

An Excerpt From

Speaking Up
Surviving Executive Presentations

by Frederick Gilbert

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Speaking Up[®]

Surviving Executive Presentations

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Frederick Gilbert



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*F*or Mary McGlynn whose belief
in this project and in me has
made it all possible.

Contents

	Foreword	ix
	Preface	xi
	Introduction	1
PART I	The People at the Top	7
1	Clueless	9
2	Life at the Top	13
PART II	Survival Tactics at the C-Level	31
3	The Seven Deadly Challenges	33
4	Time Cut: A \$30,000/Hour Investment	39
5	Disengaged Executives: It's You or the Smartphones	47
6	Food Fights: You Are Not the Referee	51
7	Decision Maker Leaves: Reading the Room	57
8	Topic Change: Time to Improvise	61
9	Side Talk: Keeping Your Poise	67
10	The Energetic Discussion: Less Talking and More Listening	71
PART III	Creating Winning Executive Presentations	77
11	Content + Facilitation + Listening + Improv = Success	79
12	Public Speaking Unplugged	97
13	Delivery Style	117
14	I Really Did Give a Damn!	133

PART IV Career and Personal Advice from the Top	141
15 Parents, Mentors, and Role Models: Looking Over the Pickle Barrel	145
16 Career Challenges	159
17 Career Advice	169
18 Legacy	177
Conclusion	183
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	185
<i>Glossary</i>	189
<i>References</i>	193
<i>Endnotes</i>	196
<i>Index</i>	198
<i>About the Author</i>	202

FIGURES

2.1 Authority Attitude Chart	23
2.2 Executive Presence	25
2.3 Executive Backgrounds	26
4.1 PREP Model	44
11.1 Deep Listening	88
11.2 Risk Assessment Curve	92
12.1 Presentation Framework	101
12.2 Data Dump vs. Executive Model	105
12.3 The 10/30 Rule	106
12.4 The Big Seven	108
12.5 Different Processing Styles	109
12.6 Stories vs. Data	113
13.1 Style Hierarchy	119

TABLES

12.1 Types of Business Presentations	99
12.2 Senior Executive Presentations Are Different!	100

Foreword

Over the course of my career, I have spent more than my fair share of time with other executives as we listened to woefully unprepared speakers drive staff productivity in the wrong direction. These speakers surely wanted to help our productivity, competitiveness, and bottom line—but they didn't. Senior management appreciates speakers who immediately get to the point with well-vetted information delivered in a concise manner. Failing that wastes time, and time is our most precious resource.

Between the covers of this book, you have actionable solutions to this problem. If you are an executive, sell these ideas in your organization. Meetings will become more productive. If you are in middle management, this book will help you succeed in those high-stakes, high-stress meetings where so much hangs in the balance, not the least of which may be your career.

I believe that leaders are born not made. The challenge of senior people is to identify those leaders rather than trying to create them.

In identifying future leaders, I look at how people communicate as one indicator of their leadership skill set. The ones that have those communication skills “baked in” have these three ingredients as part of their management DNA:

Content—They are able to get to the point immediately, knowing the value of time in a roomful of executive decision makers.

Visual Aids—They understand that PowerPoint slides are not the focal point of the meeting. They know we want a discussion about an important topic, not a monologue and slide show.

Improvisation—They are flexible by nature. When business reality demands that they be light on their feet, they improvise and create something new in a heartbeat.

In addition to these three communication skills, people who rise to the top levels at places like Sun Microsystems are able to manage a room full of bright, competitive, time-pressured executives with ease. Somehow, when things get off track or conflicts erupt, they know how to refocus the group and get us to a decision.

They understand that senior leadership wrestles with much bigger issues than just their department demands. Almost as second nature, they listen to the conflicts and issues around the table and summarize what they hear, creating a sense of trust. That trust tells me these are natural leaders.

Through his interviews with top-level executives from a wide variety of companies, Rick Gilbert has shined a light on the nature of these skills. This remarkable book breaks these highly sophisticated communication skills into learnable units. With the amazing insights of both the executives and the midlevel managers profiled in the book, you will learn how to present at top-level meetings. The executives will see you as a natural leader.

This book would have been useful for many of the people who presented to me over my career, but of course, it had not been written yet. Now it has been. You can cut years off your leadership learning curve by applying these skills.

Scott McNealy

Founder and former CEO of Sun Microsystems
Chairman of Wayin

Preface

“**F**or middle management, our quarterly board meetings are terrifying events. Every three months this hallway is lined with people in black suits with their presentations clutched in their hands and panic in their eyes,” said our tour guide at the Atlanta, Georgia world headquarters of the Coca-Cola Company. She added, “The tension is so high, I stay away from here on those days.”

If you are in middle management, you live with daily ambiguity, lack of control, and even chaos. To get anything done, you must present your ideas to people up the chain, and those presentations can be brutal. Careers and projects can come unwound in a matter of minutes if the presenter doesn’t know the rules at the top level. Your people depend on you being successful so that you will “bring home the bacon.” Although you may be confident speaking at your own level, as you go up the organization, your confidence can crumble knowing that the stakes are higher, and at the same time, the rules are very different from day-to-day presentations. What *are* these rules? That is what this book is about.

The good news is, the rules are simple and easy to learn: 1) know the people; 2) get to the point; and 3) improvise. Unfortunately a staggeringly high number of mid-level people (67%, actually) march right into top-level meetings and shoot themselves in the foot by: 1) not saying what they want at the beginning; 2) having too many PowerPoint slides; and 3) rigidly sticking to their scripts. This is a formula for career suicide.

We’ve researched this topic for the past ten years, interviewing C-level executives, and getting input from literally hundreds of mid-level managers. The strategies you will learn in this book come directly from the executives who tell you exactly what to do to be successful in those high stakes meetings. In

addition, this material has been “road tested” in hundreds of classes. We get feedback constantly from graduates who tell us stories of deals won and careers enhanced when they applied the principles you are about to learn.

We teach classes on this topic, both live and web-based. We also offer an award winning (Brandon Hall Gold Excellence in Learning) in-depth, on-demand, self-paced course called *Speaking Up®: Presenting to Executives* that streams to your computer. This book is interconnected with that video program. On the last page of some of the chapters you will notice a QR tag. If your smartphone or tablet has a QR tag scanning app, you can go right to the videos that are the foundation of our *Speaking Up®* online program. Some we’ve found that work well are: i-nigma (<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/i-nigma-qr-code-data-matrix/id388923203?mt=8>) and Microsoft tag (<http://tag.microsoft.com/download.aspx>). There are lots of other free QR tag readers. Find the one that works best with your device.

For more information about our programs, please visit our web page: www.powerspeaking.com.

Finally, as this book is going to press, the European and United States’ debt crises promise to make our economic future uncertain at best, and catastrophic at worst. This book is about the skills that C-level executives told us will keep careers on track because they help their corporations be more competitive. Obviously, *Speaking Up®* communication skills are not the be all and end all of a successful career, but having them will surely be a success factor as you keep your boat afloat in the choppy waters ahead.

I hope you enjoy this book and find it helpful.

Rick Gilbert

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Introduction

I started PowerSpeaking, Inc. in 1985 to teach people how to make winning, career-building business presentations with confidence. Because the demand for these skills is huge, our company has been very successful. Our trainings provide excellent tools for people who present to their own departments, to subordinates, and to peers. By the early 2000s, however, I started hearing horror stories from mid-level managers about the terror they felt when presenting to senior-level management. Top-level meetings clearly require a different approach. One of our clients learned this lesson the hard way when he had a complete meltdown at a C-level meeting.

No Stories! Fire Gilbert!

Matt was a *PowerSpeaking*[®] graduate and a vice president of IT at a \$3 billion Silicon Valley company. Preparing for a presentation to the founders and top officers of his company, he came to me for one-on-one presentation coaching. I drilled him on the importance of using stories to connect with his audience and to create long term retention of his core message. The research is crystal clear that stories are more powerful than data in this regard.¹

In his own departmental meetings, Matt had used storytelling successfully. A major problem occurred, though, when, following my advice, he tried the same approach in his quarterly presentation to the executive staff. A few minutes into Matt's story to illustrate one of his key points, the COO bellowed, "Where the hell are you going with this? Get to the point!"

Matt's response reverted to childhood and made matters worse. Looking plaintively at the COO, he stammered, "Well, Rick Gilbert, the presentation coach you sent me to, told me to use stories." Matt seemed to be looking for approval from

a stern father. But instead of approval, the COO yelled, “Well, fire Gilbert and get on with it.” It was a bad day for Matt and a bad day for me.

As the speech coach who had just been fired, I called the COO to find out what had gone wrong. I told him about the research showing that stories move people more than data, and that stories aid in retention. I will never forget his blunt response, “We don’t have time for stories, and I don’t care about retention. We have to get the next agenda item on the table, make a decision, then move on.”

Suddenly a light bulb went on above my head. It was instantly clear that what works in most presentation situations can cost you your job in higher-level meetings. That conversation with the COO literally changed our business from that day to this.

Different Rules at the Top

Since that eye-opening exchange with Matt’s COO, we have been studying the dynamics of senior-level meetings. Like cultural anthropologists, we set out to explore the unique set of rules in this strange land referred to as “the C-suite.” We asked questions, such as: How can major projects and successful careers fall apart in a matter of moments at a senior meeting? Conversely, how does one become a corporate hero in the C-level meeting room?

To find the answers, we conducted in-depth, video-based interviews with 22 C-level executives. They shared priceless insights about how to survive and even thrive in the often brutal life at the top levels of corporate America. What they revealed, although not exactly secret, is generally unknown in the lower ranks. This explains why so many mid-level managers fail when presenting to C-level executives.



OneID CEO Steve Kirsch being interviewed

In short, the insights these high-ranking executives shared will help you avoid presentation pitfalls and boost your professional standing in the process. Now let's meet our senior executives.



Greg Ballard
SVP, Warner Brothers



Ned Barnholt
Chairman, KLA-Tencor



Steve Blank
Founder, Former CEO,
Epiphany



Robert Drolet
Brig. General (Retired),
Former Defense Industry
Executive



Dan Eilers
General Partner, Vanguard
Ventures, Former CEO,
Claris Corporation



Doris Engibous
Board Member, Natus
Corporation, Former
CEO, Hemosphere, Inc.



Anna Eshoo
Member, U.S. Congress
California's 14th District



Harold Fethé
VP, Anacor
Pharmaceuticals



Ginger Graham
Board Member, Walgreens,
Former CEO, Amylin
Pharmaceuticals



Vern Kelley
SVP, Intersil Corporation



Steve Kirsch
CEO, OneID



John Kispert
CEO, Spansion, Inc.



Bryan Lamkin
CEO, Clover Network,
Former SVP, Yahoo, Inc.



Mark Leslie
Founder, Former CEO,
Veritas Software



Mike Lyons
Venture Partner, Paladin
Group, Associate Professor,
Stanford University



Audrey MacLean
Co-Founder, NET, Former
CEO, Adaptive, Associate
Professor, Stanford
University



Felicia Marcus
Western Director, Natural
Resources Defense
Council, Former Regional
Administrator, EPA



Corinne Nevinny
General Partner,
LMNVC



Brenda Rhodes
Chairman and CEO,
InTouch Communications



Jane Shaw
Chairman, Intel



Rick Wallace
CEO, KLA-Tencor



Dan Warmenhoven
Executive Chairman,
NetApp

Knowing what the expectations are at the top can mean the difference between a successful career and a new job search. Unfortunately, these lessons aren't taught in business schools, but are often learned via real life fiascos. Throughout this book, you will hear directly from these C-level executives. They will tell you the best ways to present to them. Their advice can literally save your career, get your project funded, or even help your company pull ahead of the competition. In the following pages, you will get all the information you need to survive the rough and tumble of a senior-level meeting.

Speaking Up®: Surviving Executive Presentations is divided into four parts. Each part explores a different element of engaging with top-level decision makers. Whether you work in a corporate setting or a nonprofit environment, the communication issues you face are the same.

In Part I, we look in depth at who the C-levels really are. In Part II, we review the major problems—the “Seven Deadly Challenges”—that can derail your well-prepared presentations. You will follow the plights of six mid-level executives as they learn some hard lessons on the playing fields of “Mahogany Row.” In Part III, we provide a presentation plan that will keep your executives paying attention to you instead of their smartphones. In Part IV, the executives let you into their world on a personal level. The greater your understanding of who they really are, the quicker you will be able to create a collaborative relationship with them when you step up to the table and say, “Good morning.” Finally, on pages 189–192 there is a glossary of terms used throughout this book.

Let's get started . . .

PART

I

The People at the Top

Having worked as a psychologist, consultant, and college teacher, I had zero idea about management structure or strategy when I joined Hewlett-Packard in 1980. As you'll see in Chapter 1, I found out the hard way that what you don't know *can* hurt you. The lessons I learned over the years (mostly about what not to do) became rich background for this book. After reading *Speaking Up®: Surviving Executive Presentations*, you won't have to make the same mistakes I made.

In the famous military treatise, *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu advises, "Know your enemy and know yourself, and you can win a hundred battles without a single loss."¹ In Chapter 2, you will meet your "enemy." While life at the top levels of corporate America can be very competitive and feel like a battlefield sometimes, the executives sitting around that table are not your enemy. Thus, the war metaphor is limited. In fact they see you as a colleague. As Dan Warmenhoven reminded us, "We're all on the same team. We're all in the same company. We are all pursuing the same objectives."

Of course, the more you know about your "colleagues" before walking into that room, the better. Chapter 2 takes you behind the glossy annual reports, to reveal what life is like for people at the C-level: their lack of job security, the competitive nature of their jobs, and the journeys they've taken to get where they are. Understanding all this, plus the skills you are going to learn in the rest of this book, will allow you to win your boardroom "battles."

Clueless

A presentation cannot make a career, but a presentation can undo a career.

—Bryan Lamkin

As a mid-level manager, you are accustomed to leading your own meetings. You may be a very successful leader with 30 or 300 people under you. In your quarterly off-site meetings with your entire team, your presentations are enthusiastically received. You are a respected and successful leader. Your career is on track. The problem is, when you walk into those quarterly review meetings with the C-level staff, all bets are off.

The stakes could not be higher. Your job, your project, and the jobs of those people who report to you hang in the balance every time you get up to present to senior leadership. This is make or break time. Many a boardroom has been bloodied by the carnage left in the wake of an unprepared speaker, clueless about the rules of the game. It happened to me.

How I Went Down in Flames

I confidently walked into Dick Anderson's spacious office at the Hewlett-Packard Computer Systems Division in Cupertino, California. I was manager of our quality publications and training programs. The year was 1982 and I was just two years into my business career. It was my first meeting with a real senior executive. I was accompanied by my boss, Ilene Birkwood, the functional manager of Quality Assurance, who reported to Dick, the general manager of the division of 3,000 people. Our meeting had been scheduled for 30 minutes, but ended abruptly in 15. We didn't get what we wanted. In spite of my



Focus on Quality

huge for me, my presentation was only a small part of Dick's complicated schedule that day.

Dick Anderson had much bigger, more compelling concerns than me or my proposal. He had just made national business headlines. During the early 1980s, the Japanese were making inroads not only into the automotive industry, but also into the world of high-tech. Their attack on American commerce dominated the business and popular press. In this competitive environment, Dick had made the decision to buy Japanese-made computer components because of their proven higher quality. As Dick said at the time, "We want to build high quality computers, but how can we

"Changes in the worldwide competitive environment have caused us to reevaluate what high quality means, and to change our expectations of what we must achieve to be a quality leader."

— John A. Young
CEO, Hewlett Packard, 1982

confidence, something had gone terribly wrong, and I didn't know what it was, or why it happened.

With the clarity of 20/20 hindsight and years of research, I now see what went wrong at that meeting. First of all, I presumed that this meeting was all about me, and a big deal in Dick Anderson's day. After all, I was a manager, and what could be more important than my quality training program? Well, a whole lot, actually. Although

do that if the memory chips keep failing?"

This had created quite an uproar and brought him attention from HP corporate offices. His focus that day might have been on a few other things—perhaps an interview with *Business Week* in the next half-hour or

At a forum in Washington D.C., Dick Anderson had made a speech focusing on the stunning difference in quality between Japanese and American vendors of integrated circuits. American vendors, notably, Intel, were at first enraged, then sheepishly apologetic, and then energized into reaction and repair.¹

—Chuck House and Ray Price
The HP Phenomenon

possibly his upcoming meeting with the HP Board. Dick oversaw an entire division of HP. His interest in my little slice of the pie was, to say the least, limited. (*See Dick's reflections on our meeting in the summary of Part I, page 29.*)

Your presentation is vitally important to you, but remember the executives are processing information from 25 to 50 different parts of the company.

—Felicia Marcus

The biggest lesson I teach executives and students is that your worldview is pretty narrow. The people above you are dealing with a much larger context than you are, and if you want to get good quickly, you need to understand more than your little piece.

—Steve Blank

The second mistake I made was seeing Dick as a father figure who would give me a pat on the back for my brilliant training efforts. With a background in humanistic psychology, I had hoped we could create a bond through our mutual commitment to training and the human potential. After all, aren't happy, fulfilled, even self-actualized employees good for business? Couldn't our quality training programs create peak experiences for them? Surely Dick would want to work with me toward the lofty goal of enriching his employees' work experiences.

Well, not exactly.

Yes, Dick had set aside a half hour in his demanding schedule for our meeting, but it was my responsibility to let him know why we were there and what we needed from him. It was up to Ilene and me to get that message across clearly and

quickly, then get the hell out of his office. As soon as he became aware that we didn't have our act together, the meeting was over. He knew enough to value his time even if we didn't.

Since I made that ineffective presentation to Dick Anderson, the senior-meeting challenge is more treacherous than ever for mid-level managers. With growing pressure from issues like globalization and the speed of business on the Internet, performance demands on senior leadership increase daily. There's no time for, "Hi Bob. How was your weekend? How's the family?" Today's demand is: "Let's get right to it. I have another meeting in ten minutes."

I walked into that meeting like a naïve schoolboy hoping to please his teacher, rather than an effective professional. I lacked the knowledge of HP's overall objectives, or Dick's objectives, or how my department could support those objectives. To put it mildly, I was clueless.

Summary

Our company has worked with thousands of mid-level managers and executives preparing them to "speak up." I can assure you that what happened to me as I struggled to understand how to relate to senior leadership is not uncommon. If you enter corporate life without formal business training, as I did, you will learn these communication rules by trial and error, if at all. It doesn't need to be that way. What follows is a road map, a compass, and a GPS to help guide you on your journey into that unknown territory called "the C-suite." These are the tools that will help you be successful every time you "speak up" in your organization.

Now let's learn more about the people sitting around that big table who are waiting for your opening line.

CHAPTER

2

Life at the Top

Executives are paid to be paranoid. Executives are territorial. Executives are impatient.

—Harold Fethe

Your success depends on getting through to C-level executives on their terms. Let's be clear about this—presenting to C-levels (or other senior decision makers in your company) will simply be the most important presentations you will ever make in your entire life. Ever! In your entire life! Think about it. You probably will not go into politics or entertainment where you could be in front of huge audiences at say, the Democratic or Republican national conventions, or on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial speaking to hundreds of thousands of people. Nope. Probably not going to happen.



More likely

Yet your 45-minute presentation in the boardroom in front of a dozen people who are not there to be entertained or inspired could get your project approved, could get you promoted, and could make you a hero to your family and your team . . . or not.

The toughest audience you will ever face are high IQ, high self-esteem males. The research also shows that high IQ, high

self-esteem females are only slightly more forgiving.¹ Welcome to C-level land.

Input from C-level executives makes it clear that their expectations are unique. The rules are different at the top, and are often a mystery to mid-level managers. Understanding executives at the top level—their personalities, the stresses of their positions, what they demand from mid-level managers—is key to successful communication in and out of the meeting room. Conversely, not understanding whom you're dealing with can be career suicide.

If you don't have that one element—the ability to communicate, the ability to present, the ability to persuade—then you're not going to go to the higher echelons of that organization. You're just not going to make it.

—Robert Drolet

People who get to the top have traits that set them apart. They are extremely bright, aggressive, successful Type 'A' personalities. Most are males and often Ivy League educated. They are under heavy pressure to produce in a highly competitive environment. 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 to their demands. Here we'll look at the reality that defines their world.

Warning: this is not a pleasant stroll in the park, and it is occasionally 'R' rated.

Alpha Personality “Syndrome”

Life for people at the top levels of corporate America is a competitive, power-driven, dog-eat-dog world. And they know it. Witness Chuck Tyler, physics PhD, who headed up a major Hewlett-Packard research lab back in the early 1980s. With 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 per-

ceived 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. Content analysis of the surveys showed that the top five adjectives used to describe senior leaders were: *data-driven*, *impatient*, *aggressive*, *time-pressured*, and *intimidating*. Perhaps these are qualities that boards prize in CEOs, but they probably don't describe someone you'd like to have over for dinner.

It may be a stretch to say there is an "alpha male" or "alpha female" personality syndrome simply because there is such a wide variety of successful styles among top-level executives. 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. Yet, it is undeniable that there are commonalities among people at the top. Their idiosyncrasies help to build the companies they founded, but they can also cause pain to people who work for them.

Writing in the *New York Times*² on the death of George Steinbrenner, Benedict Carey commented, "Recent research on status and power suggests that brashness, entitlement,

Alphas Run Companies

Reviewing a study of alpha-male baboons, the *Wall Street Journal* drew parallels to the office suite: "In the human savannah, where smarts matter more than brute strength, alphas run companies, amass fortunes, and dominate any meeting they're in. They are ambitious, assertive, confident, and competitive. While they may appear cool and calm, many human alphas thrive on adrenaline, the hormone that primes the body to fight or flight in times of danger. Those short bursts of power helped our ancestors outrun predators. But if the perceived threat never lets up, the chronic state of alarm increases cortisol, too, and can eventually weaken the immune system."³

and ego are essential components for any competent leader.” Psychologist Kate Ludeman noted in the *Harvard Business Review*⁴, “Possessing both intimidating personalities and genuine power, alphas expect the world to show them appropriate deference.” According to Andrew Park in *Fast Company*⁵ magazine, “Convinced of their greatness, these alpha males lapse into arrogance, defensiveness, manipulation, and malevolence, leaving a tangle of confusion and unhappiness.”

Why are these descriptors so harsh? Performance pressure, for one thing. CEOs answer to many audiences: shareholders, analysts, employees, customers, management, even community groups. One minute they’re dealing with a Wall Street phone call, and the next minute they’re making an employee video. As we’ll see in Part IV, they describe living in a kind of fishbowl. Ginger Graham confided that she can’t have a bad day and be wearing a frown, or forget someone’s name for fear of sending the wrong message. And that’s just the start of the pressure.

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 won’t be there for long. According to *CLO*⁶ magazine, the average tenure for someone in the “C-suite” is only 23 months.

These statistics are confirmed by Karen Sage, VP Marketing, CA Technologies:

Tenuous job security doesn’t impact just the CEO, but all upper executive-level staff. It’s about holding leadership accountable. Someone has to take the fall. Another situation to note is that most leaders like to bring in people from their past or that are culturally similar to themselves. At the highest ranks, if a new leader comes in they will typically replace half their direct reports. Even if the CEO is promoted from within, the top performers at the next level will be forced to leave 1) because they were passed over and 2) in vying for the CEO position they likely burned bridges competing with the person who passed them over. This is why executives at that level have employment contracts stipulating that if they get fired, they are paid off handsomely.

The *Harvard Business Review*⁷ reports that if the company's stock price goes up after the arrival of a new CEO, there is a 75 percent chance that one year later that CEO will still be in his or her job. But, if the stock price goes down, there is an 83 percent chance he or she will have been fired.

The demand to get immediate results is unrelenting. Few of us live under such daily, weekly, or monthly performance pressure. Rick Wallace says all this goes with the territory: "You're in a job that can go away or not, depending on how you perform. You'll keep it or you won't. If you don't perform well, you move on. It's not that complicated."

But even success is no guarantee. According to Chuck House and Ray Price in *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; Ken Olsen, DEC; Ed McCracken, Silicon Graphics; and Rod Canion, Compaq.⁸

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 observed that CEOs often feel like "hired help." With shareholders demanding quarterly profits, and a board that 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.



Karen Sage suggests keeping your foot on the gas if you plan to move up:

At the executive level you are always upping the game higher and higher. If you don't, you're out. I hear people say, 'I got to the director level and I don't need to go any higher.' Usually those people are pushed out in a few years as aggressive up-and-comers show more promise. You always have to be upping your game and aspiring to the next level. You can stay at the same level if you are an individual contributor (though you still may be at risk of lower-cost workers replacing you), but in management you better be reaching for and achieving the next level or eventually people are going to push you out.

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*,"⁹ Savage describes the shift that must happen as a manager advances up the ladder:

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.

Shortly after reading the Savage paper, an executive told me this story:

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

I walked over to him, paused, and said: 'Mike, 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 quiet. Mike sank in his chair. "As I scanned the room, I could see looks of approval on the executives' faces," he told me. "Six months later, I was promoted to CFO. Two years after that, I was president of the company." Today he is CEO of a 10,000-employee Silicon Valley technology company.

In the C-suite, it is not about competence—that's a given. It is about power.

Self-Reliance

When you work with the top level, you're being watched for your leadership capabilities and potential. How savvy are you? How well do you pick up the cues? Can you be political without looking political? Keep in mind, there is no handbook or instruction manual for what to do. For example, the January, 2005 *Harvard Business Review* noted:

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.¹⁰

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 illustrates what Savage is describing. Dan 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 dismissed in an offhanded manner. The VP said, "Well, Dan, you know what, the CEO doesn't give a shit about your problems. He worries about things like shareholder value, what the financial analysts are going to say in their next quarterly report, some employee lawsuit, and a quality problem in the manufacturing facility in Taiwan."

The VP went on to add, "Now Dan, 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 okay. 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."

Looking for Empathy in All the Wrong Places

A study by two University of California psychologists, Michael Krause and Dacher Keltner¹¹ indicates that people at the top of the economic food chain are less likely to be empathic. They are also less able to accurately read the emotions of others. On the other hand, lower-class people are more empathic and better able to read the emotions of others. According to Krause and Keltner, this is because lower-class people are more vulnerable in the unpredictable environments they live in. Hence, they need support from other people more than their upper-class counterparts.

When you're presenting in a Fortune 500 C-level meeting, you can bet your executive audience is in the upper class. In 2010 the mean compensation for S&P 500 CEOs was \$12 million.¹² They are less likely to even notice the anxiety on your face, or to empathically acknowledge your job well done. So, be reassured, it is not personal.

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 add to the old axiom: "It's lonely at the top—and, there's no help for you up there either." No wonder executive life coaching has become a \$2.4 billion industry.

So what does all of this mean to you as you stand at the head of the big oval table about to deliver a career-defining presentation to a group of intimidating C-levels? The more you know about them, the more successful your presentation will be. First of all, remember that they are under enormous pressure to perform. They don't have time to chat, so get to the point. As Ginger Graham said, "I don't need your life story. I want to know why you're here, then let's get on with it." Secondly, if you do get treated in a rough manner, remind yourself that they are dealing with enterprise-wide problems, and the perceived rebuff is not personal.

It is hard not to take being grilled or even chastised by executives personally, especially if we bring childhood unresolved authority issues with us into the boardroom. Too often people

enter the C-suite hoping for approval from a kind and loving “father figure.” Such expectations muddy the water and make time-pressured executives annoyed.

The CEO Ain’t Your Dad

If you come in and seem angry or are being a “suck-up” looking for a reassuring pat on the head for doing a good job, then you are still working out your childhood authority issues. When we have to deal with all of that it is just a waste of our time.

—Felicia Marcus

Our attitudes toward authority figures are determined by our childhood experiences with the first and most powerful authority figure in our lives, our fathers.

If you hated your mean authoritarian father, you may then unconsciously transfer that hatred to other authority figures in your life, like teachers, police officers, and bosses. On the other hand, if you had a distant and judgmental father whose acceptance you never got as a child, you may long for that approval from the boss, whomever that might be.

If all this sounds too “woo-woo” to you, hang on. It is very real in the boardroom according to the executives we interviewed. In fact, citing our research on this issue, *USA Today* ran a cover story about this problem on the front page of the Money section on Father’s Day, June 6, 2007.¹³

Imagine a presenter at a C-level meeting with a serious authority problem like I just described. He or she, who may be 30 to 45 years old, walks into a room with a large mahogany table. Seated at the table is an imposing group of eight to 10 people in their 60s and 70s who perhaps founded the company, have enormous power, and huge net worths (perhaps in the hundreds of millions or

“Many employees see [the] CEO as father figure. Some execs love it and others hate it, but all agree it goes with the territory...It is all but inescapable.”

— *USA Today*, 2007

even billions of dollars). If there was ever a time and place for childhood unresolved authority issues to surface, this is it.

This authority problem is so common that several executives expressed frustration over how it shows up in meetings. Whether the presenter is angry and rebellious or pleading for approval, these meetings are not the time or place for those issues to come up.

Ralph Patterson, former Product Line Manager at Hewlett-Packard in San Diego, told me about his aggravation when junior-level engineers came to his meetings looking for approval. Instead of presenting a recommendation based on their expertise, which is what he needed, they would spend a lot of time explaining how they did the experiment or the study and all the problems they had solved. His reaction was to hammer the presenters. "Don't tell me how you got the data," he'd say. "Tell me what the data means. We have to make a decision and move on."

To measure the extent of this problem, I asked our executives, "In your experience, what percentage of people presenting at the C-level have a collaborative attitude, have a needy attitude, or have an angry attitude?" They reported that a surprisingly high number of presenters, 34 percent, are looking for the reassuring pat on the head and are seen as "too needy." At the other end of the continuum, nine percent come across as angry and resentful. That leaves just 57 percent who have the collaborative attitude the executives value for getting the job done. The people in this last group 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. They collaborate with the executive team to solve business problems.



Cindy Skrivanek

An excellent example of this comes from Cindy Skrivanek, at LSI Corporation, who 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,

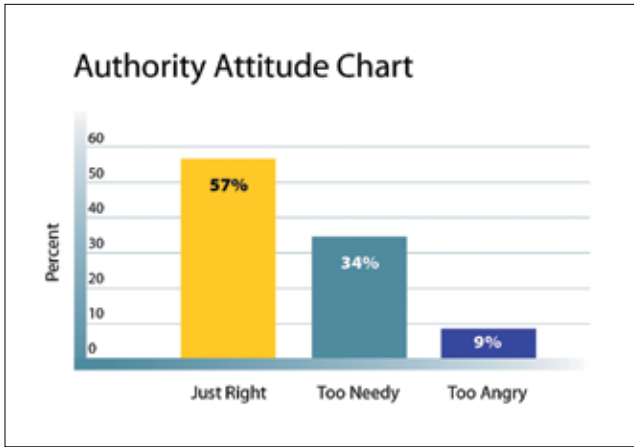


Figure 2.1 Authority Attitude Chart

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.

Putting all this together in what we might call an "Authority Attitude Chart," (Figure 2.1) you can see that only a little over half of the first-time presenters at the C-level handle authority issues with maturity. The executives were clear that these numbers apply to new presenters at the C-level. More seasoned presenters learn through experience how to be successful.

The unforgivable sin is to come in and be arrogant and condescending to your boss. It is shocking how many people will come to me with work that's a piece of crap, and are arrogant about it . . . and if I don't like it that's my problem.

—Felicia Marcus

Think about your own attitude when you present to the top level. If you are too needy for approval or too resentful of authority, work on moving toward a more collaborative approach. The executives will appreciate it, and you will be more successful.

You are asked to present at the meeting because you have something they need in the decision-making process. “I respect you or I wouldn’t be asking you to be in the room,” commented Brenda Rhodes. Do not be hurt if you don’t get the approval you’d hoped for. Harold Fethe advised, “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.”

Executive Presence

Business schools do not create leaders. You can only identify leaders. People are born that way.

—Scott McNealy
Co-Founder and Former CEO,
Sun Microsystems

A relatively new concern in the leadership literature is “executive presence.” Executives at the senior levels are all top performers, otherwise they would not be there. Some, though, get catapulted into the top spot. Executive presence plays a big role in such a promotion. Apparently top CEOs have it, and runners-up do not. What, exactly is “it?” What differentiates the stars from the superstars? Executive presence consists of a number of things, some physical, some social, some psychological. To meet Scott McNealy halfway, some of these skills are indeed inborn, but others can be learned.

In his book, *The Intangibles of Leadership*,¹⁴ Richard Davis has an entire chapter on executive presence. Davis points out some of the physical aspects of executive presence: size, good looks, and athleticism. He also includes things that can be learned: speak slowly, walk tall, develop a firm handshake, and have strong eye contact. (The *Economist* magazine, reported that 30 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are over 6’2” tall compared to just 3 percent of the U.S. population, and only 3 percent were under 5’7”.)¹⁵

Although it’s grossly unfair, Woody Allen is less likely to be the CEO than, say, Harrison Ford.

Other factors that contribute to executive presence are: confidence, charisma, ability to “own” the room, comfort with power dynamics, and social skills, i.e., the ability to make people feel at ease and feel heard. Think Bill Clinton. An Ivy League education also helps. Birth order may even play a role. A *USA Today*¹⁶ survey, noted that 59 percent of CEOs are the first-born, confirming Scott McNealy’s assertion.

Don Angspatt, a vice president at EMC, added to this list by pointing out the impact of dress, “A well-tailored image is hugely helpful.”



Don Angspatt

Figure 2.2 shows graphically the difference between the really effective C-level leader who does not become CEO, and the one who does.

Why should executive presence be important to you? For two reasons:

1. It is helpful to know the profile of what defines C-level executives so you know what is expected;
2. If you have ambition to get a seat at the table someday, these descriptors give you a menu of things to work on. (Sorry, can’t be of much help on the height or birth order issues.)

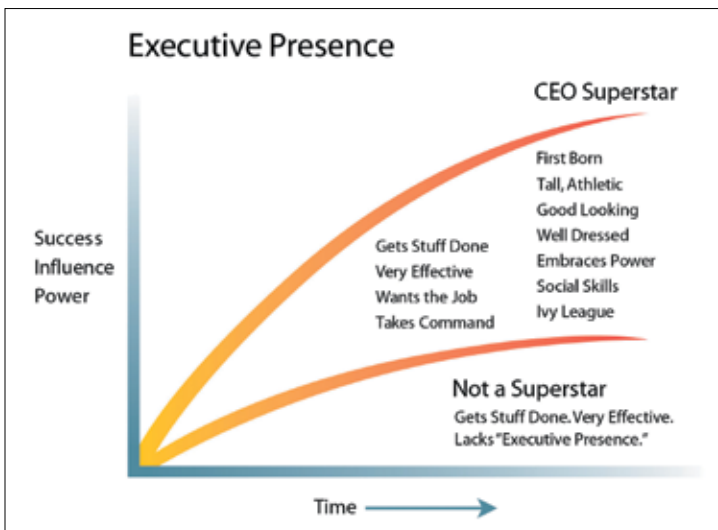


Figure 2.2 Executive Presence

C-Level Backgrounds

Looking over the class, family, and educational backgrounds of the executives in this study, we could see a pattern that fits a bimodal distribution curve. (Figure 2.3) Although this is not a scientific study, and the sample size is very small, what I noticed is that these executives fall into two quite different groups. One group grew up in very modest circumstances with parents who were not college educated. Others came from executive families with clear expectations about education and business success.

Ginger Graham observed:

Most CEOs I've worked with came from modest means. It's about work ethic and sacrifice, and a desire to have influence and impact. You learn to work against adversity even though you don't have connections, means, or education. You have to get it done anyway.

Audrey MacLean recalled:

Everything was a struggle. Nothing was handed to me. I didn't start with an inheritance, and an Ivy League pedigree, or a comfortable office. Everything I did was from scratch.

In one group, people knew early they would be in the world of business, and have executive roles. The other group found the executive calling later in life, usually because of mentors who were not their parents. It may be that people born into families in the middle are simply not that motivated, while

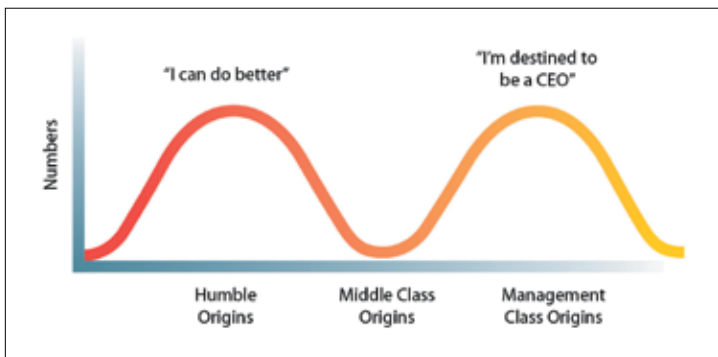


Figure 2.3 Executive Backgrounds

those at the top are groomed for it, and some at the bottom are strongly driven to make a better life for themselves.

Only in America

“Only in America are the streets paved with gold,” said Steve Blank’s mother. Steve elaborated, “My mother grew up in a hut. No electricity, no running water. She had to go to the well or the river. To go from that to Silicon Valley is one of those amazing journeys.”

Steve’s parents came to this country in steerage class, through Ellis Island to the lower east side of Manhattan and worked in the garment district. The son of immigrants, Steve started several companies, has become renowned for his entrepreneurial genius, and teaches in the business schools at Cal Berkeley and Stanford. All this in one generation.

California Congresswoman Anna Eshoo’s parents came to the United States as youngsters. Her grandparents fled their native countries in the Middle East due to religious persecution. Anna became a member of the United States Congress in 1993. She said her parents really understood the blessings of this country:

My father never once, in his entire life, complained about whatever he paid in taxes. Not once. If they had guests over to the house who started talking about politics and complaining about taxes, he’d say simply, ‘They don’t realize the blessings of this country.’

Dan Eilers’ father was a truck driver with an eighth-grade education. Dan was CEO of three successful companies, and became a venture capitalist.

Ginger Graham grew up on a dirt farm in Arkansas. Her father was a rural mail carrier. She went on to get an MBA from Harvard, became CEO of several companies, taught at Harvard, and is a member of the Walgreens Board of Directors.

Felicia Marcus was raised by immigrant grandparents, got an undergraduate degree at Harvard, then earned a law degree. In her early 30s she was appointed by Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley to head the largest public works department in the country.

Brenda Rhodes grew up on a sugar beet farm in the state of Washington. She went on to found and become CEO of Hall Kinion, a very successful outplacement company. When she took her company public, Montgomery Securities said it was the most successful IPO of the year, raising \$80 million.

These executives' stories rest four-square in the middle of what we call "The American Dream." They are bright, talented people who worked very hard to get where they are. Their stories attest to the remarkable opportunities this country offers. So as you address the people around that big oval table, keep in mind some of them may have remarkable backgrounds like these. They will likely appreciate the initiative you show.

Summary

- Are you a "tool of management," to use Cindy Skrivanek's concept? That is, are you clear that your role in top-level meetings is to help extremely talented, highly-stressed people make good decisions fast before moving on to the next decision?
- Do you realize that you may be treated dismissively and have your time cut in these meetings by people who are concerned with a lot more than you may even be aware of?
- Do you understand your presentation is not about getting a pat on the back or making friends with the executives sitting around the table? Or even, for that matter, getting a career boost?
- Are you capable of giving executives empathy about the lack of job security and unrelenting performance pressure that govern their lives?

If you can answer "Yes" to these questions, then you've captured the essence of this chapter. Gaining these insights about what life is like for people at the top gives you a huge advantage as you prepare and deliver senior-level presentations in the future. You are competing for limited resources with other mid-level people who also have good ideas. Your edge is that, as Sun Tzu says, you "know your enemy and yourself."

Part I Summary

In Part I, you met the executives of this story who serve as both the foils for our mid-level managers (whom you'll meet in Chapter 3) as well as their mentors. Your key takeaways in this book will be the strategies our managers learn as they struggle in their top-level presentations.

You also met Dick Anderson, the general manager of Hewlett-Packard's Computer Systems Division in Cupertino. Remember, I didn't get what I wanted from him in that meeting. To confirm my memories of all this, I located Dick, who has retired to his ranch in Utah. He reviewed this manuscript and had some thoughts about our meeting back in 1983, as well as about the role of the CEO:



Dick Anderson

The C-level can give you three things: time, money, and energy. What you really want from a CEO is his or her energy. It takes energy to accomplish anything. CEO energy takes many forms: creative thought energy, the energy to create a compelling vision, the energy to articulate a vision, the energy to convert nonbelievers, the energy to reward achievement, and the energy to lead.

If no energy is expended, then nothing happens. It is easy to allocate a few bucks to some well-intended project, but if the project is not in line with where the boss is headed, it won't go anywhere. On the other hand, if an initiative is parallel to and supportive of the leadership's directions, the boss will add energy and use your initiative as one more engine to drive for success. Everybody wins.

I saw quality as a compelling issue that needed more than my time, attention, or a few bucks for programs. It needed my energy. I also knew it would have to expand beyond my division and even beyond HP. In our meeting, *I must have concluded that you didn't show me how a few bucks in training could really move our quality results forward.*

There you have it. Dick Anderson had a big vision about quality, had been in the national media about the issue, and was looking for someone to help him move his agenda

forward, but it sure as hell wasn't me. As a business neophyte, I was clueless about the bigger vision our GM had. My one exposure to our most senior executive went nowhere.

The rest of this book delves deeply into the issues facing senior-level people so that you will, unlike me, "have a clue" when you walk into that presentation room. You will hear from them what works and what does not work when you present at their meetings. You will learn critical skills about how to put a presentation together, as well as how to survive in a fast-paced senior meeting that you cannot control.



www.powerspeaking.com/chapter2

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