

The Theory of 21

Finding the standout in your organization

BY CHUCK REAVES

Getting employees to try something that's never been done before can be an arduous task. For every person who will say "yes," there are 20 people who will say "no." For a positive response you must find the 21st person.

Take for example, the CEO of an electronics company who had a novel idea. While he was a solid businessman, he knew he wasn't as well-versed in electronics as his engineers. To ascertain whether his idea was viable, he asked two engineers to explore the logistics so he could test the product's feasibility.

One engineer gave the CEO a formal presentation with graphs explaining why the idea would not work along with some data that suggested no one would want the product even if it were available. When he finished, the CEO told him that the other engineer was already implementing the idea. Instead of pursuing the reasons why the idea was a bad one, the other engineer had waded through the obstacles to find a way to make it happen.

The idea, by the way, was Caller ID.

How to Spot the Doers

The Theory of 21 is based on the premise that there are two types of people in the world - the 20's and the 21's. The 20's will consistently declare that anything new cannot, should not or will not be done. Conversely, the 21's will look for ways of making things happen - even those things considered to be impossible by others.

So the question is, how do so many 20's find their way into otherwise successful organizations? First of all, there are more of them than are 21's. In fact, there are not enough 21's in the world so, eventually, despite your best efforts, you will find a number of 20's in your organization. If they are in a hiring position, they will attract other 20's. After all, 20's don't like having 21's around.

Now, among those 20's, there are two types - negative and positive. Negative 20's are easy to spot. If you bring them a new idea they will immediately shoot it down. It's a waste of time to engage them.

Out of mere habit, they will tell you in no uncertain terms that it cannot be done, should not be done or will not be done. If you press them, they will give you valid sounding reasons why their position is justified with statements like, "We have never done it that way before" or "It can't be done."



While a Negative 20 comes right out and tells you that it cannot be done, it is more difficult to recognize the Positive 20 because they can sound like a 21. These slippery critters can delay a project until it is no longer viable. They can dilute an idea until it has little resemblance to the original concept. Using "ifs" and "buts," they are dangerous, saying things like, "Great idea - we'll need to try it someday" or "We could do that if..." "It will be easier for us to do that when..."

So, what do you do with the 20's in your organization? The single, most important function of leadership is to teach. You have achieved your level of success because someone took the time to teach you. As you teach, you can ascertain whether you have a student or not. There are no extraordinary people. There are only ordinary people who are doing things that other people consider to be extraordinary. Everyone on your team was brought onboard because they have a skill set, ability or something else that could make them extraordinary.

If you want to get something completed quickly and done well, your best bet is to give it to someone who is already busy, a 21. These are the people who somehow always seem to find a way to overcome the obstacles and take action. Instead of saying they do not have time to do whatever you are asking, they will want to know your timeframe. Rather than offer excuses, you can rely on them to offer you some viable alternatives. And be sure to praise the 21's in public. When your employees know that you appreciate, admire and respect the efforts of the 21's, more of them will aspire to be 21's.

Henry Ford and Thomas Edison were friends and mentors. Ford was in Edison's facility when one of his engineers reported that an Edison idea could not be done. Edison listened patiently and then said, "Build it anyway." Later, one of Ford's engineers would come into his office and explain why a shiftless automatic transmission was impossible to manufacture. How did Ford respond? "Build it anyway." ⚙️



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