

career coach

by Laurel Touby

Q I was in a meeting and my co-worker presented a marketing strategy that I knew for a fact wouldn't work. I had tried the very same thing three years ago with disastrous results. But when I broke the bad news, everyone looked at me as if I were the Wicked Witch of the West. What did I do wrong? I was in the right and I spared the company a lot of wasted effort and money.

A You may have been right, but you came off in the meeting as just plain righteous. Here's what the experts have to say about using your smarts more wisely—and achieving the results you want.

• **Be conciliatory.** “When you correct a co-worker, what you are really saying, if only implicitly, is ‘I’m right, so you’re wrong.’ And people take that personally,” explains Annette Simmons, author of *Territorial Games: Understanding and Ending Turf Wars at Work* (AMACOM). The last thing you want is to face a roomful of defensive, hostile people. Simmons suggests a less critical approach. Instead of saying “That won’t work,” say “In my experience, that approach had some negative consequences we should consider.” This avoids making you appear to be the arbiter of truth and justice.

• **Build consensus.** Whenever you’re presenting an opinion, keep in mind that you want to persuade people to your view, not jam it down their throats, says Lesley Mallow Wendell, executive director of Options, Inc., a career and human resources consulting company in Philadelphia. Make your approach as appealing to others as possible. Ask “What would they ideally like to gain from this?” Then, use the right buzzwords to get them on board. For example, if an information systems manager is meeting with a finance person about installing more computers, she should point out that the expenditure will bring about a measurable increase in order-processing efficiency. In other words, “talk money to the money people, talk high concept to the cre-

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ative people, talk sales to the sales people,” Mallow Wendell explains. She also suggests eliciting feedback from members of the group: “That lets people know you care about their opinions and it helps you understand what objections you still have to overcome.”

When the tables are turned and it's your idea that's being shot down, try these techniques to get your point across.

• **Put problem-solving first.** Remember that the ultimate goal is not to prove you're right so much as to find the best way possible to solve the problem. “Before presenting your plan, do a quick analysis to make yourself aware of its greatest strengths and weaknesses,” suggests Mallow Wendell. She suggests using the SWOT test. On a piece of paper, briefly list each of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats related to your approach. “The SWOT is like a litmus test that can give you a sense of how well your idea really solves the problem at hand. And when you present your idea, it will give you the ammunition to defend it with more objectivity,” Mallow Wendell says. Remain open to the possibility that your way is one of several “right” ways.

• **Don't become defensive.** If you're not getting the positive response you expected, try not to become resentful or annoyed. Take a deep breath and pause a few seconds. Remind yourself that *you* are not your *idea*; no one is attacking you. If someone asks a question that you consider hostile, stay calm. Rephrase the question. Say “This is my interpretation of what you're asking. Is that what you wanted to know?” Then, go back to your idea, but try a new tack. Instead of refuting the person's argument outright, Simmons recommends gently asking a series of questions that may help the other person come

to the same conclusion you've already come to. “That way, you avoid turning the situation into a battle of wills. You redirect the attention and the energy back to the problem-solving mode,” Simmons says.

Shelly Lazarus, CEO of Ogilvy & Mather Advertising agency in New York City, recommends another method for bringing constructive energy back to the meeting. When people attack one of her ideas, she throws it back out to them, so that they “own” the problem as well: “I try to engage everyone in the solution by asking them all ‘How would you go about solving this problem?’ That way, they can't dwell on what won't work.” When Lazarus is criticizing the work of others, she tries to take her own advice: “I think to myself, ‘This argument they are presenting took a lot of time and thought. I should honor the effort that went into it.’”

Laurel Touby is a New York-based freelance writer specializing in career and small-business strategies.

CAREER BOOKSHELF

If your job needs a jump-start, page through *24 Hours to Your Next Job, Raise or Promotion* by career consultant Robin Ryan (John Wiley & Sons). It's chock-full of action steps to help you sell yourself and excel at networking, interviewing and negotiating a salary or raise. Ryan also provides checklists and quizzes for self-assessment, plus plenty of real-life anecdotes.

If you like your job but hate your boss, try *Games Bosses Play: 36 Career Busters Your Supervisor May Be Firing Your Way and How You Can Defend Yourself* by Russell Wild (Contemporary Books). It offers sound, snappy advice on how to recognize and combat “games” such as “Face Time: Where Were You?” and “Trivial Pursuit: No Misdemeanor Goes Unnoticed.”

—CATHERINE CARTWRIGHT