Executive Conversations: Five Keys To Communicating So The C-Suite Listens

When was the last time you headed down the hall or up the elevator with a senior company officer or manager to present a new opportunity, raise an issue or just get some questions answered? Talking to members of the C-suite and senior management can be stressful, but it can be the difference between a successful career and a fruitless job. When face time is limited, how do you make the most of these conversations? It takes preparation and specialized knowledge to communicate clearly, concisely, directly and, most importantly, persuasively with the decision makers who can greenlight your ideas. The following strategies will help ensure that each conversation is professional and effective.

1. **Know your audience and tailor your message to their communication style.** Everyone has a preferred style of communication: Some people are direct while others are emotional; some are casual while others are formal; some prefer a lot of detail while others prefer a high-level overview. Any and all of these styles might be found in the executive suite. To complicate matters further, the style will likely change depending on the situation.

   This is where you need to do your homework. Thoughtful and successful communicators know the chain of command above them and understand the communication style of every senior leader—all the way to the top of the organization. Read their emails carefully, watch how they communicate to the organization, and ask those who interact with them frequently, such as their administrative assistants, about their preferences. Once you understand their style, adjust your communication accordingly.
2. **Think like an executive.** One of the most common mistakes that people make when communicating with executives and senior managers is failing to understand what is and is not important to them. Because messaging tends to be more effective when framed within the context of the audience, you need to try to think like an executive. Ultimately, they care about execution and anything that promotes or inhibits the organization’s ability to achieve it. Keep in mind that most executives got where they are because they are effective problem solvers, so never point out a challenge without offering a solution.

3. **Prepare for impromptu communication.** Executives and senior managers are quite used to challenging the people around them, and if you are not prepared, a seemingly casual hallway conversation could do more harm than good. It is a mistake to assume that impromptu conversations are inconsequential, because where business is the topic of conversation, it’s a serious discussion, whether it appears to be or not. Consider carefully the topic you wish to address and provide solid solutions to issues executives may not even be aware of. It will help showcase your knowledge and your aptitude as a problem solver.

4. **Know the right place and the right time to deliver your message.** An idea, any idea is not going to come across well if it is delivered at the wrong time. Many opportunities to share ideas with an executive have been lost due to a case of the jitters. For most people, however, communicating with executives is like anything else: the more they do it, the more effective they become. While your access to the executive suite may be limited, you can still prepare for these opportunities by developing various situation-appropriate messages in advance.

5. **Be yourself.** Sincerity is critical for establishing trust, which is the basis for meaningful communications and relationships with executives. Their decisions are only as good as the information you give them, and executives need to know they can count on you.

In our information-overloaded and economically-challenged business world, being heard and getting what you need, especially from executives, is a growing obstacle. Ultimately, successful people get paid for their ideas, and learning to communicate with them effectively is a required skill for those wishing to advance. Developing and fine-tuning communications skills will enable you to move your organization and, ultimately, your career forward.