

## **CEO Tip: Dealing With the Impossible**

by Guido Quelle

“We can’t do that, boss!” As a CEO it’s not uncommon for you to hear that, is it? You have a new idea, mention it to your team and ask them to implement it. But caught up in – or rather, tied up by – their daily routine, they see the present situation rather than the strategic future and their first reaction is to resist.

You probably don’t have the same problems as those attributed to John F. Kennedy, whose vision in 1961 was to put a man on the moon and bring him back again safely by the end of the decade. The scientists said this was impossible. The gist of his response was, “That may well be, ladies and gentlemen, but you have a problem: That is still my vision.”

If you’re regularly faced with this killer contention, “impossible,” you already have a leadership issue to address, but more about that later. More important at this point is how you, as CEO, can quickly make clear to yourself what “impossible” means.

Here are some possible interpretations of “impossible.” All of them will help you get to the bottom of: “What exactly do you mean by ‘impossible?’”

### **“I can’t imagine that”**

You can help employees who don’t have the imagination to think about something you have asked of them in a completely new way by describing the goal as precisely as possible. Here, you don’t have to fight operative doubts (yet); instead it is your job to accompany them on the path to your “impossible” goal.

### **“I don’t know how I’m going to do that”**

Here a time component is meant. Alternatively – and probably more seriously – you also hear, “I don’t know how we’re going to do that,” or “We’re never going to get that done.” The “we” makes it more difficult for you to talk with a single person. Ask: “Who are “we”?” If the employee talks in the first person, ask whether they’re aware of how much work is involved, and if they know what can be left out, and make it clear that they don’t have to work on this “impossible” goal alone.

### **“I don’t have the skills to do that”**

This is good news, since skills are trainable. Willingness, on the other hand, isn’t trainable. Anyone who brings skills into play is basically prepared to apply themselves. This is the simplest scenario, because you can ask your employee what they need in order to acquire the (allegedly) necessary skills as quickly as possible. If you realize together that perhaps the skills aren’t there today, but tomorrow they definitely will be, things will be easier.

The common killer phrases such as: “We’ve never done it like that before,” “That won’t work,” “That can’t work” etc. aren’t answers to your question: “What exactly do you mean by ‘impossible?’” So here you can simply repeat your original question.

Calling something “impossible” is often a reflex, because your employees see more work coming their way. In addition to that, there is the subconscious assumption that you might think that they don’t have enough work and have endless spare capacity. Even if that’s the case, you are well advised to come to that conclusion together with your employees and not to confront them with it. All in good time.

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