politically oriented person you know and trust, make your case to them, and get their feedback on how to reframe it politically.

One of the difficult parts about reframing is that it involves moving out of one's comfort zone. If you are asking for resources, you probably have a good reason, and that reason is solid and makes sense to you. When an argument is so perfectly clear, it can be difficult to let it go, and even if you have taken the time to come up with a rationale that is more political and symbolic, you may feel compelled to share the argument that you know best. This is a common mistake that should be avoided.

Making “The Ask”

When the preparation is done, it's time to make the ask. Schedule a time and place appropriate to your relationship with the funder; for example, one that shows respect and puts both of you at ease. When first making contact, explain why you're coming; for example: "I'd like to ask your support for a proposed new initiative." At the start of the meeting, do it again, being more specific; for example: "I'm here today to ask you for \$5,000 for... ." It is important to do this up front; otherwise they will spend the whole meeting wondering what you want (this also reserves the bulk of the meeting time to continued negotiation if the initial answer is "no"). When speaking, illustrate very clearly the value proposition based on the frame in which they operate. Then ask directly: "Is this something you would be willing to support?"

It is important to be prepared for an initial rejection. If this happens, respectfully ask why and don't give up. Ask again in a different way, try to engage them in a solution. Consider other options – remember there are no rules, so if there is a trade or deal you can make, offer it. Watch body language during the meeting – both theirs and yours. Smile and make eye-contact. Wrap it up in a timely fashion and thank them for their time, no matter what happened. Remember that the way you deal with a "no" can dictate whether you get support or funding in the future.

After the meeting, spend some time analyzing what happened. This is especially important if the request was turned down. Try to "decode the no" – in other words, try to figure out what motivated that decision. Recalling the exact reactions, verbal language and body language can help with this. Was the argument framed correctly? In what frame was the person operating? If you had to ask again, is there anything you would do differently? This is a learning process, so taking the time to examine why or why not a request was supported is a critical step to ultimate success.

Conclusion

Acquiring support for new initiatives is a key skillset for leaders, as it enables the forward movement that is so necessary for organizational success. While some people come by this ability naturally, many managers struggle to get their ideas supported. This is a skill that can be learned and, with practice, mastered. Bolman and Deal's four frames model provides a simple approach that can help managers to make the case that is most likely to be heard and supported.

Bibliography

Bolman, Lee and Deal, Terrance. *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013.

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Published: March 2020

Reference

¹ Lee Bolman and Terrance Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2013), 18-19.