



What To Do When Someone Steals Your Idea

THE GOAL ISN'T JUST TO REGAIN CREDIT FOR YOUR IDEA, BUT TO GATHER SUPPORT FOR IT THAT LEADS TO ACTION.

BY ANETT GRANT

You show up to your Monday-morning meeting with an idea you've been waiting all weekend to share. It's your turn. You lay it on the table—and hear crickets. Your colleagues politely nod, then move on. You spend the next few minutes in dejected silence until one of your coworkers speaks up, rephrasing your own idea in a new way. And all of a sudden, that becomes the focus of discussion, with your colleague at the center of it.

You've become the victim of an ideajacking, one of the most common communication crimes. What do you do? Do you just sit there in enraged silence? Do you speak up? Here are three steps you can take to move ahead with both tact and impact.

1. STAY CALM

When someone steals your idea, it's natural to get upset. How could your colleagues do that? It's frustrating to watch someone get credit for something you came up with. Worse, you can miss out on the sorts of leadership roles that help push your career forward if others get to take the lead on the ideas you generate. You might feel compelled to blurt out, "I just said that a few minutes ago! Doesn't anybody listen to me?"

Bite your tongue. You might be right, but it doesn't help to get confrontational. You want to influence your team members, not alienate them. Plus, the person who stole your idea might have done so unconsciously—give them the benefit of the doubt. The main thing is to establish self-control and get your bearings back.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR COLLEAGUE'S CONTRIBUTION

Your second priority is to make sure you don't get left behind. Jump back into the discussion by immediately acknowledging what your ideajacker has just said and stating why you agree. You could briefly reference how you brought up the idea earlier, but make sure it doesn't sound passive aggressive. In fact, your tone should be collaborative and upbeat. Here's how something like this might go:

You: "I think we should stop placing print advertisements and focus on digital."

You hear some mixed reactions, then your team wanders off to a different topic. Then, a colleague says, "Print ads are just too expensive. Let's save the money and go digital-only."

Your team agrees. As soon as possible, jump in with something like, “I agree! As I mentioned earlier, going digital is a great option based on the last quarter’s data. I have some ideas for how we can leverage our digital channels more effectively.”

Now you’re reclaiming your idea and leading the discussion forward smoothly. More important still, you’re staking your territory for executing the idea you came up with in the first place, rather than letting others run ahead with it without you.

3. EXPAND ON THE INITIAL IDEA

Finally, you need to champion your idea by taking it even further. Show the depth of your thinking by expanding on what you said, adding more insight and analysis. Here’s how you could continue the above example:

“I have some ideas for how we can leverage our digital channels a little more effectively. With the money we save from cutting back print ads, we’ll be able to significantly increase our reach on social media.”

Make sure you articulate your points with precision and relevance. Make your idea compelling by mentioning relevant data points that support your argument. By adding more dimension, your idea becomes more than just an idea—it starts to emerge as a viable strategy. And in the process, you can make people forget that the ideajacking ever occurred. Remember, the goal isn’t just to reestablish ownership over your idea, but to gain support for it that leads to action.

Like it or not, having your idea stolen is a pretty common occurrence. It can take you by surprise, but by staying calm, acknowledging your colleague, and expanding on the idea, you can regain credit, control, and support for what you want to accomplish—all without losing face.