

Leading Ways:

ENTERING THE CONVERSATION WITH LEADERSHIP SAVVY

It's true that anyone can lead from wherever they sit, but if you are not the designated leader, it may be difficult to enter the fray and offer your contributions. New leaders, quiet leaders and those who have worked as an individual contributor in a research, policy or clinical role often find it challenging to push their way in, and their valuable contributions are left unsaid. If it is extreme, this reluctance can be career limiting.

Here are some scenarios and possible strategies and language to help in these situations.

SCENARIO 1.

I'm on a larger team and a fellow team member presents a design idea at our technical review meeting. She is very enthusiastic about it and would like it resourced. I have some concerns about the complexity of the design and worry difficulties in executing these ideas will bog down the resources. It's an interesting idea, but I would like to refine it (to a simpler design), but do not have a quick recommendation and don't want to discourage more ideas.

ENTRY STRATEGY:

First you want to **affirm the idea and its potential**. You could say, "I really like this idea because it ... (give reasons)"

For instance: "uses a new technology, approaches a persistent problem in a creative way, makes good use of a valuable partnership, builds off of another project that was a success, would use Dr. X's talents that we do not fully utilize, and any technical things that you think are solid.

Second, you want to **show support and understanding in the light of your proposal**. You would say "And while I fully support going forward, I do think that a little more work on the design might make it more competitive for resources when compared with other ideas being discussed." Or "I like this, but I think we would be more successful if we got buy-in from others by a) simplifying the design, for instance (demonstrating that you understand the project and support it, but have a thought about this or b) consider doing this smaller scale set of experiments to demonstrate that the technology will be applicable or that we can make the adjustment efficiently in workflow, etc.

Third, you want to **buy time to do a little more thinking, but still be seen as supportive**. You would say, "I hope I've been clear that I'm generally supportive of this proposal and would be happy to expand on my suggestions or sit down with you to push on some of these thoughts."

SCENARIO 2.

I am attending another project team's meeting whose agenda is very packed. I would like to give my perspective on a technical problem after one of the presentations. Several people

quickly comment and ask questions that require longer answers. I opt to not speak up at the meeting and follow up by email so that the meeting can keep on time.

ENTRY STRATEGY:

Well, the clock didn't bother the chatty people, but you are not that guy or gal or even want to be, so you would say, "I know we are short on time (indicating that you do even if others don't) and appreciate the commentary. Another way to approach this problem is..." – then give as succinct and as general description as possible, even saying something like, "by using the approach that was developed in Mary's lab last year. I will share more details with the group in a follow up email." This takes 15 seconds, I timed it, double to 30 seconds and you can be guilt free that you didn't use up time. But you've done a lot:

1. Expressed understanding and interest in the project
2. Shown it has value
3. Complimented the chatty on their input, and a little chastisement for running on
4. Offered the nub of your idea for all to see
5. Given yourself time to flesh it out
6. Leave the expectation of an email that they then are more likely to pay attention to.

SCENARIO 3.

At my project review presentation, a senior deputy disagrees with my strategies to tackle a specific problem (or recommends an idea that isn't fully flushed out). I don't fully agree and need to quickly decide whether to engage the deputy or dismiss by saying that we will consider their recommendation.

ENTRY STRATEGY:

Let's just say this person could be named Bill. What you want to do is to let them know you have **heard** them, let them know that **you will give the input due deference** in due time, **not commit** to anything, and **move on**.

So, you would say "Bill, as usual all good thoughts (they may be no more than that, thoughts, so don't over value them) "as I take these ideas and the input from the rest of the group and think it through for next steps I might come back to you for a bit more on... (really good here if you can take a piece of what he said that was helpful something like, "yes, I will add page numbers..." Then, "Thank you all for your help on this. Now I'd like to move to ..."

The reality here is that not everything out of everyone's mouth is important or needs a deep response. But it always helps to let them know they have been heard. You will need to develop a sense about whether or not it is truly important to the person, has any real value (which might take time) and how it ranks in priorities.

SCENARIO 4.

At another team project's review presentation, I don't necessarily agree with the technical direction / strategies / design, but I also don't want to interrupt and come across as criticizing.

Strategy: This one is tougher, and you need to ask yourself is the "juice worth the squeeze." You are probably not the person who needs to speak up just because you have a different way of seeing things to impress others. Assuming that it is important or possibly helpful to offer your perspective

you could think through what the more effective way is to be heard here, speaking up or following up with an email.

ENTRY STRATEGY:

Assuming that you want and need to speak, you would take the one thing that is most egregiously wrong with what has been proposed. Depending on the level of the issue in one of three dimensions: direction, strategy and design, could say one of the following:

Direction:

“I really like the design for this undertaking, and it looks like you have spent good time developing that, but I’m still not getting how this fit into our current portfolio commitments, so could you go back and touch on that again for me (if you can more closely target this for them all the better)

Strategy:

“Really great project, thanks for bringing us all up to date on this. I think it will clearly help (our portfolio commitments, your Project Team, etc) and I think some of the experiments show creativity and focus, hard to achieve always. But I do have a question or two about (why you are waiting for a low-level technical review or why this before that or if the full range of the steps have been thought through)”

Design:

“This is an interesting project, and I can clearly see the value thanks for sharing it so thoroughly. I am curious about one thing however, what was your thinking behind choosing a) to use technology X over Y or Z or b) altering our standard methodology from X to Y.

In all of the above, these are the general steps you want to take as you enter a conversation as a leader:

1. Signal that you are all on the same team and working toward shared goals.
2. Compliment them on whatever you can and thank them for hard work.
3. Be positive.
4. Express gratitude.
5. Be supportive of their overall undertaking or intent, if you can.
6. Be curious and raise your concern in the form of questions, “Help me understand? Why did you...? What was behind your conclusion”

These six steps make your comments more welcome and palatable and are likely to make it easier for you to offer the general perspective you need to share. To incorporate this into your leadership skill set, think about the phrases and translate them into words that you are comfortable with, but do the same work. Then just start practicing until it just becomes the way you are in a group.