

How to sell an idea to your boss



No matter one's position at a company, everyone can have great ideas about ways to make things better at work. What most people don't expect, however, is the unexpected pushback they encounter from middle managers, executives, or other stakeholders. For these decision-makers, the desire to keep things under control can sometimes get in the way of perfectly good, valid suggestions from underlings.

Persuading a boss to your way of thinking is a teachable skill, but there are a few things anyone can do to strengthen their case. Let's talk about how to sell innovative ideas to your boss.

Build trust with results

Some ideas are good enough on their own to convince managers to try them out, but most pitches are heard best from employees with credibility. This means doing your job, and doing it well.

It's simple: employees who consistently deliver timely, high-quality work have more credibility than slackers. Is this a logical way to approach adopting a new suggestion? Not necessarily. Slackers often have great ideas, and can actually get a lot of work done with minimal effort, but their reputation as a barnacle of the bottom line can get in the way of their ideas.

Workplaces operate on meritocracy—those who appear the most effective get the best treatment. Therefore, the best way to sell an idea is to look like an effective employee.

However, this isn't always enough.

Have a pitch deck

The smartest person in the world could have the most brilliant idea and people would still be hesitant to try new things. This is especially true if it involves weighing pros and cons. So, do the thinking for them.

Create a presentation for your idea to strengthen its veracity as a business case. For example, if you want a drinking fountain installed in the break room, strengthen your case by showing how much time and energy it would give back to your employees' workflows, and translate that into a dollar amount.

Some research would be nice, too. Is there a new market your company should explore? Show your boss how well your big idea could pay off using statistics and data that prove your point. Whether your idea is a major shift or a no-brainer, people like facts. Ideas without immediate, realistic backing are easy to write off.

Address the opposition in advance

Persuasion is an art that has been studied since way back in ancient Rome, when it was called "rhetoric." The classical rhetoricians established a few best practices for getting people on board with their own ideas.

One critical rhetorical strategy is to fully and honestly understand your opposition's point of view and take it into account. Nothing derails a pitch like a surprise objection, so do your homework to address in advance the disagreements to your idea.

But what about objections no one can answer? For example, what if your boss wants to know how well an idea will be adopted by team members? Until you learn to predict the future, questions like these can seem insurmountable.

Have no fear, though. Here are three ways to answer "unanswerable" questions in your elevator pitch (thanks academia):

1. **I don't know.** Going back to the water fountain example, you might be asked about the logistics surrounding new plumbing, water pressure, cleanliness, and all kinds of other tangents that have nothing to do with your area of expertise. In these cases, "I don't know" simply means someone other than you has the answer, just not you yourself.
2. **I shouldn't know.** Asked about whether or not the costs of a water fountain can be offset with tax credits? That sounds like a question for an accountant. Some people use overly complex, specialized questions as a way to object to an idea, so establishing scope can be a way to dodge an objection without rolling over.
3. **One couldn't know.** Some questions don't have answers. If you are asked one of those questions, it's not your job to immediately have a solution. This is in direct opposition to the cliché that one, "shouldn't criticize something if they can't offer a solution," because, frankly, that's bad advice.

Have a coalition



Is everyone at work asking for the same thing? Put your minds and might together to ask your boss together (in solidarity, that is—not in person).

Persuasion with a majority is tough to say no to, but be gentle. Just because a lot of people think the same thing doesn't mean other views are less relevant. In fact, some bosses see ideas from underlings as threatening, so start small.

It's also a good idea to present ideas to coworkers who don't share your views to see where problems may lie. Not only will this strengthen your case against possible objections, but it will also force you to distill the idea and work out kinks.

Make sure it's simple

Businesses operate to generate profit. Everything that requires action costs some amount of money, and that means ideas that sound easy to achieve are far more likely to be adopted than ones with complicated steps.

For example, if you think your company should rent a booth at an upcoming trade convention, map out the steps required so your boss only has to sign the check, rather than form a team to handle all the details. The more work you can do on your end, the easier time your boss will have saying yes.

Don't *oversimplify*, by the way. This is a bad idea that could not only hurt your reputation, but also get you in trouble. If there are bumps in the road, it's better to raise them upfront and brace for impact rather than pretend they don't exist. Remember Theranos? CEO Elizabeth Holmes had oversimplified Theranos' challenges for so long that by the time she was held to account, there was no way to recover. Rather than being remembered with the great innovators, she's in jail now.

Basically, do your homework

Like anything, the best way to guarantee results is to remove the guesswork. This takes planning and rehearsal. This may seem like overkill for simple ideas, but it isn't. Understanding others' objections and responding to

them will strengthen your idea and make it much easier to obtain buy-in from bosses and other decision-makers.

The less confusion there is in the proposition, the easier it is to say yes. Answer questions, convey optimism, and prove how popular the idea already is. Good luck!