

# Chapter 5: Get thet the Boss Boss to In

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## Leading Change from the Middle: The Art of Issue Selling

Instructor-Led Training Session  
Source: HBR's 10 Must Reads on New Managers  
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# The Middle Manager's Dilemma

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## The Problem

### The Intelligence Gap



Middle managers possess valuable frontline intelligence—customer feedback, supplier issues, and operational bottlenecks—that senior leaders often lack.

### The Power Gap



Despite holding the data, middle managers often lack the formal authority to initiate strategic change.

## The Consequence

### The Cost of Silence

- Regulatory capture or safety risks (e.g., banking or product safety failures)
- Missed revenue opportunities
- Operational inefficiencies

**The Objective: Bridging the gap between seeing the issue and selling the issue.**

# Session Learning Objectives

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## Analyze

Assess organizational norms and decision-maker motivations to determine the viability of an issue.



## Apply

Utilize the seven specific tactics of Issue Selling to construct a persuasive campaign.



## Evaluate

Determine the risk/reward ratio of pursuing specific issues based on importance to the organization vs. importance to self.



## Synthesize

Combine multiple tactics to increase the statistical probability of buy-in.

# Core Concept: What is Issue Selling?

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*The process by which individuals affect the organization's attention to and understanding of issues.*

## **The Goal**

Altering the perception of relevance at the top.

## **The Reality**

Senior executives do not dismiss good ideas out of malice; they dismiss ideas that do not have immediately perceived relevance to organizational performance.

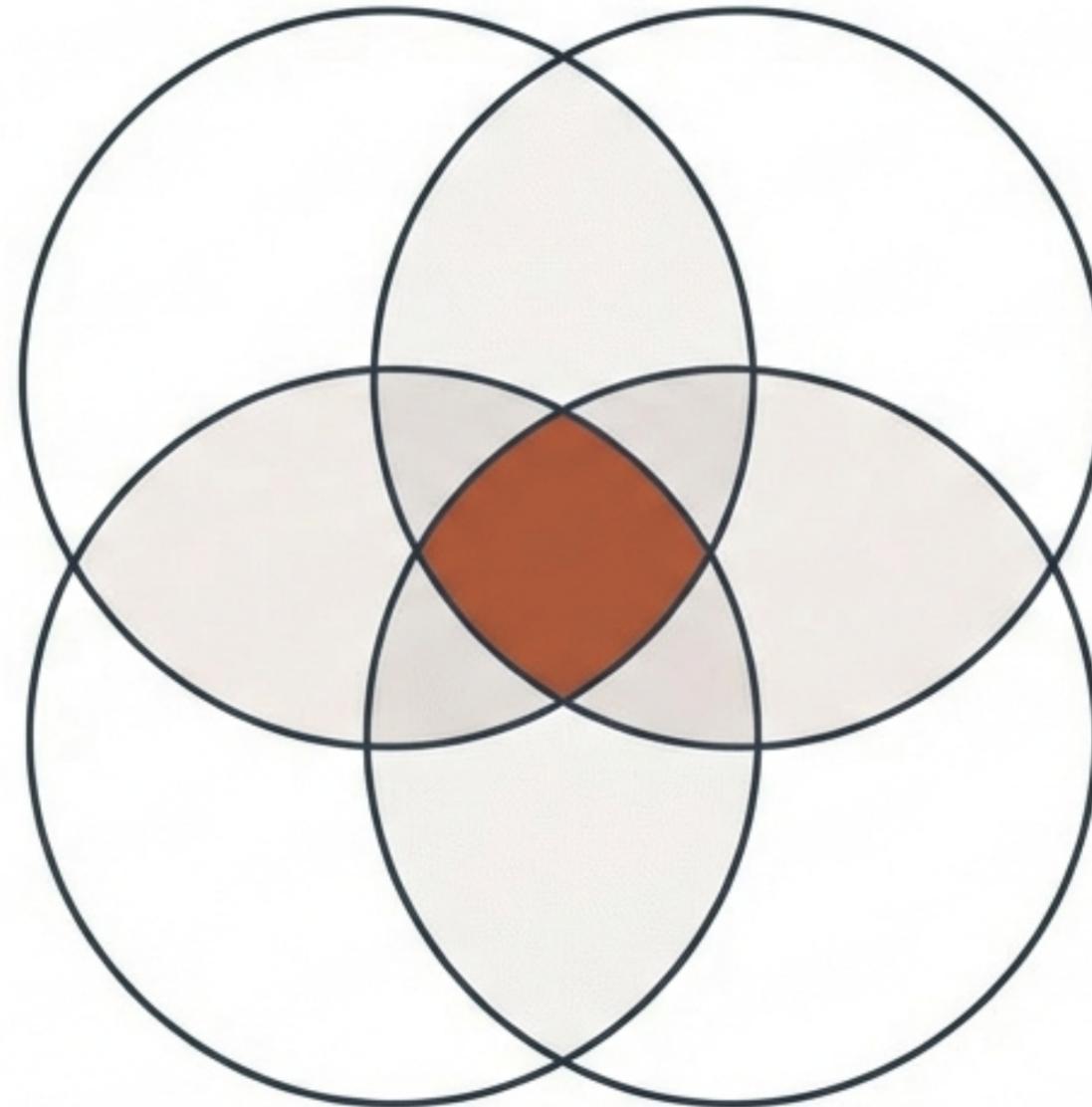
## **The Role**

The manager acts as an active change agent, not just a passive implementer of top-down strategy.

# Foundation: The Three Types of Knowledge

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**Strategic Knowledge**  
Understanding organizational goals, myths, and specific plans.



**Relational Knowledge**  
Knowing who is affected, who cares, and who objects.

**Normative Knowledge**  
Understanding decorum and data preferences.

Successful issue sellers rely on a combination of all three knowledge types.

# Drivers of Speaking Up

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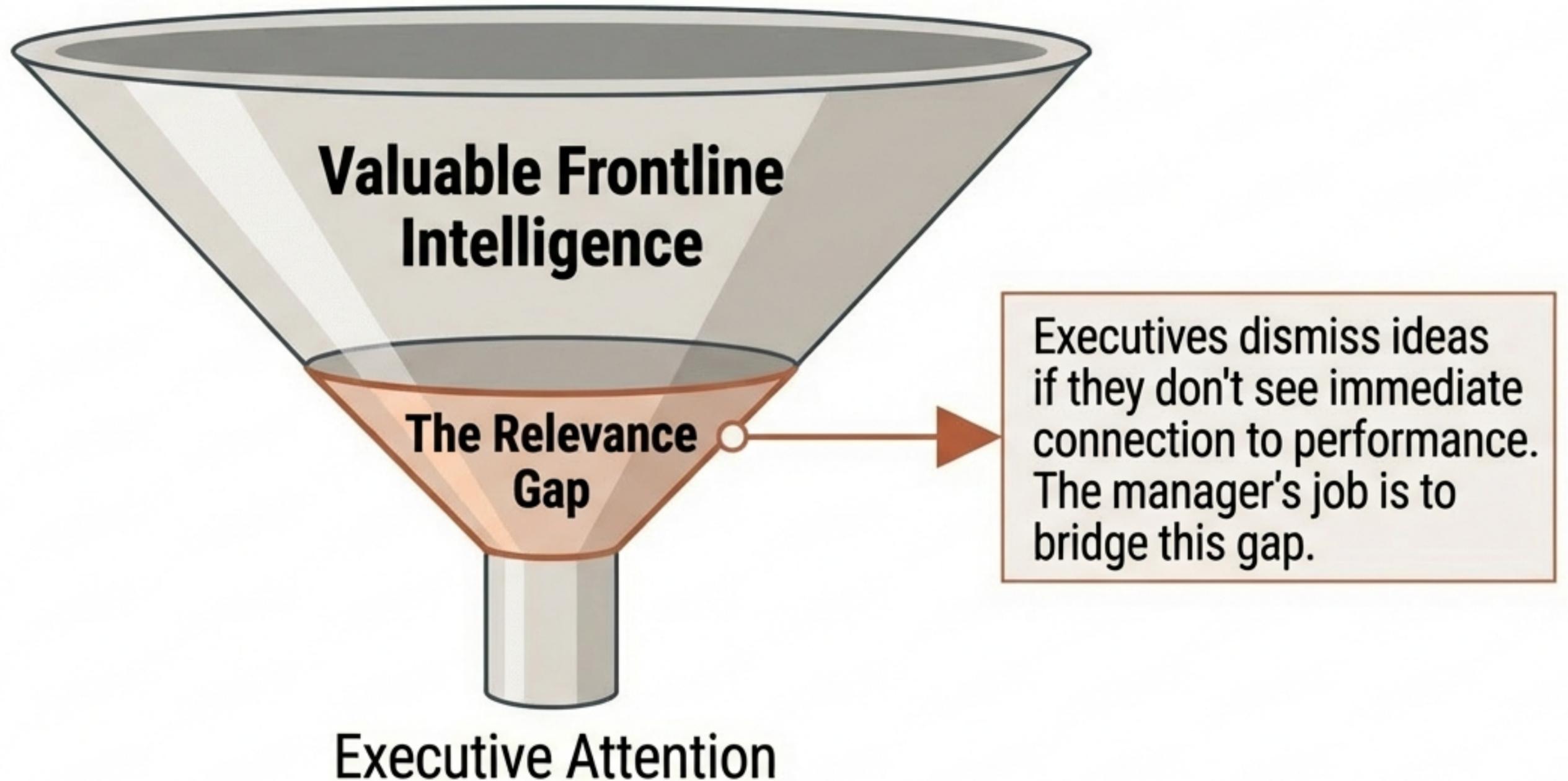
Middle Managers are more likely to sell issues when they...

- ✓ Identify with the organization
- ✓ Have a positive relationship with their audience
- ✓ Feel psychologically safe in the organization
- ✓ Think someone above them will take action
- ✓ Care enough about the issue to invest energy in selling it

Even without these conditions, applying the correct tactics improves the odds of success.

# The Attention Barrier

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# Tactic 1: Tailor Your Pitch

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## Concept

Align the issue with the audience's unique goals, values, and knowledge.

## The Common Mistake

✘ Pitching based on your needs (e.g., 'my team is tired') rather than the decision-maker's goals.

## Key Questions

- ✓ • Where does my audience stand on this issue?
- ✓ • What does my audience find most convincing?

# Application: The Canada Sales Division Case

## The Problem

Sales teams organized by region region were cannibalizing each other's clients.

A typical pitch would be to complain about conflict.

## The Tailored Pitch

- The Manager pitched to the VP's specific goal: Preventing damage to client credibility.
- The Manager pitched to the CEO's specific goal: Doubling revenue in five years.

**Outcome: Turnover costs dropped to near zero.  
Revenue doubled in five years.**

## Tactic 2: Frame the Issue

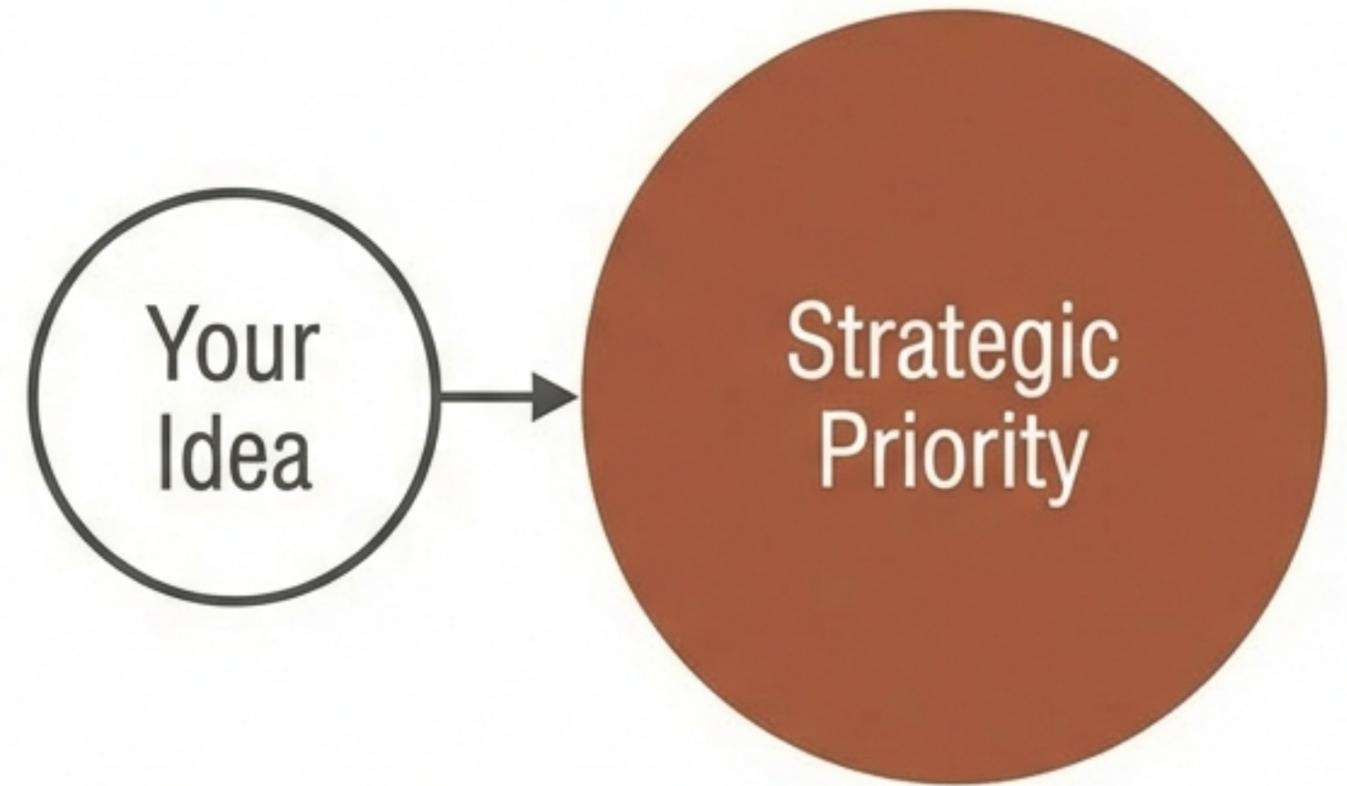
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### Concept

Packaging the idea to fit the “Big Picture” and organizational priorities.

### Bundling

Linking small ideas to larger, funded initiatives. For example, connecting “elder care leave” to a broader “work/life balance” initiative.



# Framing: Opportunity vs. Threat

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## Opportunity Framing

- Emphasizes benefits and gains.
- Inspires optimism and a sense of control.
- Generally more effective in gaining buy-in.

## Threat Framing

- Emphasizes loss and risk.
- Triggers “fight” (action) or “flight” (avoidance).
- Mixed results; can lead to leaders burying their heads in the sand.

# Tactic 3: Manage Emotions

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## The Regulation Imperative

Unregulated negative emotions (frustration, anger) cause leaders to view the seller as a complainer, not a change agent.

## The Dual Goal

1. Self-Regulation: Checking your own emotions to appear objective.
2. Target-Regulation: Inspiring positive emotions in the decision-maker.

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*“People who keep their emotions in check receive higher performance evaluations.” – Adam Grant*

# Example: The Gas-Scrubbing Technology

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## Case Study: John Healy, Energy Company

Pitching a new tech to a GM who had just bought the old system a year prior.

### The Strategy

- Regulated Frustration: Healy did not show anger at the previous bad decision.
- Saving Face: Framed the pitch gently, noting that user reviews of the new tech weren't available when the GM made the first decision.
- Result: The company invested; the GM did not lose face.

# Tactic 4: Get the Timing Right

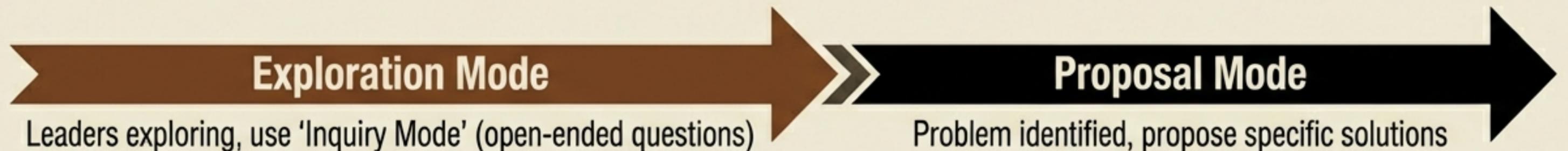
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## Catching the Wave

Issues are more likely to sell when aligned with organizational cycles (budget season, strategy rollouts) or cultural trends.

## Early vs. Late Phase Strategy

- Early Phase: Use 'Inquiry Mode' (open-ended questions) when leaders are exploring.
- Late Phase: Propose specific solutions when a problem is clearly identified.



# Tactic 5: Involve Others

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## Coalition Building

Building a coalition generates buy-in more quickly than the 'Lone Wolf' approach. Involving others provides access to data you lack and relationships you don't have.

## The Network Approach

### Allies:

Who already agrees?

### Blockers:

Who will oppose?

### Fence-sitters:

Who is neutral but persuadable?

# Tactic 6: Adhere to Norms

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## Normative Knowledge

Understanding the specific decorum of your organization is critical to credibility.

## Formal Cultures

- Require slide decks, data templates, and scheduled meetings.

## Informal Cultures

- Value 'Blue Sky' conversations and casual consensus building.

## Sequencing Strategy

Successful sellers often start informally (to gauge interest) and switch to formal presentations once the idea is mature.

# Application: Assessing Your Organization

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Take a moment to reflect on your own organization's culture and communication style.

## Discussion Questions:

- Does your organization value data-heavy presentations or narrative storytelling?
- Is the preferred mode of selling a formal meeting or a hallway conversation?

**Failure Mode:** Using drama in a culture that values cold data.



# Tactic 7: Suggest Solutions

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## The Solution-Focused Norm

Proposing fixes signals respect for leaders' time.

- Successful sellers use this tactic significantly more often than failed sellers.

## The 'Wicked Problem' Nuance

If a concrete solution is impossible (because the problem is too complex), do not just drop the problem on the boss's desk.

- **Instead:** Propose a sensible process for discovery.

# Summary: The 7 Tactics of Influence

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<b>1. Tailor Your Pitch:</b> Align with goals.	<b>5. Involve Others:</b> Build coalitions.
<b>2. Frame the Issue:</b> Connect to the big picture.	<b>6. Adhere to Norms:</b> Respect decorum.
<b>3. Manage Emotions:</b> Regulate self and target.	<b>7. Suggest Solutions:</b> Propose fixes or processes.
<b>4. Get the Timing Right:</b> Catch the wave.	

# Strategy: The Tactical Campaign

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## **The Mindset Shift**

Issue selling is not a discrete event. It is an ongoing process requiring groundwork, pacing, and patience.

## **The Power of Synergy**

Regression analysis findings indicate that using multiple tactics combined accounts for ~40% of the variance between success and failure.

Example: The Ecuadoran Luxury Goods Manager (Combined Norms + Timing + Tailoring + Coalitions).

# Choosing Your Battles

## The Decision Matrix

Importance to You (Low to High)	High	<b>High Risk</b> (Spending political capital for personal passion)	<b>Go for it / High Impact</b>
	Low	<b>Avoid</b>	<b>Self-Sacrifice</b> (High Org value, Low Personal value)
		Low	High

Importance to Organization  
(Low to High)