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## The business of playing devil's advocate

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A devil's advocate is commonly defined as someone who argues against a cause or position, not as a committed opponent but simply for the sake of argument or to determine the validity of the cause. Business legend, Warren Buffett, recently demonstrated that even the most successful of us benefit from having our ideas challenged.

At Berkshire Hathaway's annual meeting in May, Buffett encouraged investor and businessman Douglas Kass

to ask him difficult questions in order "to spice things up", as he later wrote<sup>1</sup>. The exercise helped in raising some interesting issues about a respected company few are game to question nowadays.

Granted, neither you nor your staff is likely to possess either the old-school modesty or eye-watering wealth of Buffett, but by creating an environment where a devil's advocate is free to shoot down bad ideas and improve so-so ones, you may just end up emulating the Oracle of Omaha's success. Here's how to do it.

### Get into the habit of playing devil's advocate with yourself

Instead of giving into the temptation to only focus on the potential upside of any new business idea that comes to you during a light-bulb moment, write down all the pros and cons and make sure to spend as much time considering the latter as the former.

How much is implementing your seemingly brilliant idea going to cost in terms of time, effort and money? Is there really a market for what you're trying to sell? Will you have to take on dangerous levels of debt to pursue your idea? What are all the other initiatives that will be consigned to the back burner if this one is pursued? Does pursuing the idea involve venturing into a legal or ethical grey area? How will the reputation of your business be affected if the whole thing is a colossal failure?

### Encourage your staff to play devil's advocate with you

It's a natural human impulse for people to praise the ideas of those above themselves in the hierarchy and, let's face it, for the person at the apex of the organisational chart to lap up that abundant positive feedback. But smart operators realise that allowing those around them to become 'yes' men (and women) is the quickest way to start pursuing ill-considered business strategies. Make it clear to your staff that the way they will impress you and advance their career is by picking holes in your arguments, rather than acting like cheerleaders.

### Encourage everyone in the organisation to play devil's advocate

Granted, this can be complicated, especially if it degenerates into office rivals mercilessly tearing each other's proposals apart under the guise of "providing constructive feedback". Nevertheless, few business ideas emerge perfectly formed, so you need to create a culture where everyone's ideas - including your own - are tossed around robustly and others are encouraged to add value by suggesting improvements.

Recognising the wisdom of playing devil's advocate is a lot easier than actually going through the discomfort of either having your own cherished ideas criticised or nitpicking those of colleagues. Despite this, if a business is to prosper in the long-term it needs staff brave enough to play the wet blanket when required.

### Sources:

<sup>1</sup>[www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-05-01/buffett-bear-adds-spice-to-meeting-as-rally-lulls-shareholders.html](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-05-01/buffett-bear-adds-spice-to-meeting-as-rally-lulls-shareholders.html)

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