

## “Six Sigma” for (Persuading) Tough Customers

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Sometimes the truth can set you free when you least want it to. It happened to me a few months ago when I told a potential client something they didn't want to hear. We were meeting with the key decision maker for a project involving a change initiative that would occasion many senior employees to lose their large private offices. The meeting had gone fairly well and we were in the home stretch when the key decision maker looked directly at me and asked: “How will you communicate these changes to our staff?” Fully intending to launch into a detailed plan for how we would systematically socialize change in a positive way, I began with: “Well, first of all, we would hope that they wouldn't be hearing the news from us for the very first time.” That tinge of irony was a showstopper, and not in a good way. Ouch; double ouch when my jest just lost one for the team.

### A Top Down/Bottom Up Approach

A successful change initiative should really be a combination of “Top-Down and Bottom-Up” communication. It starts with executives conveying the company's vision and mission to all, and then inviting employees to be part of the journey and the solution. Because this can be a time consuming process for already over-subscribed executives, design practitioners need to be prepared to take on the role of messenger as a surrogate for senior management, and know if and when to cue management to step in. Among the employee population there will always be early adopters, fast followers and sceptics; then there will be outright resisters to change. In the case of the latter, it is difficult to achieve meaningful change without having executives take an active role in addressing those hold-outs—especially when the loss of their talent and contribution to the firm would be significant. These employees need special attention. To that end, here's a process called “Six Sigma for Tough Customers” that co-opts the essence of Six Sigma—a formalized method for solving tough problems—and combines it with Harvard mediation expert, William Ury's concept of finding the “third side.” This five step process can help you get opposing sides to a mutual yes.

### A Simple, Yet Powerful Approach



**Identify**—Anticipate what the issues around change might be and prepare messaging that articulates what's changing about the company and what's staying the same; how the change will affect people (both positively and negatively); the intended outcome and how it will benefit the organization; and finally, WIIFM (What's In It For Me) the potential benefit to the individual.



**Target**—Seek out your supporters (your “change champions”) and engage them to help socialize the change. Even when they only represent 15-percent of your employee population, they can be effective ambassadors bring the other 85-percent along. Equally important, “keep your friends close and your enemies closer” by targeting your strongest resisters and creating a proactive campaign / plan of action to address known (or anticipated) concerns and ferret out unknown obstacles.



**Invest**—If these resisters are truly valuable to the organization you will want to keep them. Take the time to understand how these people feel about change. First acknowledge their contribution to the firm, then your understanding of their resistance. Let them recount what they perceive as a loss, and counter that with how change might offer future benefits to the organization and to them personally. Ask for their support in making those future benefits a reality.



**Persuade**—When all else fails, it's time to call in the “big guns.” Enlist the direct involvement of senior management to deliver the message one-on-one. This is even more effective when executives 1) can demonstrate how they, too, will be impacted by the change and 2) are willing to lead by example. At this point, management also should be actively thinking about what can be offered in exchange for the employee's concurrence.



**Negotiate**—William Ury talks about finding “the third side”—the point between the first side (you) and the second side (them) where parties can come to agreement. To accomplish this, executives must understand where the individual feels threatened, what they value most, and think creatively about what might be offered as a meaningful trade-off. Knowing what they want and what they'll settle for helps. (You only have to deliver on the second.) And remember, if you really want to keep them, sometimes a win / win situation means management has to give something up, too.

### Step 6: Take the Time to Celebrate

It's no wonder executives often resist the work of implementing change; it's almost a full time job. Recently, Beth O'Shaughnessy, Senior Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer for Steelcase, one of Fortune's “Most Admired Companies,” shared her experience of not only assuming the role of messenger, but also mounting an active and proactive campaign to implement changes that would mean everyone in her department would be working in much smaller, more open spaces. As part of a company-wide initiative for a firm whose business it is to support workplace change, one might imagine this executive's task to be easier than that of most change agents. Not so with this particular group. The process took nearly a year. Nonetheless, Ms. O'Shaughnessy championed the change personally and did the work, and, in doing so, built an exceptionally networked, cohesive team. Brava! Success stories like this demonstrate how meaningful change can indeed be a win / win for both the organization and the individual. To that point, Step 6 should be: Celebrate! But to get there, there are no shortcuts. You have to do the work.



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