

Fearless Thinkers, Episode 12.5
"Selling to the C-suite"
with Suzanne Bates

Masami Cookson: Welcome to Fearless Thinkers, the BTS podcast. My name is Masami Cookson, and our host is Rick Cheatham, Head of marketing at BTS.

On today's show, Rick is having another conversation with Suzanne Bates, who is a partner at BTS, leadership expert, and bestselling author. She's an entrepreneur and founder of Bates Communications, which recently joined the BTS family.

Suzanne literally wrote the book on how to sell to CEOs, so having her on today to talk about selling to the executive audience is a real treat.

Rick Cheatham: It sure was, Masami. ,So I gotta ask you, how's life in Brooklyn? How are you guys adjusting?

Masami: You know, things are good, I guess you could say. We don't have blinds. We have a lot more construction tools than when we last spoke. It's very sunny. It's all good. There're probably some sirens in the background.

Rick: Sunny days are the best. You know, I totally get it. Very early on in my career I was in kind of like a development program, and I moved seven times, like moved cities seven times in 13 years. So, I feel your pain.

Well, anyway, to the task at hand – talking to Suzanne about selling to CEOs is really fantastic. For those of you who missed the previous episode on engaging your own C-suite or your own senior executives, I encourage you to step back to that, 'cause it's something we can all use as we try to not only do what's best for our organizations, but also further our own career development. Great conversation with Suzanne, so I say we just jump right in.

Masami: Sounds good.

Rick: So, Suzanne, again, thank you so much for giving us your time and going deep into the C-suite for us. For those of you who started here, we're talking

about engaging the C-suite from a sales perspective. If you missed the previous episode, it's really about, how [you] engage your senior executive or C-suite team. But now, we shift to selling, one of my favorite things to get to do.

So, Suzanne, when you think about selling to the C-suite, where's the best place to start?

Suzanne Bates:

Well, it really begins with understanding the CEO or senior buyer's mindset – understanding, you know, some people call it a buyer profile, but what's their real role? What is their responsibility to the organization? What are some of the challenges that they face? The better you understand them walking in the door, the better you can leverage your assumptions when you do get that meeting.

Just like with a CEO within your company, or a senior executive within your company, you don't get very many opportunities to build a peer-to-peer, trusted advisor relationship. So, it does really truly begin, as it always does, with doing your homework and understanding the company, the individual, and the specific challenges that they're facing. That's table stakes, really; if you don't have that, you won't be successful.

Rick:

I think you're right, from the perspective of... Discovering what I can about current performance before I walk in the door, to be able to speak to how what I'm offering is going to enable better results faster, right? I mean, that's what it boils down to.

Suzanne:

Yes, it does. But, you know, the thing about establishing the relationship with an economic buyer is that they don't wanna be sold. You need to hit on something that's important to them that they haven't been able to solve yet. That may or may not be in the first meeting with them, right? Sometimes, our first meeting with a senior leader may be about other things.

As an example, I know I was talking with... Some years ago, I was talking with some folks who wanted to share some insights that they'd gained in a project with the CEO. And when they shared what those insights were, because I happened to know the CEO, I said, "Sorry, but he knows all that already." =

So, when we come in the room we've really got to bring insights. And it isn't that they weren't there, the insights were in the research, we just hadn't thought deeply enough about what it was that would really interest that CEO.

This is, again, enterprise thinking. What is it likely that person or individual knows already? And what may they not know yet that could be of value to them? And part of how you get to that is the quality of your questions. And, you know, so often in sales, we're taught how to ask, you know, opening questions, probing questions, that sort of thing. You don't have that many questions. Most of these meetings, initial meetings, are a half an hour. So, you have to be very thoughtful about your questions and you've gotta go in asking questions that indicate you've done your homework, and that you're interested in something very specific.

So, if you can use your time well that way – by asking questions that are really gonna get to the heart of the matter – you'll be able to pivot effectively to a conversation about what would be of help to that leader.

And another mistake that I see people make – and not to go on and on, but – a mistake that, I mean, I'm sure I've made it a thousand times, but it's moving to selling too quickly. You know, yes, you have to use your time well, and if the purpose of the meeting is to present a solution, then of course that's what you're gonna do. But if the purpose of the meeting is to take the measure of you and your company, you need to use that time well to establish the peer-to-peer relationship, and that you could be a trusted advisor who's looking out for their best interests first.

Rick:

Such, such great advice. It's funny, 'cause I can't even count the number of times that I have been coached by, you know, an internal champion, "Okay, you're only gonna get like 15-20 minutes max and you've gotta go straight to demo, and it's gonna be terrible, you know – he's gonna be frustrated if you just don't get to what you do." And that has worked zero times.

Suzanne:

Exactly. But you get that coaching from the internal folks, and there's a lot of pressure from the people who are not the buyer, but the gatekeeper to the

buyer, who themselves don't have the kind of relationship that you're hoping to establish.

Rick: It is a funny thing. And I think, you know, asking those kinds of questions that force a leader to sit back in the chair and be like, "Well, you're making me think today, or you're making me earn my money." You know, that's when you realize that the conversation is pivoting and you're establishing yourself as somebody who is creating value just by being there. And I think, so many times, if you're ever gonna get a second meeting with that executive, you've gotta deliver personal value every time you show up.

Suzanne: That's right, and you know, it gets easier as you mature as a sales professional or as a professional to do that, because you have more experience.

But when you're asked a pointed question in a conversation, "Well, how do other companies do this? Or how do they solve for this difficult challenge?" You've gotta be prepared for those questions.

Now sometimes, you can just immediately draw from your experience, but if you don't feel you have enough experience, you need to be, you know, ready for that question. You know, I had similar experience not long ago with a gatekeeper who had set up a meeting with several of the senior people. We had a half hour, and there would be eight of us on the call, and they called it a pitch meeting. And I said to them, "You know, this is not how I sell." And, ironically, the project was to teach their senior people how to build relationships with the C-suite.

I said to them, "You know, we can attend the pitch meeting, and we're happy to bring a PowerPoint, and I think it's important for me to share with you first that I would never do it this way. And so, what you're asking us to do is not what we will be teaching."

Well, that got them thinking, didn't it?!

Rick: Mhmm, exactly.

Suzanne: We were able to extend the meeting, we were able to ask more questions, and they were able to ask us

some pointed questions on our views about the best way to approach some, you know, challenging issues.

So, all just to say, "Yeah, sure, come in with a PowerPoint deck if you're asked, but what you really wanna be ready to do is offer insight."

Rick:

Yes. Such great advice. It's funny, 'cause when we talk about preparation, I think it really is to have that agile executive conversation. I call it climbing the logic tree. And it's, "Let's walk through what this conversation could be like, and all the potential branches at the most important points. Okay, now let's keep going up the tree. Okay, now it's time to branch again.

That's at least been the way that I've prepared for these things. What's your advice?

Suzanne:

The branching technique is fantastic. And, you may go into a meeting, as well, with a group or a person who has a well-formed idea about how they want it to be done, when you in fact believe there is a different and better way, or there are other ways to achieve the same thing. That's putting yourself in a challenger role.

So, if you're ready with the branching technique, I think you'll be ready for that. And you do need to be ready to offer options and alternatives without insulting your buyer. So yeah, I love that technique, Rick.

Rick:

Well, I think it, especially what you're just saying, especially holds true in the world that we live in... Of consulting services, and of, you know, a more service-based sell. More often than not, an executive wouldn't be talking to us if they knew what the solution was.

Suzanne:

That's exactly right. You're there for a reason.

Rick:

Exactly, yeah. And if they could do it themselves, they're not gonna talk to a consultant. The same holds true in other areas that, you know, they're gonna be looking for the most effective, lowest-cost solution to what they need to solve for. And you've gotta be able to basically demonstrate how your offer – whether it's consulting services, or software, or paper – how that's gonna enable what

they're trying to accomplish.

Suzanne:

Yeah, and, you know, you can do this, you can have a conversation like this and be, you know, as what some people refer to as a challenger, and be incredibly respectful, thoughtful, and mindful of, you know, the person you're speaking with.

Again, I think it's about, as we talked before, it's about asking that one more question that can provoke thinking. A senior executive buyer really appreciates this critical thinking, and they like to critically think through issues. If you were to ask a question, "Why do you think this design is the best," and not in a challenging way, but in a truly, genuinely curious way... So, now you have a chance to get their thinking. You get their thinking, you have a chance to acknowledge and respond.

It's actually a technique that's used in media training, as well. So, when you're asked a very difficult question by a reporter, you can acknowledge the question and then redirect, right? So, it's always about critically thinking.

Reframing for people is another really important technique to understand as a seller to senior economic buyers. Even great salespeople don't do is prepare enough for a meeting. And I always love to do role plays in preparation for meetings, because I think you know how it goes a second or third time is not how it goes the first time, and you're gonna hear how it sounds if you role-play it with a colleague.

So, if you're wondering whether you have good skills in reframing, or asking great questions, or getting to the heart of the matter, practice it with a colleague.

Rick:

Absolutely. We never practice enough. I think it's so easy to skip, and it's quite possibly the most important thing to do.

Suzanne:

Well, yeah. I mean, I was thinking about when I was very early on, when I started a company some years ago, a couple of decades ago, I was on one of my first sales calls. The topic was executive coaching for a leader, and I think they gave a brief overview of the leader, and then turned to me, as the buyers

do, and said, "So what would you do about this leader?" And I was tempted right there to lay out a plan for how I would work with him. But I paused for just a second and I thought, "You know, I just don't know enough to give a great answer yet. Tell me more about why you think he exhibits the behavior they were talking about."

Well, that opened up the conversation. Everybody was talking now. There were two or three buyers in the room – they were talking back and forth with each other. I learned so much more, in that next five minutes, it made it a phenomenal meeting.

And I tell you. it was like magic, this magic potion to ask that one more question that gets everybody talking. Because as we all know in sales, when you get your buyer talking about the solution, right...? You're halfway there to the sale.

Rick:

Exactly, yeah, I think that that really is such good advice. It's a recurring theme in this conversation, of: Don't rush the sale!

Well, you know, when we were talking before about enterprise mindset and I'm wondering about that from a sales perspective.

Suzanne:

It's all of the above. It's understanding their industry, understanding what's current in the industry. And while it may sound elementary, one of the things I find is that many salespeople don't read *The Wall Street Journal* or the *Financial Times* or industry publications. It's really important to be informed about what's going on in the world beyond what even you've done for your own clients, and to be broad in your ability to talk about all kinds of issues that may be interconnected. So, yes, product knowledge matters, and knowing what you've done for your other clients is really valuable to your senior economic buyer.

And, if you could just carry on a conversation, it shows them that you're worldly, right? That you see what's going on in the world around you, that you have hunches about things, you've elevated yourself to a new level. That's how you get to that kind of peer-to-peer, trusted advisor type of relationship.

You know, every business has a heart and soul too.

So, understanding their culture is really important.

Rick:

Hmm, that's great. Yeah, it is so interesting. Again, as I think about coaching my own sales teams in the past, one of my highest standard for my sellers, the day that one of the executives within your client calls you and says, "You know, Suzanne, I don't even know if this is anything you do, but I'm just curious what you think about X." Then, you've been able to kind of achieve that worldly, peer level, you know... You've demonstrated what we were talking about earlier about asking thoughtful questions, and you've really put yourself in a position that outpaces the person that could potentially be coming in behind you to try to sell to that same leader.

Suzanne:

Well, I wish I'd had you as coach 20 years ago, Rick, because it would've really come in handy, 'cause that's, you know, just really awesome advice.

I had a mentor and, similarly, he used to say, "Your economic buyer might say, 'Get me a professional services firm.' Or they might say, 'Get me BTS.' Or they might say, 'Get me Rick Cheatham.'" Because then, and of course we want them to say, "Get your company," right? But if they say, "Get Rick Cheatham," that is exactly what you're talking about. You've established another level of relationship that other competitors cannot pierce. They think of you differently: [of you] as somebody who brings an intrinsic value to their thinking.

Rick:

Awesome, I love that.

I wanna go backwards now and make sure that I captured all the right points here. And probably the first step that we went through, just a little bit, is making sure that we have that buyer's perspective, and preparing for executive meetings. Starting by doing three times more than you thought you should is probably about half enough. Maybe that's, you know, it's probably a little excessive, but that preparation is what enables us to have those free-flowing conversations.

Because through what we say and the very thought-provoking questions we ask, if we can get to that trusted advisor place with that leader, we can make a big difference not only for our own sales, but in

their business and in their ability to perform.
How'd I do?

Suzanne: That's a beautiful summary, Rick, and I think that it also makes what we do a lot more fun. If you make yourself an object of interest, and by being an interesting person, and being a worldly person, it's more fun to go out and meet with clients every day, and you feel the value that you bring them. So, it's more than a goal to reach your sales goals; it's also a goal to love your work.

Rick: Wow, see every time you just crush it. I love that so much. Just the focus on how doing this work can not only help us perform, but can make the work more enjoyable and is actually going to make us better, smarter people. So, fantastic, fantastic advice.

Well, as always, thank you so much. I always learn when we chat. Hopefully, we can get you back soon to share more of your wisdom.

Suzanne: Thank you, Rick, I learn from you as well. It's a great conversation. Thank you.

Rick: Bye.

Masami: If you'd like to stay up to date on the latest from the Fearless Thinkers podcast, please subscribe. Links to all the relevant content discussed in today's podcast are in the show notes, or you can always reach us at: BTS.com. Thanks again.
