

How to Get Ideas Adopted

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THE MYTH OF THE MOUSETRAP

Anne Miller

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With her distinguished career background in invention, innovation and creativity Anne Miller is well placed to write a book about how to get your ideas adopted and change the world. The title refers to the myth that people will be beating their way to your door if you come up with a remarkable new invention. She shows us that the reverse is the case and that rejection of or resistance to new ideas is commonplace. This is borne out by the experience of many Network members and indeed of the Network itself, which puts forward for discussion many ideas that are not currently accepted by mainstream science, medicine and psychology..

However, I'm jumping the gun, as the first half of the book deals with understanding the nature of creativity and personality types, and ways of engaging with people. As Anne shows, the personality characteristics of creative people may be an obstacle to getting their ideas heard by people of a completely different mental outlook, who are target driven and risk averse. Emotional commitment to an idea may also cloud one's judgement about the best way of presenting it. In addition to creativity, innovators need persistence to triumph over many inevitable obstacles. Anne advises people to focus on objectives and questions, not necessarily on the new idea itself, in order to maximise the chances of success. This also means listening to and acting on constructive criticism. Throughout the discussion, Anne illustrates her points with fascinating examples and anecdotes.

The second part focuses specifically on dealing with resistance, outlining five stages of the process, as she explained in her article in the last issue. It is likely that radical ideas will be ignored because they don't fit with people's mental models, but if someone starts raising objections, Anne assures us that this is a good sign because it signals that we have got through to the next stage in getting people to adopt the idea. However, as she points out, 'the combined effect of filtering, force fitting, systematic selection and selective memories can give us very rigid, stable and strong mental models.' This has important positive uses, but equally creates frustration for those trying to convey a radical new idea.

It is unlikely that confrontation will open people's eyes to new ideas, so more subtle tactics are required. This means using appropriate language, reframing the exceptional within the familiar, and spreading the available evidence out with as many examples as possible. Questions can be used to open up dialogue, as part of what she calls the unfreezing process. Applied to an issue such as climate change, people need to understand the urgency of the overall situation and care sufficiently to take action that will make a difference rather than being frozen into inaction.

A disconcerting situation can arise when you are making progress in presenting your new idea, since your supporters are likely to be much quieter and less vociferous in their support than the opposition. Anne draws on her own experience in dealing with a key engineer at a pharmaceutical company, where her innovation team was developing a glaucoma drug delivery device. She did everything to involve the engineer in the project, but he went on the attack during a public presentation. She did not realise at the time that everyone else in the room had been on her side. Only afterwards did her chief executive say that she should have turned to the rest of the group and asked if anyone else agreed with the opposition – this would have given them a chance to show their support.

Anne concludes that 'developing a creative idea requires independence, persistence and strength of mind to carry on when people are telling you the idea is impossible. However, people will only truly adopt an idea and integrate it into their own lives and mental models when they feel that in some way they "own" it too.' This is a difficult but necessary process for the inventor. This stimulating and highly readable book will be an enormous help to anyone developing and putting across new ideas. One can take a more relaxed attitude if one realises that resistance is quite normal, and that there are tried and tested ways of effective communication.

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