

Making the executive presentation

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Senior executives' information needs require a unique approach, but it is critical to learn how to get their attention

It is a common refrain heard from records and information management (RIM) professionals: "I can't communicate with my management." Like it or not, it is the burden of those who want to communicate to do so effectively. Given a continuing flattening of organizations, opportunities for presentations should increase; how effective they will be is another matter.

While the purpose, topic, and content of senior-level presentations will vary widely, there are presentation concepts that all can value and apply to top management presentations.

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Different Level, Different Information

Ultimately, senior managers have different values and responsibilities than lower-level managers, and so a different approach is needed in making presentations to them. The information needs of those at the operational levels focus on current and past activities and transactions. Information needs at this level are usually of internal origin - well-defined, detailed, structured, recurrent, and tied to specific continuing processes and objectives. On the other hand, senior managers, who are responsible for strategic planning and visionary functions for the organization, have much different needs. At this level, the focus is on information from external sources, future-oriented, non-discrete, often informal (meetings vs. written reports), and related to the needs of the organization overall rather than one unit or process.

According to Robert Anthony, author of Planning and Control Systems, there is nothing new to these observations, but these important differences often are overlooked or misunderstood by those who make presentations to upper management. If such differences are not considered carefully, it is likely that everyone's time will be wasted,

and inept presenters may find doors closed to future opportunities for executive presentations.

Scope

A common problem with presentations to upper management is the presenter's failure to understand the appropriate scope and length for the presentation. While a presentation to middle managers may be 45 minutes or more because they need to understand the specifics of a proposal, the same presentation to upper management should include little detail and should rarely exceed 10 or 15 minutes. This is because once senior managers approve a proposal, they will pass it along to mid-level managers who will address such issues as the participants to be involved, timelines, and costs - the "how-it-will-be-done" elements.

Organization

With so little time available, the structure of the presentation becomes all the more important. In fact, it may be at the crux of the executive's perception and evaluation of the proposal - and its presenter. While there are many structures possible (e.g., problem identification, selling a product or service), one might include

- * the problem (or opportunity) at hand
- * the solution (or making the opportunity a reality)
- * benefits of the proposal (there may or may not be time to address)
- * drawbacks
- * limitations
- * risks
- * cost (overall, not details)
- * resources needed
- * expectations for the short and long terms

Part of the presentation's structure includes time for questions, objections, probabilities, return on investment (ROI) figures, ratios, averages, per capita/ transaction data, and any other details that might be asked for immediately after the presentation. All these must be anticipated in advance.

Brevity and Precision

As in any presentation preparation, the audience is the central consideration, and the presentation must be tailored to fit its particular need and style. The attention span of a general audience declines from a high at the beginning of a presentation to a low about 20 minutes into it. Executive-watchers will confirm that in meetings and presentations this low point comes at about 10 minutes into a presentation or discussion. By that point, executives are squirming in their seats, looking at their watches, and checking the location of the exit. Because these individuals work under tight time constraints and have many issues vying for their attention, preparations for executive presentations should focus on brevity and precision.

In "Winning over the Boss," Rae Cook says executives can "become difficult audiences ...when you violate their [personal] principles of time and information management." Therefore, executive presentations should be short and to the point.

Limits are necessary not only for the length of time, but also for the amount of information given in a presentation. With all that may be riding on a presentation, presenters often try to force too much data into it, thinking that will better sell their ideas when, in fact, the opposite may be true. Though all the information may seem vital to the presenter, top executives have neither the time nor the need for all the details.

In the article "Giving an Executive Presentation: the 'Right Stuff'" author Raymond A. Slesinski suggests focusing on "bottom-line" information only. Executives are interested in the big picture, not "narrowly focused detailed information." Extraneous information will only clutter the presentation and cloud the main points. The presentation should be concisely informative; the most important information must be divulged. A presenter must ask: What information is most important? What information is nonessential? Which points should be emphasized, and which points can be discarded?

Clarity

In addition to being brief, concise, and well-organized, presenters also must strive for clarity. That is, within the context of the presentation, information must be easily understandable. While excessive technical talk should be avoided, a well-organized, flowing presentation will encourage comprehension. Transitions from point to point or slide to slide should be smooth and logical. However, presenters also should be flexible; interruptions should be anticipated. Instead of dreading these interruptions as disturbances, the presenter should try to make the most of them.

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Brief pauses in the presentation flow have immediacy and may help the presenter and audience to gather thoughts; likewise, questions asked during the presentation may lead to better understanding. Anecdotes also may facilitate understanding and stave off tediousness.

In the Chemical Engineering article "How to Speak so Facts Come Alive," Morey Stettner explains that anecdotes "lighten the load of ... [the] data and make ... [the] speech far more interesting."

Showmanship

In order to get attention and resources these days, a presenter must capture his or her audience's imagination. It may well be that from a top manager's point of view, the worst sin of managers - including their presentations - is to be boring. According to the Supervision magazine article "Wake Me When It's Over," a survey of vice presidents at 200 of the largest corporations found that only 3 percent of presentations were "stimulating" to them.

While keeping executive presentations brief, concise, and clear, presenters also must make an effort to stimulate the audience. Even if a presentation is short and understandable, a boring presentation may be ignored or soon forgotten. In fact, a short, knowledgeable, but boring presentation may be considered as much a waste of time as a long and entertaining presentation.

In *The Executive's Guide to Winning Presentations*, author Herman Holtz suggests that a certain amount of "showmanship" is a necessary quality for a presenter. Similarly, Peter Bender, in his article "Secrets of Power Presentations" in *The Canadian Manager*, claims that to entertain - in the best sense - should be one of the chief objectives of any presentation. When used properly, anecdotes and visuals help to achieve this entertainer/showmanship objective.

An enthusiastic and confident appearance helps energize the audience. If the presenter appears uninterested in the presentation, the audience will likely follow suit; however, the more interested the presenter appears, the more interesting the presentation becomes.

Graphics

If it is true that we retain only 10 percent of what we read but 50 percent of what we hear and see simultaneously, as David G. Lezar writes in *Seven Ways of Knowing: Teaching for Multiple Intelligences*, effective graphics and vocalization can make a significant difference. Studies suggest that an audience recalls 70 percent of information from a presentation after three hours and only 10 percent after three days. When color graphics are introduced, however, recall improves to 85 percent after three hours and 65 percent after three days, according to a 1987 Small Business Report study.

Frankly, executives have lofty expectations for presentations made to them, and among those expectations is the use of current presentation technology. Using the technology an executive would use seems a smart strategy, and very likely would be a state-of-the-art LCD or DLP(TM) projector and a high-speed laptop with a full array of graphics capabilities. Presenting with transparencies would be little less than an insult. Also, the use of cute clip art that works well for some audiences may not go over with executives, so using more serious graphics - mostly to structure statistics - is advised. Explanatory visuals, such as graphs and charts, also can be helpful and enlivening.

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A Wise Career Move

When contemplating an executive presentation, information professionals should move from what might be fear and loathing of making presentations to consider factors beyond the purpose and content of the presentation. They may want to consider how a well-executed executive presentation can improve their careers.

According to Holtz, several studies have found that an effective presentation can become a decisive step toward career success. An Avery-Denison study of 725 managers reported in an article, "Critical Link between Presentation Skills, Upward Mobility," in *The American Salesman* revealed that 75 percent of those surveyed considered presentation skills to be three times more important for career advancement than writing ability. However, according to a survey of executives reported in Slesinski's *Supervision* article "Giving a Top-Notch Executive Presentation," "only 29 percent [of presentations executives were given] got a rating of 'good to excellent' for the overall quality of presentations delivered to them."

Because presentation skills can be learned, the opportunity for success is realistic.

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