

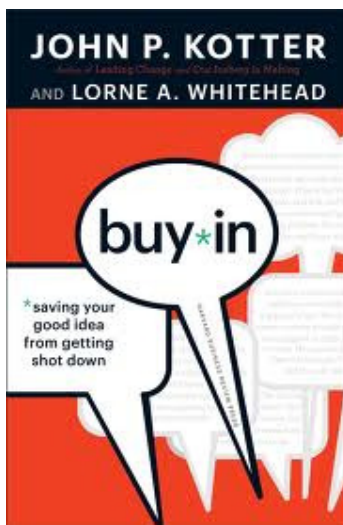


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1 ENSURING THE SURVIVAL OF GOOD IDEAS...



Anybody who has ever had a good idea shot down will immediately look up when noticing the latest book by the 'change guru', John P Kotter which he authored with Lorne A Whitehead and published in 2010. The book is titled "Buy-in. Saving your good idea from getting shot down" (Harvard Business Review Press).

Since 2007 Unisa grappled with different phases of coming to terms with being an ODL institution and not quite knowing what it looks like and more importantly, what it *should* look like. Since 2007 there had been many good ideas that just did not seem to catch on – whether because of a lack of integration, or lack of support, personalities or institutional politics.

Kotter and Whitehead's (2010) book provide a glimpse into what causes some ideas to be shot down. Interestingly, the book provides a quite humorous picture of those who make it their pleasure in shooting ideas down and suggest a number of strategies to prepare for those, out-of-the-blue and often illogical and sneaky assaults. Kotter and Whitehead (2010) share a fictitious story of a person who tables a proposal at a local town council meeting, but nothing could have prepared him for a number of characters at the meeting waiting to shoot down his proposal. The characters included

- **Pompus Meani** – he or she often values self-importance above doing good and would often be mean in his or her attack, often attacking the character of the proposer.
- **Avoidus Riski** – a person deeply uncomfortable with any form of risk and who does anything to avoid taking (or supporting) risks, no matter how worthwhile or well-researched.

- **Allis Well** – this person cannot understand why anyone wants to change the status quo! All is well and now you want to change everything. To accept any new proposal would mean, according to Allis Well, discarding all that was worthwhile in the organisation in the past.
- **Divertus Attenti** – she or he loves sharing more and mostly irrelevant information and going off on a tangent. They often compare any new proposal with other non-related events and causes confusion or anxiety.
- **Heidi Agenda** – is the sneaky one of the lot. Normally this person has a hidden agenda which forms the basis for his or her attack on the proposal.
- **Spaci cadetus** – who often seems as if he or she has just arrived from another planet.
- **Lookus Smarti** – who is, like Pompous Meani, very important and uses big words, but without the meanness of character. As long as he or she can be acknowledged as being ever so important, normally they are quite harmless, except for wasting time...
- **Bendi Windi** – is a character who assures you of his or her vote *before* the meeting, but who moves according to the wind of the majority. Don't rely on him or her for support when you need it the most!

All of these characters play an important role in shooting a good idea down using four almost fool-proof tactics namely (1) fear mongering, (2) death-by-delay, (3) confusion and (4) ridicule (Kotter and Whitehead 2010:73).

Fear mongering as tactic has as purpose “raising anxieties so that a thoughtful examination of a proposal is very difficult if not impossible” (Kotter & Whitehead 2010:74). Not only is the tactic in essence manipulative, but once “aroused, anxieties do not necessarily disappear when a person is confronted with an analytically sound rebuttal (Kotter & Whitehead 2010:75). *Death-by-delay* “slow the communication and discussion of a plan that sufficient buy-in cannot be achieved before a critical cut-off time or date” (Kotter & Whitehead 2010:77) and once the momentum is lost, the good idea dies a slow but sure death. *Confusion* as tactic has as purpose to add complexity to the issue and therefore the real issue becomes buried in statistics, statements, cross-references and this tactic is “lethal” (Kotter & Whitehead 2010:80). *Ridicule* is often the most unexpected of all attacks and attempts the assassination of the character of the proposer (Kotter & Whitehead 2010:81).

Even if you have not read the book, I am sure you can visualize these characters and actually have witnessed such attacks whether in your department or at institutional forums. The fictitious characters and story serves as basis for Kotter and Whitehead (2010:84-85) to share 24 strategies on how to prepare for these characters and their attacks. At this point, I must confess, the book turned into quick-and-easy recipes and lost me as a fan.

I found it very hard to finish the book, and except for the lasting impression of the characters and their tactics, I was generally a bit disappointed in the book. Though it is an accepted practice to teach through stories, the story and simplicity of the exploration was just a bit too contrived and superficial for my taste. I also had the nagging feeling that Kotter and Whitehead (2010) do not engage with the notion that some ideas *deserve* to be questioned and interrogated. There is therefore a danger in taking Kotter and Whitehead (2010) to propose that the fault for proposals to be shot down always reside in mean, pompous personalities that claim to know better than the proposers. It would have been great if these authors could have embedded their account in the broader context of organizational change, strategy and implementation. *Not all ideas are good.* Not all ideas are worthy to survive a rigorous interrogation, especially not when the stakes are high.

Having said that, there is certainly value in seriously contemplating the characters, their roles and the four ways of killing a good idea proposed by Kotter and Whitehead (2010). One may differ from Kotter and Whitehead (2010) or feel their approach to be lacking, but one thing that remains with me after reading the book, is the notion that any interrogation (and defense) of a proposal should be based in visible and authentic respect – respect for the effort that went into drafting the proposal and respect for the proposers.

2 SLOWING DOWN TOWARDS THE END OF THE YEAR...

As we approach the end of the academic year, a number of ODL projects are still continuing, albeit below the radar and with less intensity than in the preceding months. The proposal from ODL Task team 6 has been referred to the colleges for discussion. The smaller task team looking at the appointment of tutors and tutor-markers are continuing their work under the leadership of Mr Tony Mays (SAIDE) in collaboration with TSDL. I will have a video conference with the regions on 8 December to continue the discussions regarding the role and function of the regions in an ODL context. I am also in the process of putting together a compilation of all the approved recommendations of the different task teams and the dates for progress reports in 2011.

The two major so far unaddressed ODL projects for next year that will be the formulation of an ODL pedagogy which will form the basis for an interrogation of the roles, functions and structures of the regional services and other stakeholders and a smaller task team ensuring the integration of all the recommendations and formulation of appropriate processes and procedures as well as supporting systems. What should not be forgotten is the fact that 2011 will see the implementation of the recommendations of 2010!

3 NEWS FROM OXFORD

In discussions around the roles and functions of the regions at Unisa, reference was made to the need to benchmark against other ODL institutions such as the Open University. The interesting thing about the roles and functions of regional facilities in the context of the OU is that they are also in the process of re-imagining the role of the regions due to changing student profiles and needs, and the increasing impact of the cut in funding. And they are really grappling with finding a new model which will address new needs and cater for an era in which higher education funding will be severely cut. The OU regional facilities are very different to Unisa's regional facilities. They offer *telephonic* administrative support and are responsible for organising tutorial classes and "residential schools" in a particular region, the appointment of tutors in that region and arranging examination facilities. Students don't visit the regional facilities and the facilities do not offer library, counselling or other support services. These services are centralised and offered from the main campus in Milton Keynes. A major move at the OU currently is the proposal that all student support should be linked to the realising of the *curriculum*. Therefore there is a very strong move to think about ways how to plan and implement student support from the academic disciplines. Though this principle seems to be accepted, they have not solved the "how" yet.

I am sure that regional facilities at other ODL institutions in other contexts differ from this model. From what I have found on the web regarding the role of regional facilities at Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), the Zambia Open University, the Open University of Malaysia and others *show that each context defines the role of its regional facilities differently*.

I suspect that there is a lesson to learn from this. Unisa can either send a benchmarking team to a great number of these institutions (and learn from each of them) or we can grapple with our own realities using the key trends that are emerging in the ODL project to define a context-appropriate and context-specific regional model. *There is no model out there somewhere which we will be able to copy and paste*. The important lesson that I have learned from sitting in a regional facility for the last three weeks is that the OU has a different history than us, a very different student profile and different issues.

4 ODL REPOSITORY AND BLOG

All the ODL task team reports, the overview of the recommendations of the STLSC and other ODL documents are available on the Unisa Library's Institutional Repository at <http://uir.unisa.ac.za/dspace/handle/10500/3072> (accessed 23 November 2010). The repository is updated on a regular basis and if you register on the repository, you will get notifications of any new uploads.

You are also most welcome to comment on this (and previous) ODL Communiqués on the Unisa Staff website. On the right hand side of the Unisa Staff website, you will see a section titled “Important links” under which you must then click on “Blogs”. On the blog page, you will notice two links namely “E-connect” and “Open Distance Learning”. If you follow the latter you will be able to read and comment on the ODL Communiqués.

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Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this ODL Communiqué represent my personal viewpoints and do not represent the viewpoint of any other member of the Unisa community.