



THE PROBLEM SOLVING/SELLING CONNECTION

The same behaviors and skills that make you a good problem solver can make you a successful salesperson. That is why salespeople tend to be good problem solvers and good problem solvers, if they wish, can be very effective salespeople.

Behaviors like curiosity, sensitivity, self-confidence, flexibility, open-mindedness, risk taking, affability and tenacity are typical of successful salespeople. The exact same behaviors are representative of what we observe in a great problem solver.

The same applies to skills. Both salespeople and problem solvers need to know how to ask big picture questions, listen effectively, articulate ideas, facilitate interactions, manage resistance and conflict, connect with others and gain commitment.

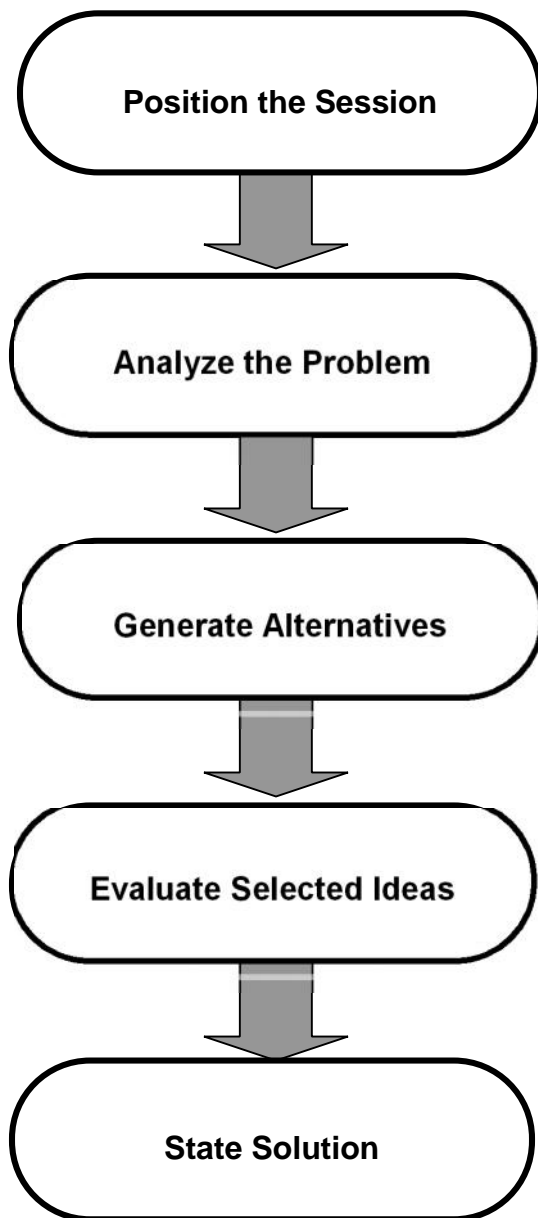
That is why we believe that the sales process is a problem solving process. If salespeople use the problem solving skills they have acquired in conjunction with their selling skills, they can elevate the sales process and differentiate themselves from their competition. The highest level of selling occurs when you transform a sales call into a problem solving opportunity.

If you look at a standard problem solving sequence and compare it with a consultative selling sequence (Fig. 1), the similarities quickly become apparent. In both approaches, we need to position the interactions, perform some analysis work, get recommendations on the table, deal with push-back and gain commitment. It is surprising that many salespeople do not think of themselves as problem solving resources to their clients. And of course, most problem solvers certainly don't think of themselves as salespeople.

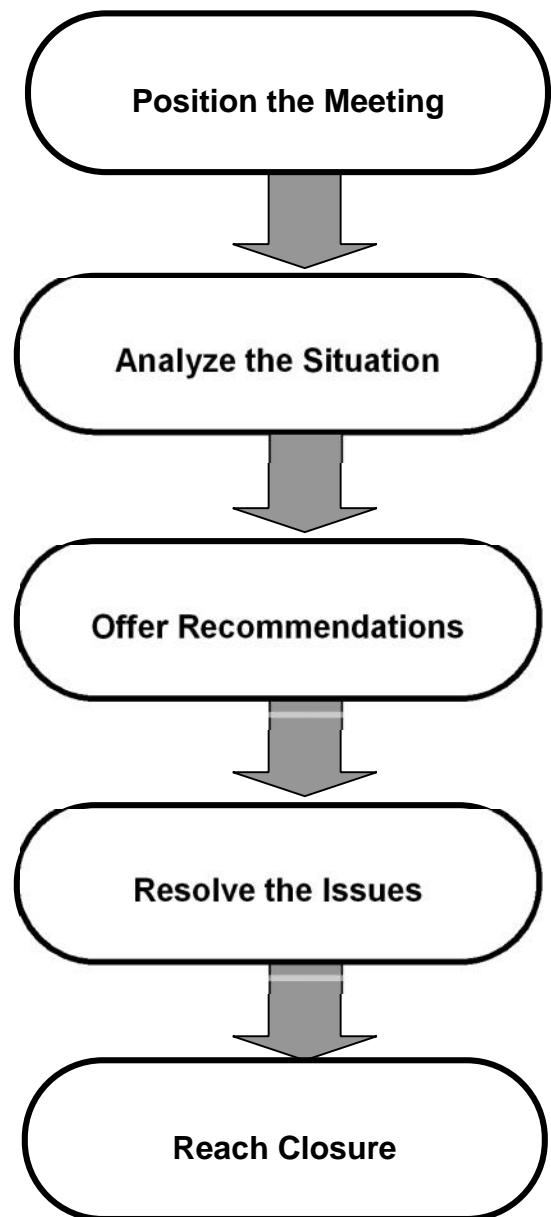
So we encourage salespeople to use their problem solving skills. We like salespeople to think of themselves as facilitators—to focus on *process* as well as *content*. Process is the “how”—which rarely gets adequate attention. Content is the “what”—which saps most of our energy.

Comparing the Sequences

Problem Solving Sequence



Consultative Selling Sequence



Look at the different parts of the selling process. When you *position a meeting* with a client, it is all about process. Make sure everyone is comfortable. Give people a chance to introduce themselves and explain their role. Get the agendas up. See how much time they have. Set the stage for questioning. Create a healthy climate. These are all about process related activities.

When you analyze a client's situation, it is critical to ask the right questions and listen for needs. But process helps here as well. It is about *how* you ask the difficult questions, *how* you listen to both the obvious and not so obvious needs, *how* you interpret what the client says, and *how* you demonstrate a solid understanding of what you learn. More generally, it is *how* you make the customer comfortable during the process. The questions themselves, the needs, problems and opportunities you uncover, the summary of what you've learned is all content related. It is very important. But the great salesperson, like the great problem solver, focuses on *how* he or she does all this. Once again, process sensitivity is critical.

Even when we make recommendations we need to think of ourselves as problem solvers or facilitators. Sure, we will bring in great recommendations and we will get creative like good problem solvers do. But again we need to know *how* to present. We need to be sensitive to short attention spans. We need to relate our recommendation to the client's needs, use our resources to assist, check in with our audience, and we need to stay consistently focused. Process, process, process.

Issue resolution is a problem solving activity. Great problem solvers know how to deal with conflict. They know how to avoid becoming defensive or aggressive when their ideas are shot down. They realize that most people instinctively reject new and different ideas. The process sensitive salesperson applies these principles. They acknowledge what the client says, encourage the client to elaborate, and learn how to transform objections into needs just like a successful problem solvers converts obstacles into invitations for ideas. Objection resolution, issue resolution and conflict resolution are similar approaches and they all focus on process.

Even closing is a problem solving activity. Great problem solvers stay focused until what is only an idea because a solution. It takes work. But to get there, they continually work out the kinks until they have something new and feasible that the group is committed to implement.

Similarly, a salesperson needs to ask for the business. If there are reasons not to move forward, he or she must continuously ask questions to explore what the issues are, that need attention. Only when all the issues are resolved it is time to commit. The salesperson makes that happen.

Great salespeople tend to be great problem solvers. Great problem solvers can be great salespeople. The skills are interchangeable. When you infuse a traditional sales approach with problem solving skills, you have not only elevated the sales process and differentiated yourself from the competition, but you have raised your relationship with your clients from vendor or provider to strategic advisor and trusted partner.