

#14: How to Defuse Opposition



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kathy Dockry

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You are listening to Episode 14 of *Mastering The Power Skills*. Sometimes no matter how persuasive we are in advocating for our ideas, the obstacles to getting other people to accept those ideas can still seem daunting. And those obstacles sometimes appear to be entirely outside our control. But in fact, there still may be some things you can do to get your foot in the door. Join me in this episode to get some ideas as to how you can salvage things when you start to get strong opposition.

How much more could you accomplish if you were 25% or even 50% more influential and persuasive? Welcome to *Mastering The Power Skills*, the podcast that provides you with the tips, strategies, and the inspiration to grow your own power and win support for your ideas. And now here's your host, C-suite leadership coach Kathy Dockry.

Hi everyone, this week we're going to talk about the power skill of persuasion, the skill that we use to have our ideas taken seriously. When I first started to work on strengthening my persuasive skills I did what a lot of us do, I considered who I needed to line up ahead of time. And I also considered what I was going to say in my formal pitch for my idea, whether that was going to simply be a conversation with my boss, or a formal presentation to the management team.

However, sometimes no matter how good we are in lining things up and making a logical and even compelling argument, we strike out. We realize there are obstacles in the way of getting acceptance for our idea, no matter how persuasive we are. And there can be a variety of reasons for that opposition.

Perhaps it's the economic climate and the unwillingness of management to take on additional costs, even if there's a high return on investment for that cost. Perhaps it's a culture, it's the resistance to change and the discomfort that goes along with that.

Or perhaps it's territorial, with one department of the company opposing any ideas that they don't generate. And perhaps it's simply politics, those

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complex and sometimes dysfunctional inter dynamics that happen when you have a lot of competitive alphas working together.

In other words, stuff happens. And because stuff happens I began to realize that if I really wanted to get good at persuasion, I needed to be thinking ahead of time about what I would do if I started to strike out.

In other words, I needed to be developing a fallback plan before I made my pitch. That way, if I didn't get a complete win on the terms that I wanted, I still might get my foot in the door. And if I could get my foot in the door, I then could prove the value of my idea, and build the case for expanding on it in the future.

So today, we're going to be talking about just that, how just as the door appears to be closing right in your face, you can suddenly turn things around. We'll be exploring some ideas as to how you can salvage things when you start to get some strong opposition.

So first, I'm going to provide you with a strategy. And then I'm going to identify some common reasons that people give for opposing your idea. And I'll share with you some ways you can counter those objections. So let's start first, with the strategy.

When we're pitching a good idea, we often don't limit ourselves by offering a watered down version of that idea, right? We understand the value of what we're suggesting and we tend to make our strongest case. And that makes sense, right? We don't want to dilute our argument.

But if we look at the idea from the point of view of decision makers, it's a lot easier for them to agree to an experiment, like the opportunity to test things out with a small step, before making a bigger commitment. So before you start your campaign to convince someone of something, spend some time thinking up options for a small start, versus a complete win.

Now, of course, you don't have to lead with that small start. It's always nice to try to get that big win. But if you have various fallback options in your

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back pocket, you'll be prepared to pull them out promptly when you need to.

So what types of experiments can you suggest? Well first, you can consider asking for approval to try your idea out in a segment of the company, such as a particular department or a particular division. To execute this well, you'll want to line up ahead of time an ambitious leader who wants to prove his or her value.

Then during your formal pitch, if you feel you need to use your fallback plan, you can say something like this, "Cheryl was intrigued with this idea and is willing to give it a try. Why don't we test it out in her organization to see if it delivers the results we want? We can then decide if it makes sense to expand it further throughout the company."

Another small step you can take is to take a segment of your idea. And what does that look like? Well, let's say your idea includes investing in a new head or a new technology, could you first start with a temporary resource, perhaps a contractor? Or the loan of the head from another department? Or from one of the outside firms you work with?

Or might you start with a short term lease of the technology versus buying it? Or perhaps you're advocating for a large initiative, could you divided into phases and then suggest that phase one be implemented and tested before the later phases of the initiative are approved?

Finally, another fallback option is to suggest that your idea be tried out for a limited period of time before any decision is taken to make a permanent change. For example, I currently have a client who wants to advocate for improvements in the process of preparing for and participating in board meetings.

As you can imagine, there are a lot of people with opinions as to that, both on the board and on the management team. And getting them all to agree on a permanent change has proven to be difficult. So instead, she's gotten approval to do her recommended changes as a trial for the next two

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meetings. After that, everyone is going to assess whether the improvements are working well or not.

So as you think about it, you can see why the strategy of suggesting an experiment can eventually win the day for you, despite the fact that it may initially slow down your ability to get a complete and total win. Decision makers see experiments is less risky and they also liked the fact that they get a chance to assess the success of the experiment after it occurs. It makes them feel more engaged and more committed. And that, in turn, increases your chance of a total win over time.

So in addition to having a fallback strategy, another way to defuse opposition is to be prepared for the common objections you might hear when advocating for a new idea or initiative. Now, you can't anticipate all objections, of course, but there are a few that we hear over and over again during our careers. And there's no reason why we can't start developing some good responses ahead of time.

So let's review some of those common objections now and I'll give you some suggestions about how to respond. So perhaps the most frequent objection we get to our ideas tends to be their expense. Funding is a competitive process in most organizations, and the demand for funding generally outweighs the amount available to everyone.

So now, clearly, if cost is a factor in implementing your idea, you'll already have done your homework as to whether the amount involved is appropriate and in line with the market. But sometimes the nature of the objection that you get is that cost of any amount should not be incurred.

Now, sometimes that's for very understandable business reasons. And other times it's simply a knee jerk response or reaction. And that's particularly the case if the recommended expense is coming from a perceived cost center, such as a support function.

So whatever the reason for expense related push-back, your strongest response is to establish that the proposed cost is really an investment, not

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an expense. In fact, be very explicit in making this point. If you can even roughly quantify the possible cost savings over time of your proposal, or the competitive edge gained by approving your idea, you have a very good shot at countering the cost objection.

And even if you can only identify the qualitative results, for example, improved speed, or simple or more streamlined processes, or better morale, you'll be in better shape and more credible. Just be sure to also explain the connection between those qualitative results and the strategic goals of the company.

So here's another common objection, some organizations who have strong consensus driven cultures can be great places to work. And they can be frustratingly slow to approve any idea that seems like too much of a change. So where does that leave you when you want to pitch something new?

Your best tactic here is to frame your idea as an evolution, not a complete change. So you'll want to tip your hat to the values that are important to the culture, and then establish the need to evolve to the next level. In other words, make it clear that you're not rejecting the culture, you instead want to develop the culture in a way that allows it to flourish and thrive in the changing world around it.

Change adverse organizations are worried about losing what makes them special. So show them how your idea will build on those values, using them as a foundation for the next level of success.

Now, many objections that you get from senior level decision makers are either explicitly about accountability, or have accountability concerns hidden in them. How do you know if accountability concerns are present? Well generally you'll be hearing what I call a list of horrors. That's like vague speculation of all the things that will go wrong with very little evidence to support them.

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So you'll hear comments like everybody will be upset, or this is going to require more people than we have, or there's no way you can do this without going over budget. The problem with these vague pronouncements is that you're tempted to respond to them directly and disprove them. You want to show exactly why your idea won't be going over budget, for example.

However, if you do that you're missing the point. You'll just end up getting continued resistance and perhaps another different vague and unsupported objection because you haven't addressed the real concern. And that concern is how can that particular decision maker hold you accountable?

Instead, a more effective response is not to invest a lot of energy disputing the accuracy of the comment. You instead enroll the objector into the solution of his or her very own concern. For example, if the person says, "There's no way you can do this without going over budget." You can say, "It sounds like you have concerns about how to hold us accountable to staying within budget.

Would you feel better if we schedule some monthly check-ins with you to review the numbers? That way, you have the opportunity to pull the plug or change direction if you don't like how we're trending. Or perhaps there's something else we can do so that you can better hold us accountable for delivering results."

Accountability objections can be hard to spot, but most of the time they can be easily addressed and aren't a real hurdle to your idea. You just need to give the objector a solution that will allow him or her to feel like they still have some measure of control.

So here's the basis for another common objection when you're pitching an idea, someone perceives it as a threat to their turf. So we've all seen this, right? The workplace can be filled with smart, competitive people. And whenever there's competition, there's also territoriality.

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Maybe the opposition is simply because we had the idea before the other team did. Or maybe the opposing team legitimately feels they have a point of view that needs to be represented in whatever initiative that you're proposing.

The easy way of diffusing the strength of this objection is to be inclusive, but under your terms wherever possible. So you could put together a cross functional team, but make sure that you're leading the group and that everyone agrees upon the charter ahead of time. The objector may still have some territorial motivation or concerns, but he or she has to hold that in check when there's an already agreed upon structure and process in place for the group.

Finally, another common reason for objecting to ideas is that the person doing the objecting sees nothing in it for them. So let's be honest here too, some decision makers are more motivated by personal interests than they are by what's best for the organization. And even those of us who are more altruistic can find ourselves being more flexible and accepting of new ideas when our personal interests are also being met.

So if you're getting some strong push-back but you really can't see a reason why, consider whether you've done enough to create some personal value for the decision maker.

Is there some aspect of your idea that will make life easier, faster, simpler, or better for him or her on a personal level? Is there some sort of promise or quid pro quo that will tempt him or her to give in? Will some aspect of your idea, help further his or her personal ambitions? Or make him or her look like a hero?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes, then make that personal benefit explicit to the other person. Perhaps you make it clear in your formal pitch, or perhaps you do it offline so that it's more discreet and not discussed in front of other people in the room. But however you do it, remember that we're all human beings with very human motivations.

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Personal favors count. They have an impact on how we view a situation. And if you have a good idea, and want to see that idea make a positive difference, sometimes helping someone else get their personal interests met in the bargain, is a very good way to dial down their opposition.

So there you have it, a variety of ideas that can help you save the day when you're not having an easy time persuading other people to accept or approve your idea.

If you want the highest possible win rate for your ideas over time, it's not just a matter of having a good offensive game. In other words, the ability to make a strong pitch for your idea. You also want to have a good defensive game, the ability to counter any opposition effectively and not let it sideline or shut you down. Using the strategies and the tactics we just covered will enable you to move forward successfully and see your ideas become reality.

All right my friends, I hope you have an awesome week ahead. And I'll see you in our next episode.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Mastering The Power Skills*. If you like what was offered in today's show and want more insights and resources from Kathy, check us out at www.significagroup.com.