COMMUNICATION

How to Pick Your Battles at Work

by Amy Gallo

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You hate that people consistently show up to meetings late. You find your company's maternity policy woefully inadequate. You think the company's IT system is out of date. It's normal to be bothered by work issues like these, but when do you move from complaining to taking action? How do you decide which battles to fight?

What the Experts Say

One thing is certain — you can't take on every problem at work. Each person has a finite amount of political capital. "If you make a huge fuss over something silly, you may not be able to get your way when it's something really important," says Dorie Clark, a strategy consultant and author of *Reinventing You: Define Your Brand, Imagine Your Future*. Even if you're certain that the issues you want to tackle are critical, your reputation may suffer if you take them all on at once. "There's a line you cross from being seen as an observant problem-solver to a being Debbie Downer," says Karen Dillon, author of *HBR Guide to Office Politics* and co-author of *How Will You Measure Your Life?*. It's important to figure out where that line is. Lois Kelly, co-author with Carmen Medina (see case study #1) of the upcoming book, *Rebels at Work: Befriending the Bureaucratic Black Belts and Leading Change from Within*, says the smartest people carefully calculate what's worth their time and energy. Whether the issue is minor or fundamental, here are five principles to help you decide whether to take on a challenge or leave it alone.

Understand your authority

Before tackling something that's irking you, you'll need to assess whether you have the reputation and authority to succeed. "People are more willing to accommodate your requests if you've proven yourself," says Clark. Do your best to keep in good standing with your superiors and co-workers. It's also easier to fight a battle if it's part of your job. Articulate the challenge in a way that fits into your role responsibilities. If that's difficult to do, try to formally alter your job description to include the change you want to make.

Be sure you have a solution

You shouldn't point out a problem without also having a constructive solution – or a plan for developing one – to offer. "You want to be seen as someone who brings ideas to the table in a positive way," Dillon says. If you have a critique but you're not sure how to make things better, spend some time researching the issue and talking to others before you raise it.

Ask yourself how important the issue is to you and the organization

There are costs to going against the grain so you need to be sure it's worth it. Is the issue a pet peeve or is truly getting in the way of your and your colleagues' critical work? Think through the risks. "If you're launching a crusade to get Dunkin' Donuts coffee instead of Starbucks, the upside is you get the kind of coffee you want but the downside is you look like an unproductive zealot," Clark warns. Kelly agrees: "Effective rebels have a good radar for what matters to the organization." She suggests you rate the importance of the problem on a scale of 1 to 10. If it's a 6 or below, she recommends dropping it. Clark adds that you should be able to articulate how your solution will move your group or company toward its goals. That said, if the issue is a relatively minor one and will require minimal resources to fix, it might still be worth tackling.

Test the waters

Change initiatives are notoriously difficult, so test your idea before diving in. "Go to some trusted colleagues and bounce it off of them," Clark says. "If they think it will be a Herculean task, then you might want to reconsider. If they think you're on to something, you've got a good data point." You don't have to set up a formal meeting; just try floating your proposed

solution when the issue comes up naturally. For example, after a long meeting, you could say, "It seems we spend way too much time doing this. Maybe we could try standing meetings to encourage people to move along faster." Then see how your suggestion is received.

Enlist supporters

Shopping your solution around serves another purpose — it builds early support. And it's much easier to take something on if you have people behind you. "When it comes time to present the idea, you can point to what you've learned from others. That shows you're not a lone ranger," says Kelly. Look for supporters beyond your immediate circle to show you've got broad backing. But be careful. You don't want it to seem like you're secretly trying to get people on your side, says Dillon; make it clear that your aim is to bring like-minded people together to brainstorm possible solutions. And don't join bad company. "Don't align yourself with a constant complainer or with people who are unwilling to fight their own battles," she adds. "Pick people you know are well respected."

It's not essential to have your boss on board — but it can be helpful. At the same time, don't expect him or her to fight your battles for you. "You don't want to run to your manager every time you want something to change," Dillon says. "Communicate with him or her once you've got some well thought out ideas and a plan for how you will address it."

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Articulate how the challenge fits into your job or make it a formal part of your responsibilities
- Have a viable solution, or at least a plan of attack, in mind before you raise a problem
- Be careful about how many battles you take on — you could run out of political capital

Don't:

- Take on an issue that isn't in some way important to the organization
- Rely on your boss to wage the battle for you — approach her with a thought-out plan
- Dive in until you've first floated the idea by colleagues you trust — both those you know well and those outside of your immediate circle

Case study #1: Make it part of your job

Before filling her current role as Specialist Leader at Deloitte Consulting, Carmen Medina spent 32 years in a government security agency. Ten years into her career there, in the mid-1990s, she realized that the agency's business model was lacking a digital strategy. "I started thinking that this stuff is really serious and we needed to get moving and do something about it," she says. She wanted the agency to figure out how to deliver information to policymakers digitally, but most of her early rumblings on the topic fell on deaf ears.

Still, Carmen was obsessed. "I remember boring my poor friends talking about how the Internet was going to change everything," she says. She knew she'd have more luck with this battle if it was part of her job description and, in 1998, she was given that opportunity. "A new position opened with a long list of responsibilities, and figuring out online delivery was one of them — although the last item on the list," she says. "But I knew that I wanted to make it a bigger part of the job." In her interview, Carmen emphasized how important she thought that was. The hiring manager told her that she'd given him a lot to think about and eventually offered her the position.

Even with digital strategy as an official part of her duties, the battle wasn't easy. But eventually she helped transform the way the agency worked. "You always want to be right when you take on a battle and I was pretty sure I was right about this one," she says.

Case study #2: Own the solution

Caroline Johanssen* was annoyed. Every month, all of the employees in her department met for a safety meeting. The department's admin sent out the invite and downloaded the slides from the pharmaceutical company's intranet site. People took turns presenting, but it was a joke. "We would be looking at the same slides we'd seen months ago. One slide we saw in

eight of the monthly meetings," she says. It disrupted the workday and was a huge waste of everyone's time. So Caroline started asking around to find out why the meeting was mandated. Surprisingly, people knew very little. "I just wanted to get the facts about the requirement. Do we really work for a company that makes us do this every month? Everybody is saying yes but no one knows why," she recalls.

After talking to several people including her boss, the department head, and the admin organizing the meeting, Caroline discovered that it was indeed required. She suggested combining it with other meetings but that became too complicated so she instead decided to take over herself. "I began putting together what I thought were more meaningful slides. I found ideas on our safety website. It was a good opportunity so my colleagues started speaking up too." Eventually they turned the meeting into something that people found productive and useful. "I don't like to complain about things that I'm not willing to do something about," Caroline says.

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the *HBR Guide to Managing Conflict at Work*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Follow her on Twitter at @amyegallo.

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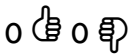
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