

Dealing Effectively with the “Dominant Big Shot”

By Jessika M. Ferm

Imagine this scenario: *You finally get the opportunity to meet with the decision maker at a major organization to sell yourself and your company. You have heard that he is a challenging person who will question your knowledge, skills, price, value, and anything else you discuss in the meeting. He may be confrontational and is likely to test your breaking point. The stakes are high and you know you have this one shot at getting a commitment to move forward.*

Sound familiar? The situation can arise anywhere. You may be calling on a decision maker to sell your products and services, it may be a final interview where the decision makes or breaks your future career plans or it may be a personal relationship and this meeting may be the turning point for how you will interact from this point forward. In any case, the outcome of the meeting is extremely important.

Did you ever leave this type of meeting feeling chewed up and spit out, questioning your own value? Would you like to know how to increase the likelihood of success when dealing with a “Dominant Big Shot” (DBS)?

Identifying the “Dominant Big Shot” (DBS):

For the sake of this article, we will refer to the DBS as “he” as based on our research, the majority of people who fit the DBS profile are men. This does not mean that women do not fit the profile; they do, but there are fewer of them, or they may adapt their natural styles more effectively. According to research conducted by Kate Ludeman and Eddie Erlandson, so called “alpha males” represent about 70% of all senior executives.

The DBS tends to possess most of the following behavioral characteristics:

- Demanding
- Egocentric
- Driven
- Ambitious
- Pioneering
- Strong-willed
- Forceful



J.Ferm

EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Determined
- Aggressive
- Competitive
- Decisive
- Venturesome
- Inquisitive
- Responsible

They also tend to:

- Be relentlessly goal-focused
- Make statements like “You must...” “I need you to...” “You don’t understand...” “You should...”
- Come off as bold, overbearing, and feel that, as long as they are right, it is OK to be blunt and even rude
- Make impulsive decisions and change direction on a dime
- Re-write history or use excuse-making to avoid being wrong
- Be accusatory and have little self-awareness of how they come across to others
- Be powerful gatekeepers to something you want (i.e. a job, a promotion, a new account, etc.)
- Be unavailable for “face time”
- Be talkative and prefer to dominate the conversation
- Have little awareness of how they come across or may perceive themselves as highly effective communicators
- Micro-manage under stress

The Four Key Factors You Must Know About the DBS to Prepare Effectively:

The most important aspect in preparing for a successful outcome with the DBS is to understand what matters most to him. Here are the four key factors:

1. Competence
2. Trust
3. Respect
4. Results

Competence

Your ability to establish competence is essential early in the conversation. Remember, the DBS will challenge you, your business, your goals and your stamina. He finds it important to determine exactly HOW competent you are. This process may involve challenging your credentials, your personal and professional network, your products/services and your ability to produce value. The DBS has a desperate need to believe that he is making correct and well-informed decisions. Accordingly, his first priority is to determine if you will make him look correct and brilliant should he rely on the information or services you provide. Although it may come across as rude or insensitive, the DBS believes that if you can withstand his attacks on you, then he will be able to withstand the attacks on him that he is sure will follow his decision to rely on you. To the DBS, it isn't personal – he sees the world as a contest and simply needs to feel well armed in the competition. If you can satisfy that need, you will be well on your way to success.

Trust

Once you have successfully established your competence (which will be questioned until the DBS is satisfied with your ability to do what you say you will do), a level of trust may be established. This can be a tricky criteria, especially since most DBS do not have a high trust level to begin with (they tend to think they can do most things better than others can) and they remain somewhat skeptical. DBSs have a natural tendency to “catch people doing things wrong.” In their minds, correcting people's mistakes or behaviors is a natural way to help the person grow and develop. Don't be surprised if their level of trust fluctuates with the results you are able or not able to produce. Their biggest fear is feeling taken advantage of. Accordingly, be prepared to revisit this issue.



J.Ferm

EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Respect

DBSs respect people who are successful. Especially if they have produced material wealth, have impressive client lists, or have established themselves as leaders in their field. They are concerned with how they are perceived by other leaders and may at times try to convince others of their successes. Don't confuse this concern for creating a positive self-image with a good understanding of how they come across. There is usually a disconnect between their self-perception and others' perceptions of them. Avoid saying or doing things that make them "lose face" or challenge their competence. They will probably dismiss outright flattery as a sign of weakness on your part, but will respond positively to measured and accurate acknowledgment of their strengths.

Results

The DBS cares deeply about what you can do for him. He cares about results and making him and his business look good. DBSs tend to achieve impressive roles within organizations because they produce results. They also tend to over-emphasize results at the expense of developing their people skills. Consequently, they can lack effective listening skills, tend to make inaccurate or premature assumptions and be less skilled at synthesizing how a conversation will produce results or value. It becomes your job to make the results explicitly clear and to communicate them as soon as possible. By focusing on the bottom line effect of his decision to "choose" you and what you have to offer, you will be in the strongest possible position to close the deal.

Preparing for the Meeting: Getting Yourself In Order

The most important step in preparing for the meeting with the DBS is to conduct a thorough personal inventory and map out a “Plan For Attack,” not a “Plan Of Attack.” You want to establish competence, trust, respect, and results without becoming confrontational or confused.

Step 1. Communicating Competence: Meeting this person unprepared is like going into battle without arms. Contrary to what you may think, planning for an attack has less to do with the DBS and more to do with you. It is about YOUR comfort around your competence, not his. So, begin by preparing answers to the following questions:

1. **What makes you qualified to speak about your products and services?** Make a list of credentials the DBS may find valuable. For example, your experiences, your company’s status in the marketplace, you educational background, affiliations, etc. Stay with facts and list “neutral” accomplishments only. Avoid statements such as “Voted most liked manager” and state such accomplishments as “preferred vendor to eight Fortune 100 clients.” The difference is in the objective nature of the second statement. Review the list and identify those of which you are most proud and keep them on a separate sheet of paper. Don’t hesitate to mention those items when they come up.
2. **What do you consider your biggest fears or insecurities about speaking or presenting to this type of person? What do you most fear that he will say or do?** Make a list of as many fears as you can come up with. For example, succumbing to the DBS’s style of communicating, not answering questions accurately, leaving the meeting without a commitment, showing up late, etc. Review the list and create a “If this...then I will” list. It may look something like this:
- 3.

Fear/Insecurity (If this...)	Prepared Action or Statement (then I will...)
Challenges my expertise/value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take a breath. • Ask questions about its importance to the conversation/outcome. • State measurable facts about my expertise. • Ask if the responses answered his questions and if we can move forward.
Re-directs the conversation or gets off track during the meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask to re-direct the conversation back to the objectives and emphasize the desire to use his time more effectively.



EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Step 2. Building Trust: This is a crucial step when preparing for your meeting. The DBS is skeptical by nature and will test how much he can trust you through the meeting and the future of your relationship. He will check for inconsistencies in your messages and may point them out bluntly. He will also carefully watch your ability to follow throughout and test your continuous commitment to the relationship. Remember, even if you win the business, get the job, or move in a desired direction, your work is not done. It has just begun. Here are some preparation steps that will help you hit the road running.

1. **Prepare one “promise” in advance that you are confident you can carry out.** For example, state during the meeting that you promise to follow up in three days or promise to always be upfront and honest during the relationship. You must of course, without flaw, carry out on these promises, so be careful not to over-promise and under-deliver. If you do, the deal is off!
2. **Prepare one “will-not-promise” in advance.** This may sound odd, but this is a powerful counter statement that builds trust and sets the stage for a successful relationship with the DBS. By stating what you will not do, and sticking to it, you earn their respect and trust. Prepare a statement like: “When I promise to do something you can count on it being done. There may be times when I explicitly tell you that I can’t promise you something you want. I do that to ensure I don’t over-promise and under-deliver. Know that I will always strive to provide exceptional service and that I want to build a long-term relationship with you and your business.” Don’t be afraid to say, for example, “To put together a proposal of that scope will require at least one month lead time. You say you need it in two days and in my experience, that isn’t enough time to do it right. I’d rather not get the project than submit poor work. Can we revisit the time frame?”
3. **Prepare an example of a time when you carried out a promise for a client or someone in a similar situation to the DBS and focus on the outcome.** This type of third-party story can help build trust since it establishes a proven track record. Whenever possible, ask a happy client/customer for permission to share an example of a time when you worked together with positive results and a contact number for the DBS to call. Chances are he never will, but this step goes a long way to building trust. For example: “John at XYZ corporation mentioned that, because we follow up consistently, he was able to catch three possible mistakes last year which saved his business over \$X last year. I am happy to share his contact information with you if you wish to speak with him directly.”



EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Step 3. Earning Respect: This step is far more ambiguous than the other three. Without respect, there is no future with the DBS. As with all relationships, respect is earned and it may surprise you to discover that respect with the DBS is established in three major ways. First, they respect (but don't always like) people with firm boundaries. Second, they respect people who produce results. And finally, they respect people who challenge them. For many people who struggle to deal effectively with DBS, these three statements are the most powerful eye openers. To prepare effectively for your meeting, be sure to:

1. **Ask yourself, "What would it take to walk away from this opportunity?"** This is an important question and it is essential that you are clear about what you will and will not do in this relationship. The DBS is notorious for pushing other people's boundaries. It is helpful to create a "Walk Away When/If..." list prior to meeting with this person. It may look something like:
 - "I will walk away when/if this person becomes abusive (verbally or emotionally)"
 - "I will walk away when/if this person does not follow through on commitments."
 - "I will walk away when/if this person consistently challenges my credentials after we have agreed to move forward."
2. **Show a consistent track record of results.** Make a list of the most impressive results you have produced and indicate references for each if possible. The DBS is unlikely to challenge the results if they are stated in writing and they have a reliable source.
3. **Practice using questions like "May I challenge you on that?" "If you couldn't use that excuse, what would you do?" "If we get off track during our relationship, how should I approach you?"** These questions set the stage for your relationship with the DBS. Most DBSs appreciate a straightforward communication style and they respond well to challenges. Remember to ask for permission early in the relationship to approach him with these types of questions. Once you have that permission, you will find it much easier to keep the relationship on track and each time you correct the course, you will build trust and respect.



J.Ferm

EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Step 4. Producing Results: The last step in the preparation process is to show how you will produce results or solve his problems. If you approach a DBS to talk about your feelings or emotions, you are setting yourself up for disaster. DBSs respond to people who can produce results and options for solving specific problems. They perceive emotional reactions as weakness or signs of incompetence – which is deadly to the relationship. For example:

1. **Research the industry/field/trends that the DBS is in and clearly state how you can produce results or solve common challenges.**
2. **Offer a “complimentary” solution for the DBS to test if appropriate.** Make sure to ask for a commitment if he sees results.
3. **Determine your price in advance.** The DBS will negotiate and will make a great case for why you need to lower your price. This is a common trap. If you give in, he will likely devalue your product/service and you will eventually lose the business. If he feels like your price is too high, he may feel taken advantage of. If your price is fair and you can show a clear track record of value, DO NOT negotiate your fees!

Meeting Techniques That Work

Once you have prepared for the meeting and it is “Show Time,” remember to be yourself. Some DBSs may not care for your style or approach, but they will respect you if you are authentic. If you are soft spoken and gentle, use concise language and stick to the point. If you are optimistic and enthusiastic, use your charisma but stick to facts vs. feelings. If you are analytical and methodical, share facts and make clear statements but avoid over-explaining. And, if you are dominant yourself, ask direct, effective questions and avoid becoming confrontational. The following techniques work because they focus on what works for the DBS. You may be comfortable with some of these and you may need to practice a bit with others. Remember, communicating effectively with the DBS does not require a “personality shift.” It only requires that you are being YOU more effectively!

- **Keep careful notes of the meeting and identify any agreements or commitments.** Summarize these in an e-mail for the future. DBS are sporadic listeners so it is up to you to keep the meeting notes and conduct the follow up.
- **Ask for the business, commitment, next step before concluding your meeting.** You may only have one shot to close the deal. DBS often respond to what we call the “Shiny-New Factor.” They tend to be impulsive decision makers and are often excited about the latest, newest solution to their challenges. If you are it, ask for the business right then and there. If they want to think it over, you have significantly diminished your chances for a next meeting or next step. Remember, the next person who speaks with the DBS is “Shiny-New.”
- **Dress conservatively.** This is especially important if you are a woman and the DBS is a male. The “Good Ole Boy’s Club” still exists and is especially prevalent among the DBS. Wear a well-tailored suit (if skirt, below the knee), classic shoes, pantyhose (I know, this can be a painful classic, but it is important), limited jewelry, and a crisp clean shirt or top (nothing below your collarbone). If the DBS is a woman, be careful not to “out-dress” her. Again, limit the jewelry, but wear your best shoes. Women DBS tend to be materialistic and are likely to determine your “entrance into the club” based on how well you fit in. I have often heard DBS women size up other women based on their shoe brand or watch selection. If you don’t have expensive accessories or jewelry, wear little of them and have your shoes professionally polished.
- **Stand up straight.** Your posture will communicate more about you than your clothing or handshake will. Have you ever noticed a person walking through the airport or city street and something about their demeanor makes you turn your head? Chances are they have exceptional posture. Celebrities hire posture coaches to create a desired impression. A “military” bearing often gives instant credibility among males. DBSs respond to people whose posture matches theirs. Stand up straight, move your shoulders back, and take a deep breath.



J.Ferm

EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- **Summarize the conversation and re-state agreements.** DBSs are fast-paced people and value effective time-management skills. They also tend to be visionaries and are not particularly fond of or good with details. It becomes your job to summarize, check for agreements, and close the deal!
- **Follow up flawlessly.** Do not forget to follow up. The sooner the better, so rely on e-mail vs. personalized notes. Chances are their assistants get to the notes first and they may get lost or filed. Keep the e-mail short, to the point, and mention when you will speak or meet again. This must be agreed upon during the meeting as the DBS tend to move on to the next thing quickly and do not like to be bothered with details.
- **Deliver, deliver, and deliver!** After the prep, the meeting, and the follow up, it is time to deliver. Remember to deliver on what you promise and avoid falling into the “over-promising-under-delivering” trap. If you are looking for a long-term relationship, you must deliver over and over again.

As you become more and more familiar with these techniques and tools, the experience with the DBS will become easier and more comfortable. During my years as an executive coach specializing in working with the “DBS,” I have come to not only enjoy their unique styles, but I now actually appreciate them. After all, they are straightforward, to the point and make quick decisions. They can be tremendously important gatekeepers to your success, and if you master the skill of dealing with the DBS, those gates become opportunities rather than barriers.