

THINK ABOUT THEIR CHOICE

I. The Problem

Too often we face difficult conflict situations where people are acting in ways we dislike. They either do things we wish they wouldn't, or they don't do things we wish they would.

II. Some Causes

1) We see them as uninfluenceable. We tend to believe we are fair and reasonable, but suspect the other side may not be. When they don't do what we want them to do -- when they say "no" rather than "yes" -- their behavior simply confirms our view that they are uninfluenceable or even irrational.

2) We ignore the choice they perceive. We look at the situation from our own perspective, not theirs. We usually don't analyze what might be leading them to say "no." And if we do, we often do so without much empathy. Instead of trying to understand first, the choice *they* think they face, and second, the kinds of consequences that saying "yes" and "no" would mean for them (both personally and professionally), we attribute nasty motives to them.

3) When they say "no," we escalate. When people don't do what we want them to do, we often react by trying to apply more "pressure." We come up with more reasons and arguments explaining why what we are asking for makes sense. The problem is that this often leads them to react with counter-arguments, causing them to dig their heels in further. As we step up our pressure, they step up theirs.

4) We present them with problems, not answers. Too often we present them with proposals that require complicated answers: they cannot say simply "yes" or "no." Rather than offering them a solution, we burden them with another problem. Such proposals tend to end up at the bottom of paper-piles instead of the top.

III. General Approaches

1) Operate on the assumption that they are influenceable. If we see them as influenceable, then we are more likely to make a genuine attempt to understand their thinking. And if we do that, we're more likely to understand how we might influence them.

2) Focus on their current choice -- as they would see it. Since we want to influence their decision, and since they are the ones confronting the choice, *their* thinking is crucial. We need to know what their perceptions are, not what we wish they were.

3) If their "no" makes sense, then change their choice. If we can understand why from their perspective it makes sense for them to say "no," then we need to change their choice as they see it. Sometimes increasing pressure may change their choice -- but too often it simply reinforces their current reasons for saying "no." In planning a new choice it is critical to consider how *they* will perceive it. A new choice that meets our interests well, but is also sensitive to their realistic constraints, increases our chances of getting a "yes."

4) Give them a "yesable" proposition. Craft a proposition to which the word "yes" is enough (where no more is required of the decision-maker) and makes something happen (it is clear who does what tomorrow morning).

IV. Specific Action Idea

We can use three sequential thinking tools to help us implement this kind of choice analysis. They are: 1) Currently Perceived Choice Tool, 2) Possible Future Choice Tool, and 3) Yesable Proposition Tool. (See next page for specific instructions.)

USING THE TOOLS -- OPERATIONAL STEPS

A. Start with their Currently Perceived Choice (CPC). *The purpose of a CPC is to give us a clear and empathetic understanding of why someone is now saying "no" when we want them to say "yes." We need to know where their mind is today if we hope to change it tomorrow. A well constructed CPC will tend to make us think things like, "If that's how they see their choice, then I can see how it makes sense for them to say "no.""*

- 1) Identify the target decision-maker. Who is it that we wish to influence? Be specific here. Decisions are made by individuals, not organizations. And even if some group of people must reach a consensus on a decision, someone must put that decision before the group.
- 2) Capture the question. Imagine the fundamental question, explicit or implicit, that they currently see us asking them -- and to which their answer is "no." The challenge here is capturing the question *they* perceive, *not* the question we wish they'd perceive.
- 3) Create "yes" and "no" columns. Below the question, create two columns. Put "if yes" on top of the left column and "if no" on top of the right column.
- 4) What are the consequences if they say "yes?" List the kinds of things that, if they were to say "yes," they might see happening to themselves, to their constituents, etc. Put a plus (+) in front of those that they would see as positive and a minus (-) in front of those that they would see as negative. Since they are currently saying "no," the negative consequences should outweigh the positive.
- 5) What are the consequences of their current "no?" Now list the contrasting consequences of their current answer in the "no" column.

B. Construct a Possible Future Choice (PFC). *If, after reflecting on their CPC, we can understand how it makes sense for them to say "no," then we need to design a new choice for them, one to which the answer "yes" is more likely. The purpose of constructing the PFC is to help us identify the characteristics of what such a new choice might be.*

- 1) Begin with a generic new question. We'd like to create a new question to which they might answer "yes." Because we don't yet know what that question should be, the best approach at this point is *not* to focus on the new question, but on the perceptions that it should produce in the decision-maker's head. We accomplish this by asking a generic PFC question like, "Should I accept the 'X Plan?'"
- 2) Create "yes" and "no" columns. These columns should look just like those used in a CPC.
- 3) Focus on the consequences for each column. If the decision-maker is to say "yes" to the "X Plan," the balance of positive and negative consequences must shift in favor of saying "yes." That is, the net effect of the consequences in the "if yes" column should be positive, while the net effect of the consequences in the "if no" column should be negative. To do this, brainstorm a new set of perceived consequences in both columns that seem realistic. Use the CPC as a guide: how might concerns that currently lead them to say "no" be handled differently in the future to produce a "yes?"

C. Develop a Yesable Proposition (YesP). *In drafting our PFC, we used a generic question. The purpose of developing a YesP is to create a specific new choice for our target decision-maker, one that will produce the perceived consequences described in our PFC.*

- 1) Brainstorm options first, then decide. Imagine many different possible propositions that might produce the desired consequences. Choose the most promising ones and refine them. Then choose one or more propositions for further development.
- 2) Make our chosen option "yesable." To be most effective, our proposition should meet three criteria:
 - (a) the word "yes" is *sufficient* (nothing else is required in order to decide);
 - (b) it is *realistic* (depending on the circumstances, anywhere from a 5% to a 95% chance of success may be sufficient to make the proposal worthwhile); and
 - (c) it is *operational* (it is clear who will do what by when, and saying "yes" sets things in motion).