You’ve come up with a way to improve services to your patrons in your organization, or maybe you’ve found a more efficient way to tackle new technology. Great—but how do you gather support and buy-in from both those within and outside of your organization? Our Reference Desk columnists offer their advice.

I’ve recently come up with a way for my team to greatly improve services we provide to our patrons, but I’m running into obstacles in bringing my vision to life. While most of my colleagues are on board, not everyone is. I’ve been approved to try it out; however, the budget I’ve been given isn’t quite what I’d hoped it would be. I also don’t have the complete buy-in from other departments outside of the library, and their support would make things a lot easier. What should I do?
Maribel: Congratulations on getting approval to try your new idea! Though you’ve not been given the budget that you might have wanted, I hope that you realize the win you’ve achieved by getting the powers that be to trust you enough to give your idea a shot. Now all you need is to have a successful trial run!

We’re not sure what your idea is, but do you know why people aren’t on board? Is it a matter of staff time, money, or both? Is there a general reluctance to try something new or to learn something new?

If possible, be creative and start with a low-budget or low-tech version of your idea and build from there. If you lack necessary technical expertise, learn or figure out how to do it yourself, or find assistance from your colleagues or an outside source.

Find out who on your team is supportive of your idea and start from there. Other departments (for example, IT, Marketing, or Facilities) may not be completely on board at an institutional level, but are there friendly individuals in those departments that you might be able to ask for a favor?

In a recent Private Law Librarians & Information Professionals Special Interest Section (PLLIP-SIS) webinar, Martin Korn, director of research knowledge services at Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP, suggested finding people who are not necessarily on your staff who have skills you need, and bringing them on board. Asking them for a favor could be considered flattering, and paying them a compliment by asking them for something goes a long way. Building key relationships now could be a great start for getting not only this project, but future ideas, off the ground.

After a reasonable amount of time, I would encourage you to honestly assess how it is going. Often, the biggest obstacle to progress is the inability to let go of an idea that doesn’t work. Ask yourself: Were services actually improved? How do you know? (Try to have a pre-defined metric for determining this.) Have you won any staff or outside departments over? Are more people willing to assist going forward? If your innovation is as successful as we hope it will be, you’ll have won the buy-in from all of your stakeholders to continue on. Good luck!

Dolly: With a more modest budget and a team that is not fully on board, I encourage you to revisit your initial plan and consider if you can roll out your improvement gradually. Some programs can be initiated in one department, then moved to the rest of the library if the results speak for themselves. With regular assessments, you can determine if the project is working as you hoped, and if your assessments honestly show that the improvement isn’t giving you the results you wanted, you can work on tweaks to make it better. The scaled-down version, while not your initial goal, will give you something to start with, especially if you can start it in a department with people who are excited to try your new project.

In building a new project, as in warfare, you’re often working on multiple fronts. Getting that outside buy-in is important—what can you do to sell those outside the library on the project, as well? I would encourage you in these strategy-building initial few months to take your time figuring out how to sell the project, and to sell it well. Since you mentioned that the project is designed to improve services to users, hopefully that is a goal that everyone in your organization—whether in or outside the library—can relate to and prioritize.

Some people are always going to be wary of change, but as Maribel suggested, if you can narrow down some of the reasons for your internal colleagues’ concerns, you can build into your plans ways to alleviate their issues and build a more cohesive team going forward. Getting other people as excited for the project as you are, and then demonstrating it works the way you intended it to, will be key to long-term success for your new initiative.

Scott: Speaking as the resident voice of academia, I think it’s fair to say that law schools have not traditionally been hotbeds of change or innovation.
Institutional resistance to change may be frustratingly common, but understanding where and why this resistance originates can go a long way toward helping you find ways to effectively communicate your message and overcome obstacles.

To do that, it’s important to recognize that change is closely associated with risk, and that risk in general is something that most organizations are hard-wired to avoid. Institutional culture, the size of your organization, and the presence of visionary leaders in key positions can all help overcome the inertia of risk-avoidance, but it is ultimately up to you to present your innovation in a way that will either minimize the perceived risk, or, even better, to show why the real risk lies in not implementing your idea. To do that, a clear vision of your idea and the ability to answer questions will be crucial. Organization and planning go a long way to allay fears over perceived risk.

To give your innovative idea the best chance of finding a receptive audience, create a statement highlighting the benefits of your idea and any costs associated with its implementation. Importantly, you should also take time to highlight the opportunity cost of a failure to implement your idea. Have your processes become stagnant? Is there a foreseeable obsolescence of some equipment or software that your innovation will help mitigate? This doesn’t have to come off like you’re strong-arming anyone (e.g., “Pretty little ILS you’ve got there. It sure would be a shame if anything happened to it.”), but it may be that not everyone has fully considered the relative risk of not innovating. When crafting your pitch, be sure to include a detailed statement that includes what you are attempting to accomplish, a description of your innovation implementation process, any resources that you will need to be successful, and how your innovation will affect various stakeholders in your organization.

Those who are either in charge or personally invested in the status quo will always be resistant to change. If you allow for that from the earliest stages of your push to implement change, you will be better situated to deal with resistance when it comes. You have your job for a reason, and part of that includes some measure of trust in your judgment. Show everyone involved that their trust is well-placed by telling a story that ends in a positive return on investment.

After that, you just need the thing to actually work … Good luck!