"In our office, we did a lot of testing and settled on Calibri 11 for the best readability while saving space."

Good grief. They're talking about fonts. Someone is actually citing the results of a Formal Font Investigation.

They are not the production staff, who might reasonably be expected to care about the font used for printing the proposal.

They are a tableful of managers and technical experts, who might reasonably be expected to care about, oh, I don't know, management and technical things.

They might seem crazy but that's one of the realities of Proposal Land: With the stakes so high (about a billion in revenue in this case), everyone cares about everything. They care a lot. Even about the font and how it affects readability and page count.

Sitting at the far end of the table—the better to see everyone without twisting my neck and when did I get this old or out of shape?—I wonder idly why there are always two more high-back chairs around boardroom tables than really fit. Do executives have no personal-space needs?

I also consider my approach. I'm an independent contract worker here, not an employee, which is both good and bad. The good? I don't need to worry about annoying my boss or someone who knows my boss. The bad? I don't know these folks very well and haven't built up many credibility points yet.

They also likely see me only as an editor: not completely unreasonable, since that's my proposal role. But I'm also a general management consultant. It maybe doesn't help that I'm the only girl at the table, although this girl has somehow reached that point where she's older than all of the boys. None of them seem to have trouble with their necks.

"I agree that a sans-serif font looks more modern—I mean, we wouldn't want to go with TNR— but Calibri is awfully boxy, don't you think?"

Yikes. Why didn't anyone warn me there was going to be a graphics type in this meeting?

Guy 1: "I think we should just use what the client used."

Guy 2: "But what about page count?"

Guy 1: "The font can't matter that much to page count, can it?"

Sigh. And now here's the obligatory "I know nothing about this but still feel qualified to make the decision" guy heard from.

OK, that's enough. I speak, aiming for gentle in both tone and phrasing, so as not to spook them.

"May I suggest . . ."

From the last seat on the left side at the other end of the table, the proposal manager turns his head without wincing (oh, the sweetness of mere middle age, I remember it well) and looks at me. A competent, capable guy, Buddy's been leading the font charge for some inexplicable reason, but at least I have credibility with him. With his attention captured, I have the attention of the whole table. Well, not the graphics type who is using his tablet to show his neighbour a space-saving, non-boxy, sans-serif font that would be ideal, but most of them. Now that they're listening, I hit "play from the beginning."

> "May I suggest
> that this decision be delegated
> to the production team?
> I think they understand
> what you're trying to achieve."

I pause, but not long enough to let someone else jump in. No siree. This is not even my fortieth rodeo. Now is the time to move in for the kill.

> "I think this group's time
> might be better put to other uses:
> Like . . . cutting the cost?"

A few blank looks, but also a few smiles, rueful chuckles, and nodding heads. OK. Done and done.

Ah, the face-saving, offence-avoiding, humour-sharing, respect-offering, implicit-reprimand-phrased-as-question. It's a technique I've come to only lately. If only I'd figured it out when I really was a girl.