

A graphic showing a piece of white paper with the text 'Powers of Persuasion' written in red, bold, italicized font. The paper is torn at the edges, and a roll of blue paper is visible on the left side, partially covering the white paper.

***Powers of Persuasion***

# Talking to decision makers: What to say and how to say it

**Nancy Singer, JD, LLM, RAC, FRAPS**

The ability to confidently convey an idea and persuade others of its benefits to your organization is key to achieving success. This article discusses ways to use persuasive skills, the importance of physical presence, and tips for maintaining a positive attitude.

## **Introduction**

How often does a decision maker or specifically, your manager, reject your ideas? Have you ever wondered why co-workers with inferior proposals have their requests approved? You are convinced your ideas are beneficial to both you and your organization. You walk into a meeting certain you are right, only to leave wondering why your idea was rejected. You may think you are being treated unfairly – that it is personal, or that the decision maker didn't let you explain or just didn't understand. More likely than not, the problem is not with your idea. The problem is the way you presented it. This article will provide you with methods to increase your success when making requests. It will cover the art of persuasive speaking, the importance of physical presence, and tips for maintaining a positive attitude.

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### The art of persuasive speaking

There will be times when you will want or need a decision maker to consider a request that may be perceived as impractical. For example, you would like your request for a one-month detail to another department within the organization to be approved. You could ask directly. However, suppose this was a new concept, and your department was short staffed. In that case, the decision maker might just say No.

Many professionals faced with a negative response to a request assume it was rejected because it was not understood. In that case, they repeat the same points over and over again, and eventually, the decision maker gets annoyed. The professional likely made the mistake of merely explaining how the request would benefit him/her without explaining how acceptance of the request would contribute to solving a concern for the organization.

### Persuasive talk template

To avoid such a scenario, consider using the short persuasive talk template. The theory behind this method is that you have a decision maker's attention for 30 seconds before his/her mind begins to wander. You should use that time expeditiously to engage the decision maker. You do not need to share all the details of the request, just the top two or three points.<sup>1</sup> By being brief and substantive, you can get the decision maker's attention and will likely be asked follow-up questions. Then you can have a dialogue.

To prepare the short persuasive talk, you need to:

- **Determine your objective and the decision maker's goals.** To understand the decision maker's goals, you should inquire about the direction he/she wants to take the department. Sample goals might include getting products cleared by the US Food and Drug Administration in a timely manner, complying with all applicable laws and regulations specifically in the area of advertising and promotion, and working harmoniously with other departments.
- **Organize your pitch.** Do this by organizing your talk into the categories of What? So what? and Now what?
  - "What" refers to a concern or a problem that needs to be solved, the situation.
  - "So what" addresses the implications of the concern or problem, specifically, how it affects the decision maker. You should list at least two or three implications.
  - "Now what" refers to the action you want the decision maker to take.
- **Write bullet-point answers to each question.** After determining the decision maker's goals, write short bullet-point answers. Each bullet point should not exceed 10 words. There should be about 12 bullet points in all. After writing the bullet points, go back and eliminate unnecessary words (**Table**).

- **Anticipate the decision maker’s questions and be prepared to provide answers.** If you don’t know the answer to a question, it is acceptable to say, “I don’t know.” However, be sure to also say you will find out the answer and get back with the answer or an update by a specific date.
- **Practice presenting the argument and making the request aloud.** After completing the template, it is a good idea to practice your talk. To listen to the content of your talk, you can use the dictate function in Microsoft Word 365. To do this, go to the Home screen and click on the Dictate icon on the top right of the screen. Alternatively, you can use an online tool such as Speechnotes.<sup>2</sup> (Note that Speechnotes works only with Google Chrome.)

***The importance of physical presence***

One needs to project an image of competency to be taken seriously. How you look affects your credibility. If people are distracted by your appearance, they are less likely to focus on what you are saying. You should dress appropriately, display good posture, and sound self-assured. Before approaching the decision maker or starting a Zoom call, take a few minutes to fix your appearance.

***Maintaining eye contact***

It is important to make eye contact when talking to people. It conveys confidence and shows respect for the other person. It also ensures the person is engaged in what you are saying.

***Facial expressions***

People generally are perceived as open, friendly, and more approachable when they smile. However, a constant smile is likely to be perceived as a lack of sincerity. In addition, smiling when a situation does not call for it can be distracting and disingenuous. Your facial expression should complement the substance of what you are saying.

**Table. Example of a completed template with bullet-point answers**

Category	Answers
<b>What?</b> (Situation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We need better relations with the marketing department.</li> <li>• At times, they make inappropriate statements about our products.</li> <li>• We’ll be more effective if we can educate them.</li> <li>• Request authorization for a 1-month detail to the marketing department.</li> <li>• The new regulatory specialist can cover my responsibilities.</li> </ul>
<b>So what?</b> (Implications – how the situation affects the decision maker)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It’s important not to violate FDA’s advertising and promotion requirements.</li> <li>• Authorizing my detail will allow me to educate them.</li> <li>• It can help align their department’s interest with ours.</li> </ul>
<b>Now what?</b> (Action to take)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you agree, talk to marketing VP about the detail.</li> <li>• Explain my detail will improve both departments’ efficiency.</li> <li>• Sign the form.</li> <li>• Talk to human resources department.</li> </ul>

### ***Tone and avoiding meaningless phrases***

How you sound matters. Speaking in a monotone conveys a lack of energy and may cause the decision maker to focus on another topic. However, displaying too much enthusiasm could exhaust the decision maker. You should talk in a calm and measured manner and insert inflection when you want to emphasize specific content. Try to avoid the excessive nervous repetition of phrases such as “you know” or “like.”

### ***Maintaining a positive attitude***

When meeting with a decision maker, it is important to project a positive attitude. To do this, you should visualize what it would feel like to get a positive response. You should also anticipate how you will handle negative feedback.

It is a mistake to react emotionally and become defensive when receiving negative feedback. When encountering a negative reaction, try to address each comment logically. If you are at a loss for words, tell the decision maker that he/she has raised concerns that you would like to consider. Ask if you could arrange another appointment to provide a thoughtful answer. If the decision maker is not responsive to your suggestion, ask if the issue could be revisited in 6 months.

The decision maker is in charge. It is in your interest to continue to interact with him/her in a positive manner. You will need to maintain a positive relationship even if your request is denied.

### **Conclusion**

Having a good idea is only half the battle. The ability to confidently convey your idea is how you will achieve success. Fostering a positive image when talking to a decision maker will help you get ahead in your organization. You know that you are a valuable employee. You have good ideas, and your requests have merit. Using the tools and techniques in this article will help your organization recognize your value.

### **About the author**

**Nancy Singer, JD, LLM, RAC, FRAPS**, founded Compliance-Alliance LLC in 2004 to specialize in the professional development for employees working in the government and in medical product companies. She is an adjunct assistant professor at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences and has taught classes at Johns Hopkins University, University of Southern California, and Harvard Symposia. Singer presently teaches classes for FDA staff colleges and FDA district offices. She previously served as special counsel for the Advanced Medical Technology Association. Singer has received Vice President Gore’s Reinventing Government Hammer Award and the FDA Commissioner’s Special Citation in recognition of her efforts to improve communication between the government and the regulated industry. She began her career as an attorney with the US Department of Justice, doing litigation for FDA enforcement cases. Subsequently, she was a partner at the law firm of Kleinfeld Kaplan and Becker. Singer is a retired commander in the US Navy Reserve. She can be contacted at [nancy@compliance-alliance.com](mailto:nancy@compliance-alliance.com).

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