

Influence Amplified

Strategies for Engaging and Persuading Today's Leaders

By PowerSpeaking, Inc.



Executive Summary

For years, PowerSpeaking, Inc. has been committed to understanding and enhancing executive communication. Building on our pioneering “Speaking Up: Presenting to Decision Makers®” program launched in 2003, we conducted fresh research in 2024-25 to address today’s rapidly shifting business environment. We’ve factored in major changes like increasing cultural diversity, evolving generational expectations, the rise of AI, and the dominance of virtual work—all against the backdrop of continued costly communication breakdowns.

Through new interviews with global leaders across a diverse range of industries, we’ve not just reaffirmed the foundational principles from our original research, but also uncovered key nuances vital for today’s executive engagement. Here’s what we learned:

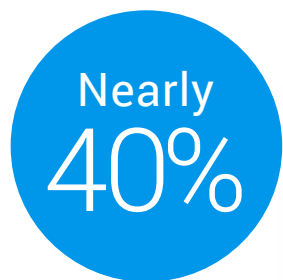
- **Understanding the Executive Mindset Remains Crucial:** Executives are still strategic, time-strapped, and focused on the bottom line. Presenters must speak to their priorities, not just their own expertise.
- **Audience-Centricity is Paramount—and More Complex:** Knowing each leader’s role and style is critical, along with understanding their unique context in a changing global landscape. Leveraging sponsors and colleagues for hyper-specific insights is more crucial than ever.



Senior executives

say **60%** of the presentations made to them fail.

—PowerSpeaking, Inc.
research



of C-Level leaders spend over 3 hours daily addressing issues stemming from ineffective communication

–Axios 2024 State of Internal Communications Report

- **Thorough Preparation is a Must—Evolved for Today's Challenges:** Doing your homework is fundamental. But now, preparation must include navigating the complexities of virtual environments and addressing the rapid pace of information flow. Anticipating questions means considering a wide array of evolving factors. And presenters now have a powerful research tool at their disposal—generative AI.
- **Clarity and Brevity are Critical—Elevated by Virtual Dynamics and Information Overload:** Getting to the point quickly is essential. But in a virtual world, maintaining focus and brevity is even more challenging, requiring new strategies to hold attention and avoid distractions. And with executives constantly bombarded by information in an era of rapid change, cutting through the noise to command their attention has never been more critical—or more difficult.
- **Engagement and Interaction are Non-Negotiable—Amplified Virtually:** Fostering dialogue is key. So, listening intently and flexing in the moment are essential. But in virtual meetings, reading non-verbal cues and creating dynamic, interactive experiences demands greater finesse and intentionality.
- **A Powerful Presence is Key—Punctuated by Authenticity:** Workplace changes such as ever-increasing diversity, dynamic generational value shifts, and flatter organizational structures have caused a shift in expectations. Gone are the days when “executive presence” defines a particular stereotypical persona. To be effective, presenters need to show up as their authentic selves, while of course, conveying competence and confidence.

Essentially, while the core principles from our original research hold true, our latest research reveals the critical adaptations needed to communicate effectively with executives in 2025. It's not just about good presentations; it's about navigating today's complexities with clarity, connection, and influence—ensuring that in a world of accelerating technology, human communication continues to drive success.

Executive Communication

Core Principles Unpacked

Here's a look at each of the core principles the executives we interviewed cited, including nuanced imperatives for today's professionals.

Understanding the Executive Mindset Remains Crucial

C-Suite executives carry massive responsibilities. The decisions they make impact organizations and markets. With so much at stake, their focus is almost always on the bottom line.

Anyone engaging with senior leaders should remember that these are high-performing, strategic thinkers who are short on time and long on expectations. They're typically sharp, impatient, and wired for the big picture. To get their attention—and earn their support—people need to articulate a clear, concise, and compelling business case.



Michael Hanson
Investment Firm
SVP of Research

"The most important thing to know when you're presenting to an executive," said Michael Hanson, Investment Firm, Senior Vice President of Research, "is that they need information cogently, clearly, and rather quickly so that they can make a decision."

For most people, especially content experts, this means a mindset shift. A presenter's limited time with an executive team shouldn't be about showcasing their deep expertise. It needs to be about speaking to the executives' bottom-line mindset and aligning with their priorities. Effective communication at this level zooms out from the tactical to the strategic, from the details to the broader business impact.

"It's about the value your proposal is going to deliver," said Gillian Fox, Your Brilliant Career Founder and Managing Director. "How is this going to add long-term value to the future of this business? If you can answer that with confidence, then your argument comes across—and you come across as someone who is a value creator offering real solutions."



Gillian Fox
Your Brilliant Career
Founder & Managing
Director

Audience-Centricity is Paramount—and More Complex

Understanding the executive mindset is essential—but it's just the starting point. To be truly effective, presenters must **gain a clear understanding of each leader's unique role, priorities, concerns, communication style, and even personal background.**

One of the most effective ways to gather these insights is by **engaging a sponsor**—someone familiar with the executives who can help with preparation and potentially serve as an advisor or advocate during the meeting. It's also helpful to speak with colleagues who have engaged with the same executive or leadership team. Their experiences can provide valuable perspectives on what resonates, what falls flat, and what to anticipate.

"You're collecting the dots to connect the dots," noted Joan Collar, Marsh McLennan, Chief Commercial Officer.

With this audience intelligence, presenters must tailor their pitch, determine the appropriate level of supporting detail, and choose a delivery style that aligns with the audience's preferences. A one-size-fits-all approach won't work. What persuades a CFO, for instance, may not resonate with a CMO—each executive brings different priorities, pressures, and perspectives to the table.



Michelle Killebrew
Pegasus Strategy Co.
Founder & Chief
GTM Strategist

Michelle Killebrew, Pegasus Strategy Co., Founder and Chief GTM Strategist, had this to say about knowing your audience: ***"Executives are constantly multitasking. And so as you're thinking through what you're presenting, you need to understand where their mindset may be. Are they worried about a different project? Are there other fire drills that may be happening? What is their personality type? Understanding where to meet them where they are is going to be the best thing that you can do for a successful meeting outcome."***

Thorough Preparation is a Must—Evolved for Today's Challenges

To engage effectively with senior decision makers, professionals must commit to thorough preparation. Success in these high-stakes settings requires more than just subject-matter expertise—it demands a deep understanding of the audience, a clear and strategic message, and the ability to deliver it with confidence.

And today, all of that is made more complex by the need to master virtual landscapes and keep up with the accelerated pace of information.



Mary Lynn Fayoumi
HR Source
President & CEO

"In my experience, it's extremely important for individuals who are presenting to an executive team to do their homework, be prepared, find points of commonality, and make sure that they understand who they're presenting to and what their objective is," said Mary Lynn Fayoumi, HR Source, President and CEO. *"What is the end goal? Begin with the end in mind."*

One key part of preparation is **engaging a sponsor**—someone who understands the executive audience and can offer insight, guidance, and even advocacy in the room. In addition, AI can be an invaluable tool during the audience analysis phase.

Equally important is **crafting a business case** that translates complex information into a compelling, executive-ready narrative. The message should clearly articulate value, align with leadership priorities, and inspire a confident decision.

"The slides are effectively there to anchor a couple of points. But you yourself, you're the narrator of the story," noted Joan Collar, Marsh McLennan, Chief Commercial Officer.



Joan Collar
Marsh McLennan
Chief Commercial
Officer

Ahead of the meeting, **socializing the content** with individual executives and select stakeholders can provide early feedback and build alignment. For example, if proposing a major, cross-functional process change, executives will want to know that all impacted departments have been consulted and their buy-in gained.

Anticipating questions and potential pushback is also essential. The more thoughtfully these are addressed, the stronger and more credible the message—and the presenter—becomes.

Visuals should be concise and purposeful, supporting the narrative without overwhelming the audience with unnecessary detail. That said, have additional detail on hand, perhaps in an appendix, in case the executives want a deep dive.

Finally, **rehearsal is critical**. Practicing out loud, ideally with a colleague or sponsor, helps refine tone, timing, and delivery. Recording the presentation can also reveal opportunities to tighten the message and improve delivery preferences.

Get the Visuals Right

- Keep slides simple, clear, and visually appealing.
- Slides should support the message, not be the message.
- Step away from them and interact. The audience came to hear the speaker, not read the slides.

Patricia Coan, Pura, Chief Operating Officer, summed up the importance of preparation well: ***“Pre-work is how you show up as confident, how you come across as prepared, eloquent, and thoughtful. Being able to address in your presentation the specific concerns of the audience that you’re presenting to is so vital for buy-in and for how you’re perceived within the organization.”***



Patricia Coan
Pura
Chief Operating Officer



Jamie Miller
Northeastern
University-Arlington
Campus, CEO &
Regional Dean

Jamie Miller, Northeastern University-Arlington Campus, CEO and Regional Dean, added another dimension: ***“Things go well when you put the time and the effort to walk into a space and do your homework. Be prepared with multiple directions you could take the engagement in and not be singularly focused on just one direction or one outcome.”***

Kasia Gora, PhD, Stealth Startup, Co-Founder and CEO, observed, *“AI can help with research. For example, say you have a vision for a presentation and want to make a certain point, but you’re not sure about the facts. You can use deep research from Perplexity, ChatGPT, Claude, you name it, to dig into a topic and quickly substantiate whether you can make a point or not. It’s also great for editing. I can make an amazing presentation much more quickly because I’m confident that I don’t have to spend hours editing. AI is also great at generating images. You can use it to illustrate your presentations in ways that have never been possible before. That kind of efficiency boost is really going to be a competitive advantage in today’s world.”*

Clarity and Brevity are Critical—Elevated by Virtual Dynamics and Information Overload

Clarity and brevity are crucial, and in today’s virtual landscape, staying focused and concise is harder than ever. Capturing executives’ attention and engaging them requires new approaches, especially because they are bombarded with information, requests, and constant change. Cutting through the noise to influence and persuade them has become both more essential and more demanding.

As Rob Cheng, PC Matic, CEO, put it, *“Being very precise and very clear about what you’re communicating is a very important skill to develop.”*



Rob Cheng
PC Matic
CEO



Gaurav Bhalotia
Angle Investor
& Advisor - Early
Stage Startups

Gaurav Bhalotia, Angle Investor and Advisor, Early Stage Startups, shared this insight: *“As executives, we really enjoy high-fidelity conversations that are extremely relevant, on point, concise, and can bring out the dimensions that will help in reaching a decision or understanding the context.”*

The executives we interviewed said they appreciate presenters who set the context at the outset. It helps them make a quick transition from the last meeting to the presentation at hand. It must be clear and brief. Immediately after setting context, presenters should **make their first line their bottom line by leading with the ask and the business benefit.**

Patricia Coan, Pura, Chief Operating Officer, reinforced the imperative to get to the point. ***"When I think about the most effective ways to structure presentations for executive buy-in, I always recommend starting with the absolute highest-level ask and the absolute bottom line of the presentation."***

The executives also stressed how critical it is to **avoid excessive detail, jargon, and overly complex slides**. Content experts often make the mistake of believing decision makers need deep details and the process that it took to get them. They don't. Less is more. Executives want presenters to make the ask, provide minimal supporting info, and then let them request a deep dive if desired.



Kasia Gora, PhD
Stealth Startup
Co-Founder & CEO

"Executives don't want to be stuck in a meeting where the information being presented isn't what they want. I think it's really important to let them double-click on details when they want it and otherwise stay high-level," said Kasia Gora, PhD, Stealth Startup, Co-Founder and CEO.

Finally, presenters should **have an elevator-pitch version** of their proposal on hand in case their scheduled time is cut. They should be prepared to summarize what decision or support is needed, then offer to return at a later date to discuss it further.

"Practice the 30-second elevator speech," advised Bianca Wong, Global Transportation Company, Vice President, Operations Southeast Asia. ***"It's a critical component of communication effectiveness and a cornerstone of executive presence."***



Bianca Wong
Global Transportation
Company, Vice President,
Operations
Southeast Asia

Engagement and Interaction are Non-Negotiable—Amplified Virtually

Executives don't want a one-way presentation. **They want a dialogue with someone who has a credible, authentic, collaborative presence.** So, professionals must prepare for a dynamic discussion—not just a polished pitch.

That means active listening and asking clarifying questions to ensure full understanding. This is especially important when a presenter senses unspoken concerns and needs to identify the question behind the question.



Nathan SV
Visara
CEO & Co-Founder

“One of the most important skills that I have learned is the art of listening,” said Nathan SV, Visara, CEO and Co-Founder. *“And the art of listening is not just hearing, but intently looking at the person and the nonverbal communication that occurs when a person is speaking.”*

Navigating a dynamic discussion with decision makers is one of the most challenging—and critical—skills to master. It demands a careful balance of engagement, time management, and strategic alignment. It's a nuanced skill that requires practice, coaching, and often formal training.

Add to that the fact that mastering this skill is more complex and essential today due to the limitations and challenges of reading the room in a virtual setting. Reading non-verbal cues and creating dynamic, interactive experiences demands greater finesse and intentionality.

Master the Virtual

Presenting to senior executives virtually is even more challenging than in person. To keep the engagement strong, people should:

- Convey passion to keep the energy high, which will combat the inherent distractions of a virtual environment.
- Create frequent interaction by asking direct questions throughout to keep the audience involved. Also, insert pattern disruption such as removing the slide deck during discussions.
- Make sure the content overall is concise.

“The rhythm has to be different for a virtual presentation. It's incumbent on presenters in virtual settings to bring a higher level of energy and more content that is going to provoke discussion and thought,” said David Johnson, Abraxas Group, Founder and Managing Partner.



David Johnson
Abraxas Group
Founder &
Managing Partner

Having a keen situational awareness is an important part of navigating discussions. It involves monitoring engagement through body language, eye contact, and verbal cues—and responding accordingly.

Shannon Brayton, Bessemer Venture Partners, Partner & Chief Marketing Officer, noted, *“An example of something that makes it really hard for presenters to manage is when executives are on their phone or laptops and are super distracted. And these are the people you need the approval from. In these situations, find a way to bring the exec into the conversation by saying, for example, ‘Carrie, I would love to better understand your opinion.’”*

Presenters must also be **prepared to handle questions** with confidence and brevity—not with defensiveness or attitude. When challenged by executives, responses should be thoughtful, honest, and to the point. If the presenter doesn't know the answer, it's far better to acknowledge that than to speculate. A simple commitment to follow up with accurate information by the end of the day—or as soon as possible—reinforces credibility and professionalism.



Peter Rigby
Informa
Former CEO

Peter Rigby, Informa, Former CEO, offered this advice: *“When asked a tough question, don't be knocked off course. Stick to the knitting, stick to the rationale of the meeting, stay on course, and answer the question without being aggressive.”*

And Siddharth Talwar, Growth Capital Investor, shared this great insight: *“A question that you can't answer is a gift. Take it. No one has all the answers.”*



Siddharth Talwar
Growth Capital
Investor

Last, but by no means least, engaging the C-Suite **demands a delicate balance of flexibility and control**. It's just as important to make room for a robust, challenging discussion as it is to keep it focused on the goal.

A Powerful Presence is Key—Punctuated by Authenticity

“Executive presence,” or what we like to call “powerful presence,” is often described as the “it factor” that sets influential people apart—but it’s much more than charisma or confidence. **At its core, a powerful presence is the ability to inspire trust, project credibility, and communicate with clarity in high-stakes situations.** It’s how professionals show up, speak up, and lead when it matters most.

While a powerful presence can be hard to define, people recognize it instantly. It’s the poised speaker who commands the room without saying much. It’s the calm under pressure, the clarity in complexity, the quiet confidence that earns respect. And in today’s fast-paced, high-stakes business environment, it’s essential for gaining buy-in, leading teams, and influencing decisions at the highest levels.

One key finding from our research is that **authenticity is a crucial component of a powerful presence with executives.**

Gone are the days when “executive presence” defines a particular stereotypical persona. People are more effective if they show up as their authentic self, while of course, conveying competence and confidence.

Whether presenting to the C-Suite, leading a major initiative, or navigating tough conversations, **powerful presence helps professionals make an impact—and be remembered for the right reasons.**

Be
Authentic!



Addie Swartz
reachHIRE, CEO

Addie Swartz, reachHIRE, CEO, advised, *“Own the meeting so that you’re driving what’s happening as opposed to just being a talking head and not really seeing or understanding or absorbing what’s happening in the virtual or physical room around you.”*

Several executives offered a variety of perspectives on having a powerful presence:

"I think some of the key ingredients for making a strong argument to an executive audience are to have an opinion and a point of view," said Bindu Garapaty, Psy.D., Better Health, Chief People Officer. ***"You want to maintain flexibility, but have a stance because that's truly valued among executive leadership teams. It provides an opportunity for diverse perspectives and diverse thoughts to be shared."***



Natalie Levkovich
Health Federation of
Philadelphia
CEO

Natalie Levkovich, Health Federation of Philadelphia, CEO, pointed out that ***"Arrogance is not attractive, and it does not win people's hearts and minds. In my experience, it's best to demonstrate by the substance of your ideas and by the track record of your accomplishments that you have credibility. If you communicate that with a degree of passion, you're more likely to be persuasive and to appeal to people's sense of purpose."***

"Confidence comes from being yourself. Taking the leap and being vulnerable and authentic is the best way to grow followership and effectively lead."

Kasia Gora, PhD, Stealth Startup, Co-Founder & CEO

"I think some of the key ingredients for making a strong argument to an executive audience are to have an opinion and a point of view."

Bindu Garapaty,
Psy.D., Better Health,
Chief People Officer




Bindu Garapaty, Psy.D.
Better Health
Chief People Officer

Final Thoughts

In essence, effective executive communication is about understanding and connecting with the audience, conveying a clear, credible message in a way that speaks to senior leaders, and achieving a desired outcome that's good for the business.

Some parting thoughts from the executives we interviewed:



"The individual benefits of improving your presentation skills, especially in high-stakes business environments, are enhancing your personal brand and being able to drive and influence critical business initiatives for the organization. For the organization, this is how businesses are successful, with individuals who can clearly and succinctly provide initiatives, growth ideas, and innovations." Michelle Killebrew, Pegasus Strategy Co., Founder and Chief GTM Strategist

"In the end, almost everything is communication. If communication is not clear between an organization and its people, its clients, its vendors, then simply put, you don't have very much. In a world of accelerating technology, AI, all of that, many types of skill sets are going to become commoditized. But what will not become commoditized is human communication and interaction. It is the way things are done." Michael Hanson, Investment Firm, SVP of Research



Shannon Brayton
Bessemer Venture
Partners
Partner & Chief
Marketing Officer

"I think there are enormous benefits to people who have a great reputation as a strong presenter, because I think that gets around really quickly. The way you show up on stage can impact your career and the way people view you. It's one of those things, over time, you have to hone as a craft if you want to be a senior executive. It just goes with the territory. And you have to learn to at least be comfortable up there to a point where you realize this is very impactful to your career." Shannon Brayton, Bessemer Venture Partners, Partner and Chief Marketing Officer

"Having strong executive communication skills allows you to influence and persuade in ways that you don't even think are imaginable." Bindu Garapaty, Psy.D., Better Health, Chief People Officer

Getting executive communications right takes a blend of mindset, skill, and adaptability, and it's crucial for both individual and organizational success. Individuals benefit by being seen as more credible and influential; and organizations benefit from better, faster decision making and stronger working relationships.

"In the end, almost everything is communication. It's the one skill set that will never go away. If you can articulate yourself well, you can do almost anything."

Michael Hanson, Investment Firm, Senior Vice President of Research

The Way Forward: A Leadership Imperative

As we've learned from the many executives we interviewed and worked with over the decades, most presenters—including people in management—don't realize that successfully presenting to senior leaders requires a radically different skill set.

It's clearly a communication skills gap that needs addressing. The question is, how best to go about it.

Because of the staggering costs of ineffective communication with decision makers—in both money and morale—we believe senior leaders are in the best position to make effective executive-level presenting a priority.

Leading the Way

Here's what you can do to ensure your teams are equipped to communicate with the clarity and strategic insight you expect:

Name it as a strategic priority. Let your organization know: presenting to leadership isn't just a skill, it's a differentiator. Call it out as a core expectation and ensure the organization has the resources it needs to make it happen.

Socialize sponsors to help potential leaders and high performers. If you don't already have a formal process to identify and engage sponsors, create one. They can play an integral role as advisors to people who need to pitch a new idea or make a request of the leadership team.

Be intentional about offering targeted training—not just general presentation skills. Offer training that helps people understand the executive mindset, structure ideas clearly, be super-concise, lead with the bottom line, build a business case, and perhaps most important, masterfully engage in an executive dialogue—in person or virtually.

Build feedback loops. Encourage team managers and their higher-level content experts to rehearse high-stakes presentations with managers, sponsors, and peer advisors. Make feedback part of the process, not an afterthought.

Sustain it over time. Don't treat high-stakes communication training as a one-and-done workshop. Build it into onboarding, performance reviews, and leadership development.

Model what great looks like. Your example matters. When you lead with clarity and purpose in your own communication, you set the standard.

Bottom Line

When your teams can present with precision, influence, and executive presence, you get better decisions, faster execution, and greater trust across the organization. The upside is measurable—and the risk of doing nothing is too costly to ignore.

And here's an invaluable resource you can share with your team:



About Us

We empower teams and leaders to drive business success through clear, confident, and impactful communication.

Transformational skill building is achieved through our highly interactive workshops, 1:1 personalized coaching, and resources, using research-based methods and proven frameworks.

99.5%

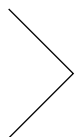
of Program Participants Recommend PowerSpeaking, Inc.

1,500,000+

Individuals and Teams Upskilled Worldwide

Named Top 100

Fastest Growing Private Companies by Silicon Valley Business Journal



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"Speaking Up: Presenting to Decision Makers"



Thank you

to the insightful,
generous
executives who
shared their wisdom
for this report



Carrie Beckstrom
PowerSpeaking, Inc.
Interviewer & CEO



Addie Swartz
reachHIRE
CEO



Bianca Wong
Global Transportation
Company, Vice President,
Operations Southeast Asia



Bindu Garapaty, Psy.D.
Better Health
Chief People Officer



David Johnson
Abraxas Group
Founder &
Managing Partner



Gaurav Bhalotia
Angle Investor & Advisor,
Early Stage Startups



Gillian Fox
Your Brilliant Career
Founder & Managing
Director



Jamie Miller
Northeastern University
Arlington Campus, CEO
& Regional Dean



Joan Collar
Marsh McLennan
Chief Commercial
Officer



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Rob Cheng
PC Matic
CEO



Shannon Brayton
Bessemer Venture
Partners, Partner & Chief
Marketing Officer



Siddharth Talwar
Growth Capital
Investor



Nathan SV
Visara
CEO & Co-Founder