

Approaching decision makers with “yesable” proposals

Because you are very likely starting out as an unknown to any of the decision makers in the field, your approach has to be strategic. You simultaneously have to get the decision maker’s attention, make a good impression, and find a way to persuade them to give you an opportunity. If you are successful on all three fronts, you will not only gain access to an opportunity for skill development and better understanding the field—you’ll also be top of mind with the decision maker when they’re hiring.

One of the most effective ways to achieve these three goals is to approach decision makers with what we call “yesable” proposals.¹ A yesable proposal is exactly what it sounds like: A proposal that invites up a “Yes!” in response.

In essence, a yesable proposal puts forward a plan that:

Is well formed and framed in terms of the decision maker’s interests, thus making it easy for them to say “Yes!”

And

Leaves space for the decision maker to negotiate the details. You are proposing an opportunity that you believe would be of benefit to both parties, one that the decision maker might accept without any alteration but is also open to amendments, should the decision maker wish to make any.

You could be the most competent candidate in the world, but if the decision maker can’t see the connection between hiring you and getting their interests met, they will not make you an offer. Again, as we mentioned in the previous chapter, your best route for learning about a decision maker’s interests before you meet them is by speaking with your connectors.

Crafting yesable proposals

It’s important to put together yesable proposals, rather than simply stating what you want, because:

- People are more likely to help you meet your needs if they can see how doing so will meet their own.

¹ The concept of a “yesable proposition” was introduced in *Getting to Yes*. Fisher & Ury, 79.

- Decision makers tend to be busy people. If they don't have the time or bandwidth to think about how you could help or get involved ("What can I do to help you?"), they may just say no (even if they might actually appreciate your help).
- Yesable proposals allow you to advocate for yourself without being overly pushy or entitled: You're making a genuine effort to put together an option that is good for them, and putting their needs at the forefront of the conversation.

Of course, preparation is essential for crafting compelling yesable proposals. With any luck, your connectors will be able to assist you in identifying what the decision maker's interests are or what they're likely to be. Without at least an educated guess about your decision maker's interests, your engagements with decision makers are far less likely to be taken seriously, much less accepted.

To illustrate how good preparation leads to successful yesable proposals, and to demonstrate what a yesable proposal might look like, we'll take you through Angela's bid to get involved in a documentary film project:

Angela is an aspiring film producer with a degree in journalism and a minor in film, and is seeking to get a foothold in the world of documentary film production. She could definitely use some onsite "shoot" experience and she needs to learn about the studio system, the festival circuit, funding and distribution channels, and a whole host of other aspects of film production. Through a series of informational interviews, Angela discovered that there is a small production company that has produced a set of documentaries on gold mining and is about to start a project on a mining region in Peru that faces an impending influx of multinational mining corporations. She'd be overjoyed to work on this project at any level of production and has been able to secure a meeting with the production company's executive director (the ED)—thanks in large part to an industry connection she made. Her challenge now is to figure out what kind of proposal she could pitch to the ED that would meet his needs and convince him that she is right for this project.

Through another of her informational interviews—this one with a film school instructor who was familiar with the ED's work—she learned at least this much: that the ED sees himself as a mentor to young talent, and that he is personally invested in the social and environmental impacts of international mining practices, particularly in South America, where his family is from.

So, Angela knows a couple of the ED's broader personal interests. But what about his project-specific interests? What does (or might) the project need right now? She makes a short list of likely possibilities based on her knowledge of the field:

- Logistical support on the ground in Peru (do they have local partners?)
- Spanish-speaking editors to help with story editing and subtitling
- Access to funding
- Publicity for the movie; promotion at film festivals

Beyond this, Angela needs to consider how she fits into the picture. What contribution could she make to the project and how can she present this to the ED?

- She is passionate about film as a platform for exploring problems and advocating in support of important work done by non-profits. (The environmental impact of mining has not been an area of special interest for her, but she is definitely behind the broader purpose of this documentary.)
- She cares about social justice and preserving marginalized and indigenous cultures.
- She is proficient in standard Spanish, but isn't familiar with Peruvian slang or the accent, nor with indigenous Peruvian languages.
- She is American, but her father is from Argentina and has a history of activism in the region. She may be able to set up further connections between the production company and non-profits in that region, as well as help to get the film screened in South America.

From this prep-session, Angela comes up with the following proposals:

- 1) She could go to Peru to help the field team with logistics (booking hotels, flights, setting up interviews, ground transportation etc.). She could do minimal translation work for non-Spanish speaking members of the film crew and, where helpful, be available for anything else. In order to make this feasible Angela would need the company to cover some of her expenses (travel and food). Angela is confident that she can find someone through her network of connections to put her up for free or, failing that, she could try couch surfing, and so she is willing to remove the cost of accommodations from her proposal. Also, because she knows how to stretch a food budget and is able to buy food at the local markets, she's even willing (if necessary) to take the cost of food out of the proposal.
- 2) Without going to Peru, she could help out on the project doing first-round editing and subtitling which could save time for the fluent Spanish speakers on staff who would only have to go back and make corrections rather than subtitle from scratch. She could offer to do a trial subtitling of some early footage to demonstrate that it would actually be a backend time saver. In return, Angela would ask to sit in on the US meetings of the production team to learn about their process and have the chance to ask individual members questions.
- 3) Angela could be taken on as an assistant to the producer, helping the producer with basic logistics and to liaise with the directors and editors. If by fortune there were room in the project for this type of role, Angela would happily offer her services—either for pay, if the company is not tight on cash, or, probably more valuable for her, in exchange for mentorship from the producer (and hopefully from the ED as well). Her interest here is getting direct access to the action and decision making that gets serious documentary film projects off the ground.

Armed with her draft proposals, Angela can then dig further for the decision maker's interests during the negotiation—an aspect of the proposal conversation we delve into a little further on—and use what she learns to finalize the most compelling proposal on

the spot. Before Angela can share her ultimate proposal, she has to first engage the decision maker. From there she will formulate her proposal based on the interests that she hears during their conversation.

Turning to Angela's upcoming meeting with the ED, compare the examples below of how Angela might approach the actual conversation with the ED and make an effective, yesable proposal. For each scenario her first attempt represents an approach that job hunters often take. Her second attempt is based on our coaching.

1) Offer concrete ways to meet their interests

Typical approach: "I am really interested in doing work for your company. I think the work you do is amazing and I want to be a part of it. I am interested in doing production work on documentary film projects that tackle social and environmental justice issues. Your mining documentary is an obvious fit for me. Is there somewhere I could help with the Peru film project?"

In moments of stress and busyness, asking a question that requires someone to make choices and come up with creative ideas often feels like more work than the person can handle. Unless the ED just happened to have something concrete in mind right before Angela walked in, he probably would have responded with something like, "Thank you for your interest. I'll be in touch," which, as many of us know from experience, rarely leads to anything. This dynamic appears in social situations as well: when a friend is facing a crisis, we often say, "Please let me know if there is anything I can do." Our friends often thank us for offering but don't actually take us up on the offer, even though they probably really could use the help if they weren't too overwhelmed to think about *how* we could help. If you asked your friend, "Can I bring you dinner one night this week so you won't have to worry about cooking?" they're much more likely to accept. Yesable proposals operate under the same principle. Now consider Angela's approach after coaching:

Coached approach: "I have heard about your Peru gold mining documentary project and it sounds fascinating. If there were a way I could help your team, I'd love to be involved. I imagine that this kind of project would need logistical and organizational support in Peru, and support from Spanish speakers to do subtitling and promotion. I'm hoping that we can find a way for me to help out that would make sense for you. I've heard that you are dedicated to the development of newcomers in the film world—I know this would be a valuable experience for me. Would you be willing to take a few moments to consider how I might be able to contribute to the project?"

In the coached approach, Angela starts a conversation and peaks the ED's curiosity as she identifies some of his potential interests, as well as listing a few concrete areas where she may be able to help.

2) Respect the decision maker's autonomy and don't get positional

Typical approach: “I think you should take me on as the ground staff person to organize your logistics.”

Coached approach: “I took some time to think through how I might be able to help and wanted to share my ideas with you. For one, if you need on-the-ground logistics and administrative support, I would be willing to relocate to Peru for three months to help get the project set up. I could handle hotel reservations, flights, setting up interviews with locals, figure out where to get replacement equipment if something breaks, etc. In order to make that work financially, I would ask to have my flights and food covered. I bet I could find a place to stay during my time there.

“A second option I considered was helping with subtitling on the interviews you already recorded. I speak standard Spanish and thought that I could take a first crack at the translations into English for the subtitles and then whoever normally does your subtitles could just clean up my work. I'd be happy to do a test run for a short stretch of dialogue to see whether or not your editors would find this useful.

“With both of these ideas, my aim is to be around your team and learn from your process and the great work you do. At this stage in my career, I am most interested in being compensated for my work through mentorship and chances to learn through observation. This could look like: allowing me to be a fly on the wall for meetings of the production team, or having a monthly lunch meeting where I get to pick your brain about the industry. Does any of this sound like it could meet your needs? If not, is there another arrangement you'd propose?”

In the first example, Angela is being positional and digging in to a specific demand. After coaching, Angela advances the needs of the ED first, while fitting them in with her own. Even if she doesn't perfectly understand his interests yet, she's likely got some of them right and makes it clear that she's considering his situation. She asks him if she got his interests right and how he might tweak the plan to make it a better fit. She is specific enough for the ED to have a good idea of a potential plan, and she gave him room to adapt it. Her proposal is clear and directing, while respecting the ED's authority.

3) Show that you're aware of industry conventions, even if you seek to break those conventions

Typical approach: “I'd like to be a production assistant.”

Coached approach: “Obviously, I would be thrilled to join you as a production assistant. I realize that's a bit unorthodox because production assistants usually come out of a newsroom internship or have editing and script-writing experience. Still, if you'd consider me for this or some other role, I know I'd be able to do high quality work for you and I think my eagerness to learn and flexibility around travel and compensation would make me a good fit. If not, I would gladly volunteer to do go-for work for the

project here in the States for the next month to give you a sense of what I'm like to work with."

In the first, typical job-hunting example, Angela is asking for something unusual without any respect for or acknowledgement of convention. This can come off as entitled or oblivious. In the coached scenario, she demonstrates her sensitivity to the field and a respect for its conventions while at the same time making a case for why she wants to disrupt convention. If it works out, she'll get an opportunity she wouldn't normally be able to get with her level of experience. Plus, she also gives the ED the option of setting up a volunteer trial period so he can make a more informed decision about whether to hire her once, after he's seen her work.

When it comes to breaking convention, people have different responses depending on their personality, industry culture, and other factors. Some decision makers admire the initiative of those who seek to dive right in to the deep end, while others see this kind of thing as disrespectful. Again, your connectors can probably help you anticipate how a particular decision maker might respond to any attempts to subvert convention.

In each of the three scenarios above, the coached proposal is more "yesable" because, rather than an open-ended offer to "do anything," the proposal actively addresses specific needs of the decision maker. In order to respond to the "yesable" proposal, the decision maker has to expend far less mental effort imagining how you might be able to meet their interests because you have already laid that out for them. The more information you have about the decision maker's interests, the better this kind of pre-formulated proposal can work.

Even if you do have a good idea of what the decision maker's interests are, it is always wise to ask and confirm your understanding. Sometimes this comes before you make your proposal, and sometimes afterward—it depends on the situation, the patience and available time of the decision maker, and how much information you have going in.

Be sure not to box yourself in with assumptions. When Tad was looking for a job in the hotel business in Boston, he interviewed with a chain that had recently lost its regional pricing director.

Tad: I approached the interview as if I was applying for the job of pricing director—a post I assumed they wanted to fill. I jumped right in and sold myself as a pricer and nothing else—I was perfect for this imagined job opening! If only I had asked the interviewer about his interests first. I would have had a chance to talk about how I could have fit with the needs of the company. After I was finished with my "speech" about why I'd make a great pricer, the vice president looked at me and said, "That's very interesting, but we have decided not to fill open regional pricing roles. It will all be handled out of the home office in the Midwest. We have other regional placements available, but it is very clear that you're focused on pricing. Thank you for coming in." Whoops.

In situations where you have minimal information about the decision maker's interests in advance, it's okay to start an interaction with open-ended questions about their interests rather than putting forward options based on little or no information. Once you learn their interests during that meeting, you will have to work with them in the moment to figure out some options that could meet their interests. Sometimes you can use a combination of tactics: put together some draft yesable proposals before the meeting, and then tailor those drafts during the meeting, either in your head or by having a transparent "brainstorming" conversation with the decision maker about what they think might work.

One of Justin's decision makers, Jay, was a respected professor at a local university. Justin was interested in working with and learning from Jay—but Justin wasn't sure how that would happen. He didn't know enough about Jay's interests to put together a yesable proposal until after their first meeting.

Justin: During the meeting, I asked open-ended questions to explore Jay's interests and get a sense of how I might be useful. As it turned out, I was lucky with my timing. Jay had been mulling over how he could evaluate student perceptions of a clinical negotiation program he ran at his university. He was just getting started on this evaluation project and seemed open to letting me assist. After the meeting, I emailed and asked in an open-ended way how I could help him with the evaluation. I received no response. Instead of waiting indefinitely or re-sending my original inquiry, I drafted a concrete proposal. Based on what I now knew about the program, I suggested conducting a set of interviews with students over a three-month period, as well as sending an online survey to alumni of the program. I proposed that Jay and I meet once a month and that I check in about my progress once every two weeks with one of the other professors involved in the project. I had a hunch that this wasn't Jay's top priority and other responsibilities kept getting in the way. The fact that I was able to provide a detailed and sensible plan saved him the effort. With a few tweaks, Jay accepted my plan and I started conducting evaluation interviews shortly thereafter.

Delivering yesable proposals

In addition to preparing the content of your yesable proposals—focused on how you could meet the decision maker's interests in a way that is also good for you—it's crucial that you put some thought into how you're going to deliver the proposal and manage the conversation.

In order to have the chance to deliver a yesable proposal you have to first gain access to the decision maker for long enough to make your proposal. The best way to do this will depend largely on circumstance. Generally, the more face-to-face contact you have had with a decision maker, the more likely it is that they'll meet with you and the easier it will be to get your proposal accepted.

Making the pitch and managing the conversation: Conversations have a tendency to meander and shift organically, especially if they are informal, and there are many

different ways that a proposal pitch and negotiation could go. As a preparation measure, however, it's helpful to go into your meeting with decision makers with an agenda outline, either in mind or on paper. You should recognize some of these elements from the excerpt of Angela's conversation with the documentary maker. We recommend the following agenda:

- **Check-in and appreciation:** Small talk, making a connection, and communicating your genuine appreciation that the decision maker has dedicated the time to meet with you.
- **Articulate your purpose and agree on a plan for the meeting:** Ask if they would be open to hearing an idea you have for collaboration that you believe would be beneficial to them. Similar to informational interviews, you can be transparent in naming your hoped-for structure and plan for the meeting.
- **Articulate interests:** Name their interests that you hope to meet and ask if there are any they would add or that you may have misunderstood. Draw on paraphrasing skills: reflect back what the decision maker is saying and confirm that you're understanding their interests correctly. Then share what interests you believe working together would meet for you.
- **Share your yesable proposal:** Frame the proposal as an option that you believe would meet their interests. You want to communicate that, if they like the proposal, you are prepared to agree to the proposal as is. Make clear that you are interested in any adjustments they might want to make and be sure to tweak your proposal to align with any new interests mentioned during this meeting. You may want to prepare several proposals and present whichever one seems like the best fit during the meeting, or present a few and let the decision maker choose.
- **Adjust the proposal to best meet interests:** Once you have put your proposal on the table, ask what they think, and seek ways to make the proposal better for them and/or for you (while being careful not to make the proposal less fitting for either of you). This is the time to see if you can find ways to increase the value that is on the table. Do you have shared interests that you could find better ways to meet? Are there low-cost trades that had not occurred to you in advance of this meeting?
- **Define terms:** Get a clear commitment and define next actions (try not to leave the ball in their court—it could roll away and never be seen again). What happens next? Who is responsible for what pieces? Should you schedule a follow-up meeting and, if so, can you get that on the books before you leave today?
- **Appreciation:** Regardless of the outcome of the meeting, be sure to thank them for taking the time to meet with you.

Handling resistance and push-back: If your yesable proposal isn't garnering the "yes" you'd hoped for, you can still use the conversation as an opportunity to thoughtfully explore why the decision maker is declining—which just might lead to a conversation about what *could* make an agreement work. Until you do the work of discovering their interests you will not likely be able to smooth a rocky conversation. One of the most effective ways to diffuse pushback and get back to interests is by resisting the

temptation to get defensive. Instead, reflect back what you hear from the decision maker and ask open-ended questions. “So it sounds like I misunderstood and you’re not actually interested in offering kickboxing classes at your gym. Can you tell me a little bit more about what kind of exercise classes you did have in mind?” Approach your task with a detached journalistic view, as if you have been given the assignment of writing an article on the idiosyncratic business decisions of this particular decision maker—why are they making these decisions, what is important to them? Once you have learned more about their interests, you can decide if it’s worth taking another crack at making a yesable proposal.

If a decision maker rejects your request, take a moment to pause. Emotional reactions subside with time, so buying yourself even just a few moments can be essential to producing a thoughtful response and continuing the conversation in a way that is productive and collaborative. You may consider excusing yourself to go to the bathroom, or pausing to take notes, or simply parroting back the exact words the decision maker just said—“Oh, ok, conducting an assessment simply isn’t realistic this year.” This final option is a good way to maintain the conversation’s flow, and buy yourself time to think. Also, by reflecting back you convey to the connector that you have heard their rejection, and if you follow it up with an open-ended question then you create an opportunity to gain even more information before responding.

As you delve into a conversation about a declined proposal, your response (using paraphrasing and open-ended questions) might look like one of these:

- Based on what I proposed, you don’t see hiring me as a good idea. I also don’t want to end up in a role that’s a bad match for me. Can you help me understand what you *would* be looking for?
- You have an interest in ensuring that your team is able to work efficiently and you fear that bringing on someone new would be a burden. Is there anything else?
- So, am I right in understanding that you need someone who can...[their interests, e.g. work well with the rest of the team and can work three evenings a week, etc.]
- It seems like what matters to you is... [their interests, e.g. the success of this particular product line in the next six months]
- You have ... [restate their interests, e.g. a budgetary constraint in this quarter]
- What would it take to turn your no into a yes?

If you see an obvious way to meet any new interests the decision maker mentions in the course of this conversation, propose them. If not, you may need to regroup after the conversation and think about what you could propose that would meet their interests. If this is the case, thank the decision maker for their time and if you think you might return to negotiate with this decision maker at a later date, leave the door open for that negotiation. Ask if they would be willing to meet with you again once you’ve had time to think things over, and, if it seems possible and appropriate, try to set another date before you leave.

If it is clear that there is no way for you to meet their interests at this point, you can ask them for advice—in essence, turning the conversation into an informational interview.

You can also go back to your connectors and debrief the conversation. They can help you think through what went wrong and what the decision maker's interests were.

If the first conversation goes well and your decision maker accepts your proposal, you may end up negotiating compensation and other concrete terms.

Making proposals is complicated

Some people will read this chapter and think, "Well, of course I'd ask for opportunities and make proposals for what I want. I have just as much a right to be heard and to seek what I'm looking for as anybody else." Others will read this section and think, "I'd never be able to do this. I'd be overstepping; I'd come off as entitled or presumptuous. There's no way they'll say yes, so why even ask?" In the most extreme cases you might be thinking, "Asking would put my career in jeopardy. There could be major repercussions if I'm that forward." These responses depend partly on personality, of course, but gender, race, age, ability, culture, social class, and other factors also inform them. When it comes to asking for opportunities and advocating for yourself, there are two tensions at play. First is the decision maker's actual response to your requests. Second, there's your own, internal comfort with asking, based on your life experience, social identities, and assumptions about how the decision maker will react.

In an ideal world, no one would have to fear asking, advocating, and negotiating for the opportunities they are seeking. In the real world, where we do sometimes stand to lose out if we speak up, the first challenge is to identify which kind of resistance you're facing in a given situation. Are your fears of asking based mainly in your psyche and not really reflected in your interactions with decision makers? Or are you getting real pushback from decision makers? It's likely a bit of both. But understanding which one is most salient in a particular instance can help you seek the right kind of support to figure out how to proceed. If your resistance to asking and negotiating for opportunities is mainly internal, you may want to consult with a friend, a therapist, or a coach. If some decision makers truly do have an adverse reaction to your stepping up to negotiate for opportunities, your best course of action would be to seek out others who are familiar with your field, who have faced similar challenges, and who have specific advice about how to deal with these setbacks.