

## How Can I Get the Boss to Listen?

One often hears safety practitioners complaining that the boss just doesn't seem to listen.

But maybe it's NOT really that the boss doesn't WANT to listen or isn't interested. Maybe it's HOW we approach the boss with our ideas and proposals; maybe we just haven't caught their attention from the right angle.

Here are some **quick tips** to prepare for approaching the boss to help you get them to listen:

### What's In It for the Boss?

What would make this idea or proposal useful or interesting to the boss? If we can tap into a key outcome the boss wants, and link it to what we need, we're much more likely to get their interest and support. It has to make sense to them first.

### Whose 'Monkey' Is It?

Who is the right person to ask? Are there other people we should go to first? Before taking a problem scenario or proposal to the boss, make sure we have considered all options available. Is this an issue we could handle ourselves? Is it a decision WE could make? Many times, the answer is already in our own hands and we haven't recognised it.

### Get to the Point

How much information is enough, and how much is too much? It's often tricky to get the balance just right. Generally it is best to anticipate the likely issues, key points and crucial questions, and have those answers ready in the background. But resist the temptation to flood the boss with all the details – if we overwhelm a person, we will lose their attention. Present only the critical elements (i.e., key points), then give further details only as required. Allow for them to ask some questions and be ready with answers. This will help to focus their attention as well as engaging them in the discussion.

### How Do We Get The Message Across?

WHAT we have to say is important. Equally important is HOW we go about saying it. If we really want to get through, we'll have to adapt to the boss' way of doing things. Some key considerations:

- **Avoid jargon** – words that mean something to us if we are working closely in one arena may sound like a foreign language to the boss (or other staff). Use plain everyday language wherever possible to keep the message clear and simple.
- **Focus on points of reference** the boss is comfortable with and use **relevant terminology**– eg, profit, return on investment, depreciation, KPIs, etc.
- Keep comments **clear, specific and to the point**. The boss' time is at a premium. Waffling will come across ill-prepared and we'll lose credibility.
- Do enough **analysis** to support our case – e.g., use a graph to illustrate trends or results instead of presenting a list of figures. If the boss has to put in a lot of effort to figure out what it all means, it might just be easier to tell you NO than to take time to think it through. Increase our chances by thinking it through for him/her in advance and presenting a compelling case.
- Use **diagrams and props** to convey key points – “a picture is worth a thousand words”. When trying to communicate with a busy person, we need all the advantages we can get.

### ***Do Some Homework***

Always support the case with facts and logical arguments. Ask the 6 key questions – WHO / WHAT / WHY / WHEN / WHERE / HOW –then look at “WHAT IF” and “WHAT ELSE”. This will cover the most likely angles, giving us confidence to present our case credibly, and answers will be ready when the boss asks.

When considering the implications of the proposal, determine what will it cost – not just in rupee terms, but every resource required – i.e., manpower / time, systems, equipment, etc. Also consider the angle of what it will cost if we **DON'T** do it – for some bosses, this may be an even more convincing argument!

Even though we have prepared questions and answers, take note of the above advice regarding the amount of information and appropriate level of detail you deliver first up.

### ***Timing is Everything***

Does it matter when you try to approach the boss? When is the right moment? It helps to plan and carefully pick the right moment. Consider these important factors when approaching the boss:

- Where is the best place to discuss it? If it is in the boss' office, the boss may feel more comfortable, but we may feel ill at ease. If there's something we need to show the boss to support our case, find a way to get the boss there. A neutral room or office may be helpful, as long as we have adequate privacy and freedom from

interruptions. Maybe it's even appropriate to start a discussion casually over coffee – we need to figure out the best circumstances to pave the way.

- What else might be on the boss' mind? If preoccupied with month-end deadlines or a product recall, for example, we are unlikely to get a fair hearing. Wait for a quieter moment when the boss will find it easier to concentrate. By contrast, a business crisis may support our case, and we may be seen as a 'Johnny-on-the-spot' if we are ready with suggestions and solutions. There isn't any magic formula here, unfortunately; assess the dynamics and try to find the most suitable time to broach the subject.

### ***You Can't Always Get What You Want***

Don't make the mistake of pre-supposing what the boss' attitude is likely to be. Many people shoot their own argument in the foot by assuming in advance what the boss will or won't do. The worst the boss can do is say no, but they never have an opportunity to say yes if we don't ask them! Think it through and make sure it's reasonable, then just **ASK!**

We can't control the other person, and we can't control other circumstances. But we do have a choice about our own attitudes, and we can adapt our own approach. If the boss says no, make sure to check the reasons why. If still convinced about the proposal, go back and re-think the argument, get more information, address the boss' concerns and objections, and give it another go. Sometimes when the boss says "NO", it just means "***I don't have enough information to enable me to say "YES" at this point***". If it's important, don't give up too easily.

With a bit of forethought and careful preparation, we can do a lot to pave the way toward effective communication with the boss. By showing up well-prepared and meeting the boss on his terms, we gain his/her confidence, develop credibility within the organization, and increase our chances of getting support.

The key is really in our own hands.

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