How To Get Your Project Approved

What do you do when you have a great idea? You know how to save your company a ton of money or you've thought of a way to really improve a product. The problem is that you know that you have a great idea, but no-one else does. And you can't convert this idea into reality by yourself. You need resources. You need money. You feel that you need permission. What do you do? If you're working for a large organization there are probably written procedures for the analysis and approval of capital projects, but they are usually very generic and barren documents designed to handle a broad spectrum of projects. They don't tell you how to process your unique project and they say nothing about how to get approval for a non-capital project. You have to know how to move your idea through the bureaucratic machinery of the real world and convert it to a reality. If you're like most people you see opportunities for improvement in the workplace that are so glaring that they should be self evident to even the casual observer. Why, then, don't the big decision makers see these problems and do something about them? The reason is that they don't have the same knowledge and experience that you do. They are far removed from what you do and they don't have the time to understand the details of your job unless you run into substantial problems. And since you're good at your job upper management rarely needs to micromanage your work. That's what they pay you for. So you have an idea that has you excited. You've probably bounced off of a few of your friends, maybe your boss. Everyone seems positive about it but still it just sits there. Now you have a decision to make. Are you going to wait until someone else recognizes what a good idea you had? Are you going to leave your idea on the shelf waiting to spontaneously metamorphose into an approved project? Hint: it'll never happen. Or will you take on the responsibility of converting it into a reality? Recognize that the later course will result in a lot of effort which may very well be wasted in the end. You will run into an endless lineup of people who will tell you that they had that idea years ago and it didn't work then and won't work now. On the other hand if you don't try you will become one of those people. Ok, you've decided that your project is worth fighting and sacrificing for. Now you're ready to begin. 1) Convince yourself. Get a copy of your company's capital approval process and spend some time learning how your company justifies capital expenditures. Even if you will never generate the official calculation it's an eye opening experience to understand how it's determined whether a project really makes money for the company. Run a return on investment calculation on your project. Are you still convinced it's a good project? If you are, then you can probably convince the decision makers also. If the project is not an economic one, that is, if its justification is based on regulatory or safety requirements, then must compare it against alternate route to the same end. You'll want to talk to people in a number of different areas to assess the various alternatives. Sometimes you'll have to compare capital and procedural solutions to a particular problem and this can be very difficult. The best way is to reduce each alternative down to money and run the same discounted cash flow calculation that appears in an economic justification. Of course you will have to make some big assumptions like, alternative X prevents one spill per year at $50k per spill. But if you list your assumptions up front, critics are reduced to quibbling over details while your logic stands like a fortress. Your project will come up with a negative return on investment, but if it's the least negative of all the alternatives, then you're in. 2) Testing your product. Pick one or two trusted colleagues to critique your project. The criteria are a willingness to give honest feedback and a broad perspective of the corporation. Modify your proposal based on their suggestions. 3) Develop a sales plan. Ok, you've convinced yourself and a few associates that your project is viable. Now you're project is ready to present to the public at large. But first you need a sales plan. "A sales plan!? But I'm an engineer," you say. Well, that's true, but if you want to get your project approved you have to remember that despite all the corporate procedures with their net present values and their discounted cash flows, in the end it's a human being that signs on the dotted line. That person is held accountable for the results of the project and that person has to be convinced that all those numbers represent a real benefit. Examine the signature levels required for your project. The key people who need to be convinced are usually those just below that level. They are the people who will make the final pitch. They have to be convinced that this project is going to do something for them. Understand where the real power in the organization lies. Upper management rarely has time to thoroughly analyze the projects they approve. Instead they rely on a few experienced subordinates. These are the people you must contact and convince in advance. These individuals may have been in their positions for a long time and are the recognized technical experts in their fields. Managers may come and go above them, but the old hands remain constant. Don't let their age lead you to believe that they are unwilling to change, however. The old hands can be persuaded by someone who demonstrates that they care as much about the field as they do. 4) Official submission. Once you have both the technical requirements and the people parts of the equation covered now you can proceed with the official submission of your project. Be prepared for unknown roadblocks to pop up. Don't be discouraged. Answer all the questions even though it's the umpteenth time. Your project may require a radical paradigm shift for some people and change is always difficult. 5) Rejection. What if your project is rejected? This is something you should prepare for in advance. Think about how you will act and what you will say. This will help you to remain calm if the worst happens. Although you may feel discouraged and maybe even humiliated you are better off for trying than if you had done nothing. Remember that management is awash in a sea of competing possibilities, most of which you are unaware. It's possible that a much larger initiative is afoot which obviates your idea. The experience that you gained while preparing the project request could not have been achieved otherwise. Your ability to assemble a logical thought process has been presented to an audience which may not have known you previously and you will now be perceived as someone with initiative who cares about more than just his or her immediate job. 6) Success. After your project is approved, installed, and successful comes the most important part. When you are recognized for your contribution, whether it be by ticker tape parade, bonus check, or simply a grudging respect from your peers, share the wealth. Thank everybody who had anything to do with the project, even those whom you had to persuade to stand aside to let it pass. Don't worry that your glory may be diluted, for they know who pushed the project through. And besides, you'll need their support for the next great idea that you're just starting on.