

How to Handle Gatekeepers and Blockers

The main contact is in control of your success or failure

CHAPTER 8

Obstacle 2

Gatekeepers and Blockers

As a salesperson, your toughest assignment when starting in an account is getting to executives. Administrative assistants, receptionists, and subordinate employees protect executives from you. In addition to them, you will block yourself by thinking that people don't want you going around them to get to the executives.

Admins block you because they feel their mission is to keep salespeople away from the boss. You pose a threat to their duties. The quicker they can get rid of you, the faster their fear is relieved. You're a stranger. You're a threat. Besides, you are extra work for them. They have to explain you to the boss and they have to schedule you. It is easier to say "No – not interested." There is no risk.

Receptionists block you because they have been read the rules not to give out information. Besides, they have calls coming through and they don't have time to play 20 questions with you. However, if you have a name they will pass you through. If you don't, they'll either not allow you to go further or pass you to an admin. Receptionists may know a little about the company, such as the names and titles of some people, but they don't know what these people's responsibilities are and how they fit with your offering. I question why you even start with them. Go to an admin of a senior executive.

Now if you get past the receptionist and the admin, you will probably have to deal with voice mail. Most executives are in meetings or traveling and not around to pick up the phone. Actually they will answer if they are in their office, unless the admin is set to intercept. It is more interesting to talk to someone new than face what's on their desk. Some companies even have caller ID and the Exec decides to answer or pass it to voice mail.

Another line of defense is the subordinates and lower level buyers. These could be administrative people who called you in, e.g., purchasing agents. They could be functional people who you know will be involved and you either

called them or they called you. It could also be people you were passed off to. These subordinate types are not going to let you through to the exec's office without effort. Besides, they need to be sold.

Finally the most debilitating blocker is you. You feel that the person or people you are talking with don't want you to go beyond them, so you stop yourself. Successful salespeople never think that way. They approach the situation with the confidence that the executives want to see them and knowing that these subordinates will help them get there. Successful salespeople feel that until the subordinate says, in no uncertain terms, "You are not allowed to approach the executives," the objective is the executives.

So it's tough dealing with blockers. However, if we know why we're being blocked we can develop strategies, tactics, and techniques to get through them.

Reason for the Blocks

People block you because *they have nothing to gain* by letting you pass; more importantly, they *stand to lose* by letting you pass.

Admins could be afraid their boss will be irritated, or they feel that if I were my boss I'd be irritated. Who knows what's going on with each admin, but suffice it to say that they sense a loss with no potential for a gain. After a go around with an admin or receptionist, I catch myself saying, "Why is she so tight with information such as the boss' name or email address? Is she afraid I'll send a letter bomb?" When I become rational, I realize that she *is* afraid of a bomb – something that could hurt her in her job or with her boss. Why should she help me? What's in it for her? If her boss finds out, she could get reprimanded – maybe even lose her job. Even if it is not that significant, it's easier to say no and give nothing than to work with you. Again, working with you is an effort and effort is a loss unless there is a reward for her. The same applies to the receptionist. Why extend myself – for what?

Subordinates to the execs are basically the same; however, their loss may take a different spin. They could be afraid of losing control. They could be afraid of losing the illusion that they are the final decision-maker – the Power. They may feel they have been given the task to investigate and decide and if you get by them, they have done a poor job with their task. They may also be afraid that their bosses will get angry if you get past them. They may feel it is their job to deal with you. Whether it is true or not, it is their fear and it is real to them. If you get through, they lose.

It may be that the subordinates are not interested in what you have to offer, so why should they let you go further? It may be they don't want what you have to offer because they don't like change or they don't like your solution. They believe that if you get through to the bosses you could sway them and this will not be good. They may also like your competitor and want to stop you from making any in-roads with them or their bosses. No matter how good you think it will be for them or their company, it is their perception of the loss that is blocking you.

Self-imposed blocks are another matter, but similar. Here you feel you will

lose if you go around, so you block yourself. You have to take a different approach to selling. Your objective is to get to and work with all the decision-makers, including the executives. Tell everybody along the way that this is your mission and you want these subordinates to help you get to the executives. This is about confidence and purpose. We'll discuss this later.

The voice mail blocks or screens are also all about losses or gains. Voice mail is really a great way to get to someone. However, it only works well if that person is interested in what you have to say or in who you are. Think about yourself. Your significant other or a good friend calls and leaves you a voice mail. You will listen intently and probably call back as soon as you can. A telemarketer calls, you probably skip or fast forward. But if the telemarketer hits a nerve right away, then you might listen and may even call back. Even if you know the person, or the person calling refers to someone you know, they may capture your attention yet the message will have to hit something sensitive before you'll call back. Bottom line, you will call back if you see something in it for yourself to make it worth calling back – otherwise it is a loss to make the effort to call back or even talk to a telemarketer. So with voice mail, if you want a call back you'll have to know what's in it for the person (gain or loss avoidance).

Now another big reason you can't get through these blockers is because you don't have credibility with them. In other words, they don't trust you to take care of them or keep them safe. However, this too, is about gains and losses. Can they trust you to do something that will be good for them or are they afraid you will do something that will cause them to lose? For example, I could use some help with investments, but I'll never talk with a 'cold call' stockbroker. S/he could be great, but there is no trust and there is a risk of losing my money.

Admins, receptionists, and subordinates block us because we have no credibility with them. If you had some positive history with any of these people, they would do a lot to help you (Golden Network). If they don't know you, they immediately default to, "I can't trust you. Therefore, I can't let you through and I'd like to get rid of you."

Actions to Overcome Blocks

Since the main reason people block you is fear of a loss and/or that there's nothing in it for themselves, your best action is to show them how they will win or at least not lose with you. For example, if an admin knows and trusts you she'll tell you anything, including the gossip. So your strategy is to develop credibility with her by getting her to feel comfortable with you so she feels she will lose nothing. The more secure this individual is the farther you will go. High level admins feel very secure about their position and the people below their boss. They will give you information about lower level people because they have nothing to lose. Getting info about their bosses is another story.

The same is true with subordinates. If they trust you they will be the first to let you get in front of their bosses, because they know they won't lose with you and that you will help them get what they want – your offering.

If they feel they will lose control, for example, you'll have to show them how they will maintain control of the decision and how it is good for both of you to see the executive. You might say, "It would probably be good for both of us if I knew your boss' expectations of my products/services. This way I could structure a proposal that would make both of us look good. So why don't you set a meeting and you can run it. I'll be there for support if you need me. But more importantly, I can hear it directly and we won't miss something and disappoint your boss. This could make both of us look badly."

I was working with CNA, a very large insurance company. I knew I'd never get the consulting deal I was working until I met with the Sr. V. P., and the Sales Training VP was blocking me. However, in an earlier interview I found out that the Training VP was concerned about his credibility. He had spent many years building credibility with the managers of the sales department and he did not want anything to jeopardize it. Establishing the credibility of training managers is very difficult because they are perceived as not out on the front line. Training is more theoretical than practical, so why listen? Well, this VP had earned his credibility and he was not going to recommend something that could fail and jeopardize losing his credibility.

Knowing this, I talked with the sales managers whom I had already met with and developed a relationship (Golden Network). I explained the problem and they agreed to conference call the VP Training and tell him that they liked my services and wanted to pursue it further. Well this eliminated the credibility issue for the VP Training and he quickly got me in front of the Sr.VP. I got the assignment and this VP Training helped me to get more deals. He learned that I delivered for him. He continued to build his credibility (win) and he continued to help me.

Had I not known his loss issue, I would have done all sorts of things to circumvent him or to please him (such as lower the costs). These would have accomplished nothing and could have cost me time and money. Knowing the loss helped me build the strategy to make it a win for him.

Turning a loss into a win is the best way to approach a block. Have an open, up front conversation with the blocker to find out what s/he is afraid of losing, or what s/he would like to gain by working with you. You can also get help from your Golden Network. Have these people get you information or get you a meeting with the blocker. Be careful, however, about getting loss information from other people. Losses are personal and others usually don't know the personal details.

Another strategy is to go around the blocker. We've all done our share of this. Calling early or late is a way to go around the admin. This and many other techniques are out there for you to find and try, but the problem is that you could get people annoyed or upset with you. It could be the blocker, the executive, or your own company. It depends on the ramifications. So be careful with this strategy.

Another strategy is to go along with the blocker. Sometimes people block you for your best interest. Just keep the dialogue going. Be sure it is in your best interest and not for other reasons. Set a plan with dates and work it

together.

Obstacle 2

Gatekeepers and Blockers

Check Yourself

Score: 4=Always; 3=Most Times; 2=Usually; 1=Sometimes; 0=Never.



1. When someone at a lower level says there is no need to go beyond him or her, do you immediately think that this person has not bought into you or your solution yet? ____
2. Do you ask (to learn) what the person's perceived loss is? I.e. why he feels there is no need for you to go further up or out?? ____
3. Do you ask the person to tell you what it will take to have him buy into you? ____
4. Do you tend to assume you're blocked because the person has a power or control issue? ____

Scoring: (1 + 2 + 3) - 4 = ??

(____ + ____ + ____) - ____ = ____

8 or more is good; Less than 8 means read and work this section

Chapter Summary

Subordinates, administrators, purchasing, etc. keep you away from their bosses because they fear losing something – power, ego, job, recognition, authority, etc. Bottom line is they haven't accepted you or your offering yet. They see a risk and see nothing in it for them, for you to go pass. Therefore, you get blocked. To break the resistance you must show them how to win with you. You can always go around or go along with these blockers, but these could present serious consequences and / or delays for you.



Common Situation

Can't Get Pass the Gatekeepers

You're blocked. You're frustrated. You try to be polite. Yet, you don't ask the reason s/he is not letting you meet others.





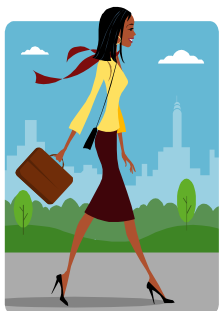
Resulting Problem

Your Success or Failure Lies with This One Person.

You have no idea if or how your message is getting communicated to the key decision makers or what the deciding criteria are. You're dead in the water without a clue of what to do. You will tend to avoid this person which could stall your progress further, or you will continue to pick at him, which becomes annoying. Until the person feels you are the horse he can win with, he'll block you.

Prepare Yourself

1. Always assume you'll be blocked.
2. Your attitude must be that even though you'll be blocked, you will always meet with all the powerful Decision Makers in spite of the upcoming blocks.
3. Eliminate blocks before they happen
 - a. Win the person over before you try to get him to introduce you upwards.
 - b. Let everyone you meet know you will have to speak with others involved before you can submit a proposal and pricing.
 - c. Rehearse what you'll say.
 - d. Make sure you find others ports of entry initially. Use your Golden Network for introductions.
4. Don't block yourself
 - a. Unless someone says, "You will go no further," continue to proceed up and out with your interviews. Don't assume someone will get upset. Let him or her tell you.
5. When a hard block is issued, it's because the person hasn't bought into you or what you're offering yet. You are perceived as a possible loss to her. What if her boss likes your solution and she doesn't. Worse, what if she thinks her boss won't like your solution?
 - a. Ask what her concern (issue or loss) is.
 - b. Rehearse what you'll say and how you'll say it.



Tak'n It to the Streets

1. For your next sales pursuit or lead, what will you say to your first contact to indicate that you will have to meet the other decision makers up-front also?

TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADERS WORKBOOK

“I know your buy-in is critical, but I will need to speak with others involved before I can go further with pricing, etc.”

2. What will you say when the person clearly states you are not to go further?

“It seems you are concerned with me speaking with others. Please explain your concerns.”