

Competing On Ideas Takes Way More Work Than Competing on Work

Being an “ideas person” at a small company is exhausting.

I can't tell you how many hours I've spent talking or arguing about *ideas* for improving a product or a process. In my job (running a marketing department), it's unfortunately something which most people **seem** to value highly.

It's tempting to go down the route of being that ideas person. It's a way to get your voice heard. Our society rewards ideas, so do our companies. We like the quick gratification of **knowing** how to solve something.

Of course, that is just the problem with ideas. They provide quick gratification. They do not provide a solution. As Gary Vaynerchuk is fond of pointing out, ideas are shit, and execution is everything (warning: some profanity/vulgarity ahead):

Solutions take work and time that largely happens behind the scenes for everyone else. Actual work is by nature private until it's done. And that puts doers in a situation that can sometimes be precarious.

While you're out there doing shit with limited time, personnel, and resources, you're a sitting duck for every Joe who has an idea.

There are hundreds of entrepreneurs, journalists, news commentators, and Facebook commenters who think they know better than you how to do your job. You have dozens of coworkers who may think they know your problem-focus area better than you. Lots of external firms and salespeople and advisors and senior executives have ideas about how you should run your business.

And let's be fair: none of these people have time to distinguish signal (real work) from noise (good ideas that haven't happened yet). So if noise is all they have to go on, they're either going to want you to be noisier, or they're going to want a noisier person in your role.

This isn't good for you or your company. So what's the solution?

If you know you need to execute, execute, execute, spending time competing to become the best and noisiest “ideas person” won't work. There is no time.

Especially if you're a young employee, you simply won't have as many ideas as all of the

older, more experienced, more-taken-seriously people who will inevitably comment to your managers about what you should be doing differently.

If you're actually a productive employee, you also won't be nearly as vocal with your ideas as people who aren't working in your focus area. They can afford to nitpick and plan about the very things you've already been working on for months. Will you turn aside to defend yourself?

You must give up on trying to beat them with more ideas. Idea arms races just escalate and eat up time and build up backlogs, timelines, and lists.

As counterintuitive as it seems, competing on ideas actually takes way more work than competing on the oh-so-valuable skill of just getting shit done.

"Idea people" frequently share ideas first, maybe months before actual implementation. You, on the other hand, have a golden opportunity to give actual weight to your ideas. Do the work first, then share. It's far more powerful to present a finished project or prototype or improvement than to write down some ideas about them.

This is playing the long game. Ideas may get attention and praise in the short term, but doing will get you trust and progress that lasts.

So ignore the ideas people (well, listen to their ideas, but ignore your temptation to "beat" them), even when it's tempting to enter the fray of another conversation about "what we should do." Think about the few good ideas that will have the biggest effect. Prioritize them. And to the extent possible, make them happen – and ask questions/feedback later.

Whatever you do, don't try to earn glory for an idea which someone else will have to implement, or which you haven't started the work on. I've been guilty of that too many times, and it's made me less effective as someone who gets shit done.

But for all of my deviations from my own standard, I can't think of too many cases in which I **have** delivered results that ideas have beaten out the actual work I've accomplished. If you're intimidated by the notion of talking less and working more, just pay attention. You'll learn, like I have, that competing on work is way easier than "competing on ideas."