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FIRST MEETINGS TEST YOUR STATUS

'People like people like themselves.'

Tony Robbins

As social animals we like to live in groups, and as we live in groups relative status matters. Status does not just mean job titles and the number of direct reports you control. It also means the way you behave. We are often particularly aware of this on first meeting people, because biologically we are assessing the 'threat' of the 'stranger'.

In terms of client relationships, this is a crucial moment for building trust. Just as statistics about non-verbal communication are popularized, so are those about how we make decisions to trust others. Whichever source you believe, it seems likely that this decision takes just a few minutes, depending on different propensities we have as personalities. Although we can modify the impression we create over time, a bad start is a bad start, so, if there is an opportunity to manage this well, good salespeople do so:

'The nerves are something you get used to. When I started, I spent a lot of time in company toilets and avoiding coffee before meetings. Although I was "carrying the bag", I felt in awe of these captains of industry we were calling on and of my boss's polished way of dealing with them.'

Neuroscience suggests that the brain reacts to perceived threats in a fraction of a second by changing the chemistry in our heads. This, in turn, affects our ability to think rationally. A number of factors cause the 'threat' responses – fight, flight or freeze. One of them is the client's sense that the new person is threatening their

status. This is partly because the salesperson, like any newcomer, is not ‘one of us’ and unfamiliarity is inherently a cause for concern. But it is also to do with behaviour.

How do clients behave on first meeting? They may stand up slowly from behind the desk, extending the hand of greeting at arm’s length, talking rather loudly perhaps and extensively – a slightly larger-than-life version of the person you subsequently get to know. The reason is that all these behaviours are associated with raising their relative status, confronted by a person they do not know. Your tendency may be to do likewise and it is important to match but not confront the status difference with your client:

‘The CEO’s office was the entire top floor of a building in the West End of London. You stepped out of the lift and there were three receptionists at the desk facing you, one of whom walked you to the door of what I assumed was his office. Along the way we passed through three anterooms each decorated in a different style: Chinese antiques, medieval European antiques and modern Italian furniture. When I commented on these to the receptionist, she explained that her boss’s wife was an interior designer. At the office door we were greeted by the personal assistant and shown into another room with two other administrative staff. This was a rather cramped room with three desks for the assistants and two chairs for visitors facing them. The personal assistant offered the usual drink, and said that the CEO was “in conference”. I sat awkwardly in my heavy overcoat for at least ten minutes until a light on her desk went on and she said, “Dr Busetti will see you now.”

‘There was another door at the end of the room and, my heart beating rather fast, I went through it. I found myself in the largest office I have ever seen. On the opposite side of the room was an antique desk (Signora Busetti’s choice, no doubt), behind which sat a slight man on the phone. He indicated I should approach, which I did; it was all of 20 paces across this gigantic empty space. As I got nearer he

smiled broadly and apologetically, held out his hand, still talking on the phone, and indicated that I should sit down in the chair opposite his desk. It looked like a very low chair so I decided to take off my coat and place it on the chair and headed for the conference table close by. I wasn't going to be intimidated any more.'

DO NOT BE INTIMIDATED BY A SENIOR CLIENT'S STATUS

Status is communicated by people's posture, their voice, their facial expression and even their breathing. The higher your status the more you fill space and time; you stand upright with your chin up, you speak slowly and deliberately, you make direct eye contact and you smile, you breathe regularly and deeply. You behave as if you are unafraid. If you want to lower your status, you sit and cross your legs or arms (this protects the more vulnerable parts of your body); you incline your head; you speak quietly and perhaps rather fast; you avoid direct eye contact and your breathing is irregular. You are behaving as if you expect to be attacked.

One way to get control is to change your own thinking about the encounter. If you are convinced that you can help this organization with your company's services and competence, you will behave differently than if you are worried about the outcome of the meeting in terms of failing to get an order. Junior or younger salespeople often find it hard to do this, as they are excited and concerned about their own performance. If you can focus on helping the client with your ideas, you reduce their status in your mind; they are just another client that you would like to assist in improving their business.

Match eye contact, firmness of handshake and tone of voice, and allow the client the space and time to feel that they can dominate the situation, but not you. One rule of thumb you might consider is never to interrupt your client until they feel comfortable with you.

MODULATE YOUR STATUS TO GET THE RESPONSE YOU WANT

Once you have mastered the general principle of status behaviour, you can learn to use it to your advantage.

If there is someone who seems reluctant to talk, lower your status. When presenting, you can do this easily by sitting down. This raises the status of everybody else in the room (who are already sitting down, we assume) and indicates that you want them to ‘take the floor’. You can apply this to an individual by using silence. If you want them to say more or to talk at a less superficial level, you leave space and time for them to do so. When we say nothing we reduce our status, and this means that the other person’s status is raised.

If the person is not interested, raising your status can have a big impact. Many of the salespeople interviewed for this book said, ‘You have to be prepared to walk away’, which is another way of indicating that you will no longer accept a subordinate status with your client. You stand up, you turn your back on them (a very high-status thing to do as it indicates that you do not see them as a threat), and you prepare to leave. This is often a last-ditch attempt to gain ground, but there are lesser variations that may get the lead’s attention:

- Increasing the intensity of your gaze – this might involve looking up suddenly in response to what they have said or to their silence
- Increasing your hand gestures – pointing things out – literally and metaphorically – increases your status, as when passing a document across the table (invading their space)
- Speaking a thought out loud, slowly and deliberately – ‘Really? *Really?*’ This is short of an insult, but clearly indicates that their reaction is less than you expect.
- Leaning forward in your chair – or leaning well back, looking at the ceiling.

These sorts of behaviours are provocations to respond, small assaults on the client's apparent complacency, so be prepared for a reaction in kind.

MATCH YOUR STATUS TO THEIRS AS THE MEETING ENDS

Often, it will take the whole meeting for the client to feel comfortable with you – comfortable enough to introduce you to their boss or another person, or indeed to host a second meeting. As representatives of product suppliers, salespeople are encouraged to see the sale as what matters and that your job is to be whatever the customer needs you to be to achieve this goal. High-value solutions representatives should not think like this; for their offering to be valued, they too must be valued by the client. In status terms, this means that the final impression after the first meeting must be that you – and your company – are the client's equal in status terms.

At the end of the meeting there is always the 'next steps' discussion, where both parties agree what action to take. First, it is important to conclude the session with a professional summary of what you have covered, any agreements that have been reached and any areas that remain 'open' and unresolved. The client will often welcome your taking control of the agenda, as long as your summary accurately reflects their feelings about the meeting; you have earned the right to be equal status by this point.

Secondly, you need to assess how they are feeling about the issue and manage the status accordingly. If the meeting has revealed that the client is both highly anxious and insecure, then you would probably ask – low status – 'What would you like me to do as a result of this meeting?' or – higher status – 'Where will you take this next?' If they seem confident that the meeting has been productive, then you might frame the question in a more equal-status way, looking them in the eye and saying, 'So what should we do next?'

Thirdly, final impressions are as important to manage as the first few minutes in status terms. As you put things into a bag or put on your coat, express appreciation for their time and for the information they have given you and indicate how you will be in touch again. Be the first to offer your hand this time.

Putting it all together

Being aware of the difference in status between you as the salesperson and your client is one thing. Using this difference is a skill. Great salespeople are continuously experimenting with the relative status between them and their clients to ensure a positive outcome from the meeting. This is not because what you say doesn't matter. It is in addition to having good questions and clear messages to communicate. You mustn't either threaten your client's status or be too subordinate to her. The aim is to gradually match your status so that by the end they see you as an equal they can do business with.