

Your Baby is Ugly!

Strategies to use when telling a boss his or her idea is not going to work.

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How do you tell someone – especially the boss! – that their GREAT idea, their “baby” is not going to work? In fact, it’s so bad it’s UGLY!

Well we did and guess what? We got fired. But thankfully, the story doesn’t end there.

A few years ago, the President of a US based company asked us to work with a recently hired – and highly sought after – executive. Our mission was to work with the new executive and form a Task Team to launch a business idea for an emerging market.

The new hire had convinced the President that this was a sure-fire, money-making, knock-your-socks-off business opportunity. Given the stalled economy and the globalization of the company’s primary market, we believed the idea had some merit and should be explored. We met with the executive and the Task Team to conduct a development session using one of our favorite tools for crafting future plans, Scenario Planning.

Assessing your Baby - Scenario Planning

If you know about this method, you know that there are four questions that are at the core of this technique. They stimulate a very robust process that can generate well thought-out scenarios and can lead to some solid decision making:

1. What do we know for sure and how do we know it?
2. What do we think we know and why do we think this?
3. What do we not know...but wish we did?
4. What do we know that we don't know?

People’s native knowledge about the four questions combined with some digging and research into the answers allow groups to assemble the facts and do the analysis required to craft a few likely scenarios. The resulting scenarios that are generated can range from Good-to-Bad-to-REALLY Bad – meaning Ugly!

How the Baby Turned Ugly

As you can probably guess, the scenarios generated by the Task Team for this potential new business were all ugly:

- Potential markets were stagnant at best
- There was a significant amount of evidence indicating that shrinking markets would lag any recovery
- The particular technology was questionable
- The current infrastructure was inadequate, and
- All of the talent for the new business was going to be imported from the US - which would have created a huge storm of protests from the local government and indigenous work groups.

After much discussion over two very full days, the Task Team agreed that this was clearly an “ugly baby.” However, we had a hung jury. The “father” of the baby - the highly paid exec - was a hold out.

He debated against the data and disagreed with the team's analysis. His argument boiled down to his belief that, "you can't predict the future." Based on his gut instinct - and his statement that he needed a "Big win!" as the new guy - he argued vehemently for a "Go Forward" recommendation to the President, despite the team's analysis and assessment. So, what's the next step?

What to do with an Ugly Baby?

The way the Task Team members saw it, we had two options:

1. We could say, "*Go forward and hope for the best. We know we can't predict the future.*" – which would be somewhat true.

This response would let all of the Task Team members off the hook. They could finish their assignment and go back to their regular jobs. If problems developed in the future, they had a "fall guy." Plus, this route would keep the Task Team members from hurting anyone's feelings, or upsetting the boss.

It was the safe way out for the Task Team members – no one would risk their job by delivering an "**Ugly Baby Report**!"

2. Or, we could report the candid results of our analysis.

As you can imagine, fearing potential negative repercussions, this was not the first choice of many of the team members. Also, a few argued that if we were going to be candid, then the recommendations should not be watered down. The brutal truth should carry the day. That is, the team was asked to provide a candid recommendation after a thorough analysis, and that is what they should do.

We were at a bit of an impasse. Clearly the Task Team had a different recommendation than the executive. Emotions were running high and every disagreement was turning into an argument. Finally, a decision was made that we will "agree to disagree." It was decided that the Task Team would deliver the **Ugly Baby Report** and the newly hired exec would deliver the **Dissenting Minority Report**.

With so many eggs in one basket – and lots of hope! - the President went with the Dissenting Minority Report and, since we knew all of the issues, he suggested the newly hired exec retain our firm to help develop and launch the new business. Of course he didn't retain us and we were fired.

Lessons about Delivering an Ugly Baby Report

1. **Have a "Chartering Discussion" At the Start** – Initially there was a high sense of urgency around this initiative which we allowed to propel us directly into the task. Having a preliminary discussion about everyone's collective understanding of the assignment - the "Charter" – sometimes referred to as an "Up Front Contract" - as well as the rules of engagement would have clarified expectations regarding the intended outcome and put a process in place for resolving conflict, which may have decreased the emotions.

Additionally, I think we would have become aware of the real goal of the newly hired exec!

2. **Brief the President on the Decisions Process and the Analysis** – In our presentation to the President, we moved to the results of our analysis much too quickly and didn't spend enough time walking the President through the decision process itself. Of course, emotions lead the way. After many long, tiring and emotional discussions, the team sought closure. Many team members wanted to finish the assignment and go back to their regular jobs. Therefore, the team focused on the bottom line and failed to convey how the critical issues and concerns were addressed and thoroughly debated to arrive at their recommendations.

3. Facts May Not Cure Beliefs

As the discussion progressed and the facts began to unfold, it became obvious that the newly hired exec was not going to let facts get in the way of his beliefs and opinions! The assembling and discussion of facts generated heated discussions as the exec was confronted with things that he steadfastly proclaimed were accurate, and that turned out to be false.

Instead of changing his mind to reflect the correct information, he entrenched himself even deeper. This phenomenon known as “backfire” is a natural defense mechanism to avoid cognitive dissonance. Researchers at the University of Michigan in studies conducted in 2005 and 2006 found that when misinformed people were exposed to corrected facts in news stories, they rarely changed their minds. In fact, they often became even more strongly set in their beliefs. Facts, they found, were not curing misinformation. Like an underpowered antibiotic, facts could actually make misinformation even *stronger*. <http://tinyurl.com/432s6a6>

Clearly our newly hired exec did not want to admit he was mistaken, regardless of the facts.

Conclusion

So there you have it. You may dread having to tell the boss about that *baby*, but if you don't, someone or something will. And in this case, the market did. The sure-fire, money-making, knock-your-socks-off - business opportunity hardly lived up to its hype. It limped along for a year, losing money and damaging the brand.

We were called back in to help get a demoralized staff and business repositioned and on track. And the newly hired exec? Well a juicy story about revenge and reckoning will not be told here: he was hired by another company within a year while he could claim that the new business “has not yet reached its potential.”

The moral of the story?..... You decide and let me know!

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