

## **Speaking Up: Presenting to Executives** by Rick Gilbert

In Fortune 500 presentation rooms around the world, management careers are careening off the tracks. Why? Poor delivery? No. Bad content? No. It's because people don't understand the C-level environment. They don't understand who these people are, the world they live in, and what they demand from subordinates who get on their meeting agendas. The carnage of these presentation train wrecks can be avoided by knowing more about these people and giving them what they want.

### **Who Are They and What is Their World Like?**

The people who rise to the top have traits that set them apart. They are extremely bright, aggressive, successful Type 'A' personalities. Most are males, often Ivy League educated. They are under heavy pressure to produce in a highly competitive market. Your goals must be in line with their goals: to move the company forward. They don't have time for pleasantries, diversions, or people who can't respond quickly and efficiently to what *they* think is important. Let's take a look at their world.

### **What Job Security?**

Why is it a bare knuckles world at the top level? For starters, there isn't much job security. If you plan to work with C-levels to get things done, be advised they may not be there for long. According to CLO magazine, the average tenure for someone in the "C-suite" is only 23 months.

Additionally, the Harvard Business Review reports that, if after becoming a new CEO, the company's stock price goes up, there is a 75% chance that one year later that new CEO will still be in his or her job. But, if the stock price goes down, there is an 83% chance they will be fired. The demand to get immediate results is unrelenting. Few of us live under such daily, weekly, or monthly performance pressure.

But even success is no guarantee. According to Chuck House and Ray Price in their book, *The HP Phenomenon*, boards ask CEOs: "What have you done for me lately?" Shortly after generating record breaking profits for their companies, boards fired: John Akers, IBM; John Young and Lou Platt, HP; Ken Olson, DEC; Ed McCracken, Silicon Graphics; and Rod Canion, Compaq.

Those looking up to the CEO may see an imposing figure to be admired or feared. However, from the vantage point of the CEO, it's very different. Ginger Graham, former CEO of Amylin Pharmaceuticals and now a consultant to new CEOs, observed that CEOs often feel like "hired help." With a board that demands quarterly profits, and understands little about the day-to-day problems of running the company, the CEO may feel like a puppet on a string with little job security.

## **The Power Culture**

According to researcher Adrian Savage, what gets you ahead at the lower levels is competence, but at the top it is all about raw power. In his breakthrough paper, "The Real Glass Ceiling," Savage describes the shift that must happen as a manager moves up into the senior levels,

As he or she crosses the invisible barrier, the rules change. To advance further, s/he must play by the new rules, even though they've probably never been explained or even acknowledged openly: succeed in getting and keeping a position of influence and power, from which to secure resources for his or her division or function. Do this amongst a highly competitive group of people who are all outstanding individuals, all working hard to secure their own positions and resources, and all committed to winning first and worrying about any casualties later, if at all.

Welcome to the power culture. Savage goes on to explain that some people are better at adjusting to this change than others. Shortly after reading the Savage paper, one of the executives I'd been coaching told this apocryphal story:

I was giving my quarterly finance report to our top leadership. As had happened on three previous occasions, Bob Warren (pseudonym), a peer from product development, began challenging my numbers in a derisive manner.

I walked over to him, paused, and said "Look, Bob, you do this to me every time I present. I am goddamned sick of it. This is my presentation and I plan to finish it. If you have something to say to me, you can do it after this meeting is over. But for now, I want you to shut up!"

This executive had played college football and presented an imposing figure. He said the room grew deathly silent and Warren sank in his chair. "As I scanned the room, I could see looks of approval on the executives' faces. Six months later, I was promoted to CFO. Two years after that, I was president of the company." Today he is CEO of an up and coming Silicon Valley technology company.

## You're on Your Own

"The perception of your work by senior people is what makes you stand out."

– Brenda Rhodes,  
CEO, In-Touch

When you're working with the top level, you're being watched for your leadership capabilities and potential. How savvy you are? How well do you pick up the cues? Can you be political without looking political? But, there is no handbook. For example, in a January 2005 Harvard Business Review article, it was noted that:

Would-be CEOs can't expect much help in moving to the top spot. Boards and chief executives will give only the slightest indications of the behavior they expect. They want to see whether a candidate is sensitive to subtle cues and can adjust his or her behavior accordingly. CEOs and chairmen are more likely to test than to counsel.

A recently promoted sales executive I worked with in a high\_tech company felt he needed help in his new position. After a particularly contentious senior meeting, he approached the CEO complaining that he couldn't get things done without the CEO's support. The CEO said bluntly, "I don't have time for this. Okay, yes you have my support. Now get on with it." The end.

Another example: Bill, was extremely talented and had moved quickly up the management ladder. He was on the verge of being promoted to the C-level. He complained to a VP I'd been working with that he'd presented an idea to the CEO and had been rebuffed. The VP said to Bill, "Well you know what, the CEO doesn't give a shit about your problems. He worries about things like shareholder value, what the analysts are going to say in their next report, some employee lawsuit, or the fact that there's a quality problem in the manufacturing facility in Taiwan."

The VP went on to add, "Now Bill, you may not like that, but it's not going to change. You may not be cut out to work at the C-level, and that's OK. There are lots of other places you can work. But if you are going to play at this level, that's the name of the game. So take care of *yourself*. The CEO isn't there to take care of you."

So, from the Harvard Business Review, to high tech companies, to the Adrian Savage research, a clear picture emerges: the higher up you go, the more self-reliant you must become. We might also add to the old nostrum "It's lonely at the top," – "and, there's no help for you up there either."

No wonder executive life coaching has become a \$1B+ industry.

## **Value of Their Time:**

### **What costs \$30K / hour and has a 50% failure rate?**

When middle managers make requests to senior leadership for money, resources, and project support, they may not see the bigger picture. Focused only on their own wants and needs, they may fail to appreciate the cost of poor meeting performance. If we consider the top five leaders of a mid-sized company (CEO, CFO, COO, CTO, CMO, etc), with let's say, \$4 billion in revenue, and calculate what it costs to put them into an hour long meeting, the numbers are shocking.

Their salaries, bonuses, stock options and other perks can be determined from SEC public records. Our calculations indicate that the cost of having those five people in a decision meeting costs the shareholders around \$30,000 per hour. \$30,000 for one hour!!! To make matters worse, CEOs we've interviewed report that more than 50%\_of the meetings they sit through are *total failures*. The cost to the share holders of bad meetings is staggering. No wonder the pressure is so high.

According to Mike Lyons, Chairman, Future Point Systems, corporate boards operate under a tenet called "duty of care." That is, a board is charged with watching out for the shareholders' interests. We could assume that if a board knew the huge cost of poor presentations in front of the C-level, they would be expected to take action.

Such losses could make the cost of your run-of-the-mill sexual harassment lawsuit pale in comparison.

## **The Alpha Personality**

There is a wide variety of successful personality styles among people at the top. Consider the huge differences between well known CEOs: Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard (The HP Way); Andy Grove at Intel ("Only the Paranoid Survive"); Larry Ellison at Oracle ("We eat our young"); Bill Gates at Microsoft; Steve Jobs at Apple. While they are very different people, they have certain attributes in common. They all wield enormous power and can be intimidating to people who work for them.

According to Andrew Park, writing in Fast Company magazine, "Convinced of their greatness, these alpha males lapse into arrogance, defensiveness, manipulation, and malevolence, leaving a tangle of confusion and unhappiness."

Psychologist Kate Ludeman noted in the Harvard Business Review, "Possessing both intimidating personalities and genuine power, alphas expect the world to show them appropriate deference."

Writing on the death of George Steinbrenner in the New York Times, Benedict Carey commented that "Recent research on status and power suggests that brashness, entitlement, and ego are essential components for any competent leader."

Life at the top levels of corporate America is a competitive, power-driven, dog-eat-dog world, Darwin's "survival of the fittest." For example, Chuck Tyler, physics PhD, was head of a major Hewlett Packard research lab back in the early 1980s. He had 100 engineers and scientists under him. He proudly quipped to me one day, "I'm the intellectually dominant primate in the room."

In our research on the personalities of top level executives, we did a survey of middle management to see how they perceived people at the top. For a period of six months, in our training workshops, we had people describe the personalities and business values of their C-level executives. The top five adjectives used to describe senior leaders were: *data-driven; impatient; aggressive; time pressured, and intimidating*, just the qualities boards prize in CEOs.

According to recent CEO research by Adam Bryant in his new book, *The Corner Office*, "To get to the corner office it takes a lot of ambition, impatience, and fierce determination." This Type 'A' personality gets someone to the top, but can be hard for subordinates to work with. In order to continue to be successful, the new CEO must now ratchet back his or her style, and become a Type 'B' personality, e.g. listen more, acknowledge the hard work of others, and appreciate that not everyone wants to work 24/7.

### **"I'm becoming a real bitch"**

Susan was a 42-year-old senior director at a Bay Area biotech firm. In one of our trainings, she had just heard the adjectives people use to describe their top leadership. She got a faraway look in her eye, like she has just had a blinding insight about something very important.

After the workshop, she confided, "Look, I am moving rapidly up the management chain. I am headed for the C-suite, and I know I'm becoming a *real bitch*." She went on, "I am more time pressured than ever. I don't have patience to listen to people's problems. I have decisions to

make, and quickly. This is just where I want to be in my career, but sometimes it's not a pretty picture." The good news here is that Susan is clear about where she is going, and the sacrifices she is willing to make to get there.

### **Success With C-levels**

As we've seen, C-levels are very bright people living in high-stress, high-demand environments with little job security and not much support. They can be abrupt and hard to please. However, what a frightened first-time presenter may not realize is how much they want you to succeed. If you're on the agenda, it's because you have information they need to move the company forward. It's not in the company's best interest for you to fail.

Due to a "perfect storm" of personality variables, performance pressure, and environmental factors, top level people can be a very tough audience. Additionally, to put them in a room together costs the shareholders a lot of money. This is made even worse by the fact that more than half of the presentations they receive are total failures. All this paints a dismal and scary picture for the aspiring presenter. But wait! There's hope.

First of all, let's remember that the executives want you to do well. It is in the best interest of the company to have successful, informative presentations. Secondly, in our interviews, they told us what they want. It is not rocket science. Follow these nine guidelines and you'll get in and out of that top level meeting with your career in tact, and maybe funding for your project.

#### **Use Your Sponsor**

Presenting to top level decision makers is "by invitation only." You'll have a sponsor who is higher up in your own functional area. That person has a lot riding on your success, and wants you to hit the ball out of the park. He or she can enlighten you about the political realities before the meeting, keep things on track during the meeting, and help with the follow up summaries after the meeting. Get him or her on board early in the process.

#### **Prepare, Prepare, Prepare**

"What happens *before* the meeting is more important than what happens *at* the meeting," says NetApp Chairman, Dan Warmenhoven. With your career hanging in the balance, plan carefully for that top level presentation. Analyze the audience. Determine if they demand qualitative or quantitative information. Find out who supports you, and who opposes you.

Be strategic. Corinne Nevinny, General Partner, LMN Venture Capital, advised: “Send your slides out before the meeting. That prevents it from being a ‘free for all.’ Most people won’t bother to read what you send them. Being unprepared, they are less likely to attack your ideas.”

Finally, check and recheck your numbers. At the top level, you are in front of a very numerate group. They can do math on the fly. If your numbers don’t “tie,” you’re dead in the water. For example, one CEO we worked with recalled a hapless presenter who had gone through a number of slides about market share. The CEO noticed that the numbers didn’t tie. He stopped the presenter and asked why. The presenter said, “Oh those numbers come from different sources. I blended them and rounded them off.” The CEO exploded, “What the hell are you doing? I can’t believe anything else you tell me. Why are you wasting my time?” Not the outcome you want.

### **Get To The Point!**

“You have 30 seconds to get to the point,” says Steve Blank, co-founder and former CEO of Epiphany. “In the past five years, PDAs have gotten so good that I now have a telephone, a TV, the internet, a computer, and my email at my fingertips. Trust me, all of that is more interesting than you are. If you don’t get right to the point, I’m gone.”

Executives live with unrelenting time pressure. Get to the point immediately. We heard time and again, “make your first line your bottom line.” Propel CEO, Steve Kirsch put it succinctly: “Start with your punch line at the beginning.”

### **Dump The Slides**

“Senior executives are not a bunch of PowerPoint receptor machines,” noted Felicia Marcus, former Regional Director, USEPA. Slash the number of slides to, perhaps, zero... but have back up slides in case they want to do a “deep dive.” Executives want a discussion, not a slide-driven lecture. Paradoxically, a detailed slide show does *not* convince them you know your stuff. In fact, it may cause them to doubt you have the expertise to talk without slides. Ned Barnholt, Chairman of KLA-Tencor, and former CEO of Agilent, said that when a presenter can’t talk “off the slides,” he loses Barnholt’s trust. It requires a free form discussion to create that trust.

### **Live By The “10 / 30 Rule”**

The “10 / 30 Rule” says that if you are scheduled for 30 minutes on the agenda, prepare just 10 minutes of material. The executives will hijack the other 20 minutes for discussion. Dan Warmenhoven, Chairman of NetApp, warned, “If you have a half hour on the agenda, you’re not

going to get through a half hour presentation. We're not going to let you. Remember, it's our meeting."

### **Skip Storytelling**

**Rule #1:** Research shows that stories are far more effective than data for getting attention and increasing retention.

**Rule #2:** Not at the C-level.

Because of the pressure of time, most executives do not find stories helpful in senior meetings. Robert Drolet, Brigadier General (Retired) and former defense industry executive, is very clear on this:

"Decision briefings are serious. Decisions must be made that involve money, involve people, and involve resources. Time is a critical asset that has to be managed. These executives didn't come into that room to listen to a five minute story from you. They came in to make a decision and leave because they have an agenda for that day they can't possibly meet."

Tolerance for stories will vary between companies and between executives, but generally you'll be more effective staying with data. As Jane Shaw, Chairman of Intel observed, "In God we trust. Everybody else bring data." If you do use stories, make sure they are short and get right to the point. Steve Blank cautioned: "The amount of storytelling and emotion diminishes the higher in the organization you're presenting to."

### **Delivery Style**

At the top level, it is all about your content and the strategy you are presenting. As Robert Drolet, says, "Style is like icing on the cake. You can have lousy style, but if you have good content, you will be successful."

While executives are most interested in your content, if you have poor delivery, it will make it harder for them to buy into what you are saying. A speaker who mumbles, paces, fidgets, talks in a monotone, talks too fast without pauses, and won't make eye contact is seen as nervous and just not believable. Such poor delivery habits can completely ruin good content. The question is, "Are you conscious of what you are doing with your body as you deliver your message?" Many speakers are completely clueless about the physical part of their delivery. They are just too nervous to think about it. When we get nervous, the fidgeting starts up, and boom! there goes the value of the message.

The good news is, fixing this is not rocket science. If your style needs a tune up, take a class. Make sure the class includes video feedback and private coaching. Your skills will improve in no time. Keep in mind, though, it is your content that matters, not your delivery. The only reason you should polish up your delivery is so people can hear your message more clearly. You don't want them looking at your hand-wringing and wondering why you are so nervous. They'll begin to doubt you are telling the truth.

### **Don't Expect a Pat on the Back**

"The CEO ain't your dad," one executive told us. You may be thinking, "Of course not. I know who my father is. I'm not confused about that one." But wait. In fact, there are a lot of people in corporate America who ARE confused about that. Psychologists tell us that our attitudes toward established authority figures are often determined by our childhood experiences with the first and most powerful authority figure in our lives, our fathers. Several executives expressed frustration over how this authority problem shows up in meetings and takes up valuable time. Whether the presenter is angry and rebellious or pleading for approval, it absolutely is not what these meetings are about.

Ralph Patterson, former lab director at Hewlett Packard in San Diego, described his frustration when junior level engineers came to his meetings and spent a lot of time explaining how they did the experiment or the study and all the problems they had solved. He said he'd hammer on these presenters, "Don't tell me *how* you got the data. Tell me *what the data means*. We have to make decisions and move on." From Patterson's view, people were asking for approval—rather than coming in with a recommendation based on their expertise, which is what he really needed.

Fortunately, many people are able to balance the psychological dynamics of childhood authority issues and corporate top level decision making. They don't get confused. They don't feel either anger in the face of authority, or a pleading need for reassurance. Their locus of control is within themselves, not projected onto the external power structure around them. An excellent example of this comes from Cindy Spivinek of LSI Corporation. Cindy speaks to her senior team all the time. She is clear about her role as a resource for decision making at the highest level:

"I'm a *tool of management*. My job is to give senior executives information, lay out a set of options, or maybe ask for a decision . . . *and then leave!* I'm not there to be their buddy or to get pats on the back. A presentation isn't a personal development opportunity or a chance for increased visibility. I'm there to do a job. And that job is to help prepare the executives to make the best possible decisions for the company."

No confusion here about the purpose of the meeting.

Remember, you are asked to present at the meeting because you have something they need in the decision making process. Do not be hurt if you don't get the approval you'd hoped for. Former Johnson and Johnson EVP, Harold Fethe, noted, "You may crave reassurance in the meeting, but you will almost certainly get higher marks if you can acknowledge their goodbyes, whether friendly or terse, and allow them to move on to their other work." In other words, this is a serious decision meeting. It's not a place where you can expect to get longed-for parental approval that may have been missing in childhood.

### **Improvise**

Successful C-level presenters perform like jazz musicians. When things go off the track, they improvise. In its May, 2009 issue, The Harvard Business Review observed, "The best team leaders are like jazz players, improvising constantly as they go along."

The downfall of the over-prepared, nervous, mid-level presenter is the dogged determination to stay on script. Robert Drolet observed, "They come into the room with their slides stapled to the front of their suits, with the attitude, 'I'm going to get through these slides no matter what; earthquake, fire, building falls down, whatever.'" Guaranteed failure. Similarly, Steve Kirsch, CEO of Propel, observed that "Your success is 80% in your ability to facilitate the meeting and only 20% in the content per se." Being prepared, but flexible, is the winning strategy.

In summary, presentations at the top levels of corporate America are done in rarified air. The people are unique and demanding. Failure can mean loss of a project, damage to a career, and even a new job search. In addition, success or failure effects the careers of people under the presenter. The stakes could not be higher. According the C-level executives, 50% of the presentations they receive are total failures. So, in summary, to have a successful meeting with top level executives, do what they love, "get to the point and improvise." Your career and project will be stay on track, and you will become a hero to the people in your organization.