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Working from the Ground up: A Lesson from the Election

Gary Breed
Editorial Director



Regardless of your political preferences, the success of Barack Obama's presidential campaign is an excellent example of organization and execution in the grass-roots style, from the ground up. At the beginning of the primaries he was not a major name in his party, but by working hard at the person-to-person level in the Iowa caucuses, he quickly achieved a place as one of the leading candidates. For the general election, his campaign had more local offices than any presidential campaign in history. Beyond Obama's personality and political message, the operation of his campaign provides some good lessons.

The primary lesson is that things can work well from the ground up. It's not the only route to success, of course. There are many top-notch marketing departments that identify customer needs, communicate their findings to company executives, who in turn direct their product development staffs to proceed with a particular project. The lesson of ground-up success is most important to those companies that have not done a good enough job listening to the ideas of their own staff.

Let's say you are an individual engineer with an idea that you believe would be good for your company to pursue. What can you learn from a successful political campaign?

First, you need to have a clear message—and it needs to be clear at several levels. You are probably best at the technical background, so communicating those details with your peers and supervisors is the easiest for you. With luck, a supervisor may see the value of your idea and send it further up the chain of command. If not, you will need to take the next step, which takes another lesson from the Obama campaign—organization.

You should back up the technical justification with market information. There are two aspects that should be addressed together: identifying how it meets customer needs, and how it can fit with your company's development and manufacturing capabilities. There have been many, many clever ideas that few people really need, and there have been many failures when a company tried to move too far from its core competency. Make sure your idea isn't one of those!

Work on communicating the idea—*sell it!* Selling an idea requires full knowledge of the concept, plus an understanding of who needs to be approached in your particular company. Most of all, be passionate about it. It will keep you motivated, and it will show others how strongly you are convinced of success. As you gather supporters, create an organized promotional effort. The old saying about “strength in numbers” is true.

Finally, be prepared for setbacks. There are a thousand legitimate reasons for a business to reject an idea for a new product. Investment cost, market conditions, available personnel and perceived competition are just a few. Some ideas just need time for the world to get ready for them!

Another Route

Entrepreneurship is a classic

ground-up enterprise, with obvious similarities to a political campaign. You need to raise money, convince people to support you, communicate your ideas to the marketplace, and effectively sell to the customer!

We have heard many stories of success and failure concerning new companies based on a particular idea. Remember, a start-up company requires more than just a great idea, so if you take this high risk, high reward path, make sure you have the personality and ambition to make it happen.

If the prospect of starting a whole new company is daunting, maybe all you need to do is find a company that wants your idea. This is a traditional method, where the person with the idea seeks out a company (or partners) with the necessary resources and expertise for its development, manufacturing and marketing.

Like winning a political campaign, developing a new idea into a successful product—or a new company—is exciting and rewarding. It’s no wonder that many engineers aspire to this level of achievement!

New Ideas are Needed

Today, there are special challenges that need creative new ideas. Climate change, energy generation and efficient usage, globalization and many other issues require technological solutions as well as social and political ones.

It may take many small contributions to reach workable solutions. If you have an idea that may contribute to those solutions, you are encouraged to work on it and promote it—from the ground up.