

When Your Boss's Favorite Word Is 'No'

You have great ideas. Your manager never seems to agree. It's time to shift tactics.



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Nope. No way. Nah. Nice try.

Doing our jobs means securing permission—to launch that new strategy, collaborate with another department, take a vacation.

That's a problem when the boss's default response is: Eh, no.

"It was stalling my career," says Kerry Flynn Barrett, a human resources consultant who once had a boss who batted down her efforts to take on bigger projects and more responsibility.

It wasn't until a more open manager took over the group that Flynn Barrett was able to rise. In retrospect, she wonders if she could have swayed the original boss by using more data to back up her proposals, or making her ask over lunch and warm conversation.

From childhood to our work lives, we hate hearing "no." We take rejections too personally or seriously, interpreting them as slights or the end of our career. Frustrated, we retreat to our desks to fume in silence or, worse, tell off the boss in an impassioned speech that feels great in the moment and wretched shortly thereafter.

Much of the time, we're focused on the wrong culprit, says William Ury, co-founder of Harvard University's negotiation program.

"The single biggest obstacle to us getting what we want, it's not the difficult person," says Ury, whose coming book, "Possible," examines bringing people together amid conflict. "It's ourselves."

After hearing a no, show empathy and curiosity rather than irritation, he says. Zoom out, imagining you and your boss are actors in a play.

Then respond with "I understand." And ask a "what if?" question, for example: What if we tried it next quarter instead? What if we got marketing to lay the groundwork with the client?

To figure out what's really holding back your boss, try "Why not?" (Tone matters here: You want to sound inquisitive, not aggressive, Ury says.) The phrase activates the critical part of the brain, unleashing what's actually bothering the boss—and giving you clues on how to remedy that.



Why they are stuck on 'No'

Maybe your manager is inherently pessimistic, or knows more about the company's current budget than you do. Maybe she's worried you will outshine her, or that her own manager will recoil at the ask. Maybe she's just tired.

Make it easy on your manager and split your proposal into two phases, says Tom Krouse, chief executive of Donatos Pizza, a 461-location chain based in Columbus, Ohio. The first should be a yes-no question that is almost impossible to reject. Keep it broad, not prescriptive, and tie it to a wider company goal or problem.

That's how Krouse's operations and innovation team played it last year when they approached him about the company's labor challenges. Wage costs were rising, and workers didn't want to do some pizza-making tasks. The team didn't propose a specific solution, but wanted his acknowledgment that something needed to be done.

"I can't argue with that," Krouse says.

He would have initially bristled at adding automation to his restaurants, he says, worried it would damage the company's human touch. But by the time the team returned months later to demonstrate a machine that sauced a pizza in seven seconds, he was open to it.

The slower approach "kept me from making an emotional decision," Krouse says.



The meeting before the meeting

Before putting your boss on the spot during a big meeting, bring them into the fold with an "idea résumé"—a one-page document that includes evidence underpinning your idea and a sense of who it will impact—says Peter Mulford, chief innovation officer at strategy consulting firm BTS. Present it to your boss as a first draft.

"What would have to be true for you to really get excited about this?" Mulford suggests asking after delivering the memo.

Then, set checkpoints. If the boss needs to be convinced there is demand for a venture you're proposing, request \$5,000 to have a marketing firm estimate the customer base, rather than asking for \$300,000 upfront to fund the new product.

Your boss will feel less like you're trying to coerce him and more like you're trying to uncover the truth, with the company's best interests at heart, Mulford says.



Become the one to trust

Establish yourself as the resident expert before making your pitch, says Michael Quinn, CEO of Minor Nobles, a firm that trains corporate workers on pitching and presenting. Send a trickle of links and tidbits around artificial intelligence for weeks, and by the time you're ready to debut your brilliant AI idea, you'll be trusted.

Or ask yourself, "Who does the boss trust?" Presell the idea to that person, Quinn says, incorporating the feedback into your final proposal. When the boss looks to her confidant for guidance, you'll already have that person's support. Make clear to the adviser that you aren't going behind the boss's back, you're seeking some initial advice.

Amy Gallo, the author of "Getting Along," a book about difficult colleagues, once had a boss who said a knee-jerk no to great ideas, only to put them into action herself a few weeks later. Annoyed at first, Gallo and her colleagues eventually realized: Hey, at least our ideas are getting done.

Now, Gallo recommends using "we" instead of "I" when introducing ideas to an insecure boss. And don't assume some initial negativity is the end of the conversation.

"No," she says, "isn't always no, period."

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