



Subduing the Obstinate Executive



Have you ever had a boss that simply wants to stand in your way? They [avoid making even the smallest decision](#), never providing enough information to understand their objections. It is more common than most of us would imagine. In fact, this behavior is the central to every sales interaction. Even though you may be repulsed at thinking of yourself as "selling" to your boss, that is exactly what is required with any idea you are pushing. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to employ the same techniques used to sell large systems. If you think this is rubbish, as one of my esteemed readers once eloquently said, I will posit that you are already using sales techniques, just the wrong ones—the ones car dealers use. Changing this approach will subdue your unruly boss

The Answer Is Questions

Normally, when asking your boss to make a [decision](#), you present him or her with a list of benefits and then you ask for a decision. This is identical to the methods of the car lot's stereotypical slimy salesperson. They list numerous features (whether they are important to you or not) and ask for the close—"Would you like me to draw up the paperwork so you can drive it home today?" That technique might work if you were buying a multifunction calculator or some new inexpensive widget for your computer, but it falls woefully short in higher stakes [decisions](#) where money, reputation, or both are on the line. Instead, decision makers want to understand the value based on the key benefits to them. In the case of the car, what might be a cool feature to the sales person (a remote control rear window sunshade), may be useless to the buyer. On the other hand, additional backseat legroom may be critical for comfortably transporting clients to lunch. A salesperson will have a much easier time selling the latter.

The simple solution is to [ask your boss](#) what is important to him or her. For these questions to be successful, they must be the right type of questions. Author

[Neil Rackhams'](#)
[research](#)

shows that when selling any "big" items, four types of questions must be asked—situation, problem, implication, and needs-payoff. These conveniently condense to the salesy term SPIN questions.

Situation Questions

The first level of questioning is situational. These questions determine the authority of the person to make the [decision](#), who is involved with the [decision](#), and so forth. These are the most basic of questions, and seem too inconsequential to focus on. Although they appear to be trivial and may be annoying to answer, they have an insightful impact on the outcome of the decision. Questions in this category are similar to ones that determine whether there is a preference on make/buy or in-house or outsourcing. Assuming their answers can have a profound negative effect on the decision maker's reception to your proposal. Many of us have been in the embarrassing situation where suddenly the option of buying a COTS (common off the self) solution was the unspoken preference.

Problem Questions

Problems are in the eye of the beholder. Even though you and your boss work for the same company, each of you [may identify](#) problems [very different](#). *Problem questions* elicit your boss' view of what is important. Your view of the problems is irrelevant when

[justifying his or her decision](#)

. To find out the decision maker's view, ask questions about specific problems and their weight on the organization. Always add the question "Are there any other big problems?" Knowing there is a problem is not enough, executives must have an explicit need for a solution. The following two sets of questions determine the

explicit

need based on these

implicit

problems.

Implication Questions

When describing problems we are intimate with, we tend to think that everyone understands the gravity of them. It is obvious to us since we have worked with them so long. We need to layout questions that will guide others down a path of discovery so they may internalize the problems' scope. As the name implies, *implication questions* drill into the ramifications of the problems. They help the decision-maker comprehend the problem's consequences. For

instance, if you are trying to resolve a problem with untimely production throughput reports, then implication questions could be address whether late or inaccurate reports cause:

- Starting the wrong material.
- Scheduling inappropriate overtime resulting in increased costs.
- Sending people home early detrimentally reducing production throughput.
- Missing customer deliveries.
- Failing to identify quality issues in time to minimize rework.
- Shipping defective product.

It is not the problems, rather the implications that arise from those issues that creates the call to arms. These questions help the listener understand the breadth of the problem and sets you up for the final set of questions—the needs-payoff questions.

Needs-Payoff Questions

The structure of *needs-payoff questions* shows the listener the need for your solution and the payoff. These questions, as opposed to the earlier questions (which are negative by the fact they are exploiting problems), are termed in a positive tone. Instead of saying that an implied problem is costing a certain amount, the questions take on a positive form focusing on how much they would save if an explicit problem is resolved. For instance, "Eliminating the accidental scheduling of overtime would save you how much money?" and "How much would you save in rework costs if you could catch issues a few hours earlier?" These questions provide the final piece of data that you and your decision maker need—the cost justification. If the cost savings outweigh the cost of implementing the solution, the decision becomes much easier.

Obliterating Objections

The sequence of questions has two significant benefits: 1) the cost benefits come from the decision maker, it will be difficult for them to object to the reasoning, and 2) the conversation ends on a positive assessment of the solution that directly addresses the decision maker's explicit problems.



Will some still object? Of course. In fact, some will realize that you are trying to corner them and will stop answering questions. You may need to resort to asking the questions over weeks in casual conversation and keeping meticulous notes. In the end, you will have an extremely convincing case for supporting a [fact-based decision](#) .

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