Getting Through To Leadership

Top Strategies for Communication

How to best communicate with the Big Kahuna(s)? The answer is not as difficult as you may think. Speak their language! Put your message into the language of Cost, Sales, Orders, EBIT, and ROI. These Big Five issues are always at the front of their mind and will immediately get their attention. Speaking to them using your "jargon" may impress you and your peers but it will not get you where you need to go. The Big Five are what drives every organization, even non-profits. For a non-profit, convert EBIT into Budget / Social Value, Sales into Service Delivery, and Orders into Organizational Demand and you still have the Big Five. Understanding the language of those you need to influence cannot be underestimated. It is your responsibility to learn their language and put yourself in their comfort zone. You will influence no one by dragging them into your zone.

When you get your big opportunity get to the point! Begin with your conclusion, recommendation, or request then provide the rationale, the reasons, and data to support your position. Never forget, you got on their calendar…they didn't get on yours so respect their time. Never forget there are many different priorities for their attention that can interrupt your session with them so always be prepared to shift gears and sum up at a moment's notice. Develop a 60-second "elevator speech" for your most important message and always be ready to use it. This is so important because – speaking from my own experience - there are usually several people on the agenda before and after you. They may or may not manage their time effectively. The 30 to 60 minutes you planned to use for your elegant presentation will at some point inevitably be cut to 10 minutes. Plan on how you are going to adapt to that on the fly and be ready. This step in preparation may make the difference in success and failure. Time and the Executive Staff wait on no one.

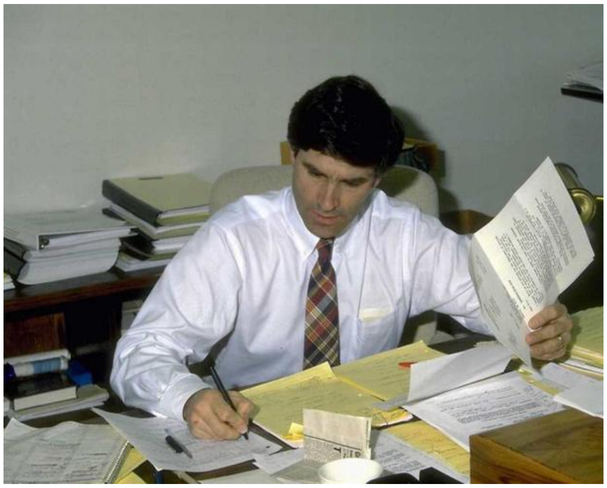
Key executives get a large variety of sales pitches from many sources. Influence (the art of changing minds and winning hearts) is more about discussions and relating to them personally than "selling". Use the Rule of Thirds: 1/3 for your slides and your message and 2/3 for Questions and Answers. Prepare for all possible questions and outcomes. No one can think of everything but McGee's Law states that "They will always ask about the most important thing you forgot!"

How Management and Execs Think

All of us have at some point had to talk with someone farther up the food chain in order to explain a situation or to try to change the situation we were in. All of us have met with mixed results. Anyone trying to tell you that they have been 100% successful in influencing those above them are being less than honest with you! There are several common misperceptions abounding as a result of these experiences such as:

Key Management doesn't have a clue! They are only focused on:

- The Bottom Line
- The Monthly / Quarterly Report
- The Stockholders
- Their bonuses
- Covering their "assets"



It is also easy to believe that "they just don't get what we're doing / needing; "they don't speak our lingo". Almost all of us have developed very specialized language and jargon to ease our communications with others who share our interests. Every field has its own special "code". They are also not afraid to use it! Optimally, it is intended to convey competency, understanding, belonging, or technical shorthand to speed our internal communications. We often take pride in our special language. Using "our lingo" around those who are not in the "fraternity / sorority" we belong to can also have serious drawbacks when those who do not understand are the key decision makers we are trying to influence for a decision or support.

In addition, the higher one moves in the food chain, the more you are required to be able to think strategically and demonstrate "situational awareness". As you move through the organizational structure it is natural (and required) to transition from tactical / local thinking to more and more strategic / global thinking. Seeing the "big picture" requires different data and a different set of skills.

Executives also tend to be Type A personalities and are driven by results. Some are very data driven, others thrive on achieving results and objectives that they can measure and quantify. Others are driven by the "art of the possible" and achieving a new vision. Others tend to focus on building networks and relationships that allow them to move forward. Each of these different styles requires a different approach by those who would influence them.

Understanding What Drives Key Leaders

For many years people and organizations depended upon their technology or their market position to ensure they could compete and win. It is our belief that the only truly unique business discriminator today is the ability to drive change in your organization faster than your competitors. If your commitment is not to pursue simplicity, then your actions will ultimately inhibit people's ability to change and improve. Moore's Law not only has been proven a reliable predictor for computer chip advances, it is reliably predicting advances in the fields of information, technological capabilities, and numerous other aspects of society today and will remain in effect for the foreseeable future! The best key leaders are always thinking about how to incorporate change faster and more successfully than in the past. They feel these stresses personally and professionally and are struggling to understand how to ensure the success (and survival) of their teams in an increasingly dynamic environment.

What Keeps Them Up at Night?

This is a critical question I learned some years ago. As a young middle manager, my boss and mentor once told me: "I am not the slightest bit interested in how to make your life easier until I know for certain you know what is keeping me awake at night and are working to solve that problem for me. My primary job is not to help you solve your problems. You are here to help me solve mine". I thought it a bit harsh at the time but he was precisely correct! My role and responsibility was to understand how to help those above me succeed in meeting their goals and objectives. That was my only reason for receiving a paycheck. Understanding that simple concept helped me become much more useful to him and to the organization.

There are many things that keep key leaders awake at night. Engineering problems, productions problems, customer complaints, competitor advances, and market forces - just to name a few. The only way you will ever know what the answer is for those above you is to ASK! Have you ever asked the question specifically? Many of us think we know the answer. Many of us are wrong. Make it a point to ask the question. The answer may well surprise you. Additional critical questions are:

- What are your top three priorities?
- What would you change first if you had the opportunity?
- What are your Customers saying about you?
- What can I / we do to help you achieve your goals and objectives?

Learning to Examine Business Needs From Multiple Viewpoints

Key business leaders today are under increasing levels of stress unimaginable even a few years ago. Globalization, rapidly changing technology, increasing levels of sophistication of Customers and their demands, escalating demands and expectations of Wall Street and investors, and unreasonable stockholders all play a major role in today's business environment. They combine to produce a situation that requires strong personalities, good leadership, and a commitment to change being driven at an ever increasing pace.

Learning to recognize and understand each of these business drivers will help you understand what those above you are facing and the pressures they are dealing with on a daily basis. Each of these factors is independent yet they are all related in a successful organization or venture. Each must be understood and taken into consideration when making a decision, as every aspect of this equation is affected when a change is made. Learning to balance these often competing and occasionally mutually exclusive interests is not easy nor is it optional. A decision that seems clear cut and easy to understand at the floor or office level can often be complicated by factors not readily apparent to the casual observer! Yet the executive must always keep in mind that he or she must find a way to ultimately balance each of these interests for the long-term good of the organization. Each of these interests and their constituencies will have their own viewpoint and their own priorities. Learning how to recognize them is only one aspect of a successful influence peddler. Learning how to accommodate them all is a job for professionals and not for the faint of heart!

Structured Strategies/Common Workplace Conditions

The first objective is to ask the critical questions. Those answers will drive you to work on the most important tasks. Ask yourself "What does success look like? What are you trying to accomplish in your communications session: a Decision? Do you need permission? Do you want feedback? Or are you providing an update or a status report?" Knowing what you want to achieve during your session is critical to ensuring you structure your message to that end. This sounds very basic. Yet this is where far too many of us fall off the wagon. What three things do you need most to make something happen as a result of your session? Do you communicate these needs to your audience?

Do your homework! Your credibility depends upon your level of preparation and the accuracy of your work. Pay particular attention to numbers and ensure that they add up correctly. Does your data, your information, and your message all tie together in a way that clearly leads them to the conclusion you want without "forcing" or selling them? Nothing will shoot down a session intended to influence a key decision maker faster than to find there is inaccurate data or a flawed piece of information in your material. It immediately brings into question your entire package. If they found this on first review, what else is there they haven't found yet? Your entire message is now shredded and your opportunity to influence them is lost. If it is not fatal, then at the very least it diminishes your work and your message.

If there is a question you cannot answer or pieces of data you do not have at your fingertips do not be afraid to say "I don't know but I will find out!" Your willingness to readily admit you do not know it all actually strengthens your position in their minds.

Always present more than one option. Showing more than one possibility ensures they understand you have thought this through and have examined all the data and looked at all the possibilities. Even if (in your mind) there is only one possible answer, you need to show them your work to eliminate the other possibilities for reasons that are logical, rational, defensible, and well thought out. Nothing raises my "red flag" faster than feeling like someone is trying to drive me to a conclusion that is their "pet rock". Presenting more than one option provides confidence to the audience that you have done your homework and are on top of this situation. You should also run the "What if?" question on every option and (to the best of your ability) have an answer for every conceivable question they may ask. And do not be discouraged when McGee's Law kicks in. No one can think of everything.

One other tip to remember is to answer every obvious question before it can be asked. Ask colleagues you trust review your work or presentation before hand to help flesh out gaps or weaknesses in time to fix them. If you leave something fundamental or elementary out of the equations it leads them to wonder what else you may not have thought through. Make them work to find the questions to pelt you with during your session!

Review and practice your message with a friend, a peer, or a mentor if possible. They can be invaluable as a second set of eyes and to role play for you. They can help you fine tune your message, your approach, and ensure you cover all the important points in your time allotted. Also plan on having more than one practice session. You will have to find missing data, correct errors, or adjust your message to strengthen or correct any problems they help you identify.

Know your audience. Spend the time required to learn who will be attending. Who will be the key decision maker? Is this going to be a one-on-one session or will there be multiple individuals you need to influence? Do you know the "style" for each decision maker? The best approach we've found (and the quickest to learn) is the Wilson's Social Skills model. There are four different styles you need to be aware of:

- Driver
    - These are action-oriented people. They like to focus on results and making progress. Their comfort zone requires you to "cut to the chase".
- Analytical
    - These types are clearly drawn to data and lots of it! They thrive on facts and have never seen a situation where they have had "too much information". Their comfort zone requires you to ensure the accuracy of your data and information.
- Expressive
    - These types are focused on the future and the "what if" scenarios. They excel at strategic thinking and are always on the cutting edge of something…

      Their comfort zone requires you to use references and "stories" to influence them. Just make certain the stories are relevant and support your message.
- Amiable
    - These people are strongly influenced by creating and maintaining relationships and networks. Their comfort zone requires you to describe how what you want to accomplish impacts the organization or the network in a way that strengthens those relationships. Win/Win situations are very important for these types.

Learn to "read the room" as you are communicating your message. Just as individuals have distinct personality types, groups and teams have "collective personality" types as well. It is not uncommon to find someone who will react one way in the group and differently when one-on-one. This is not necessarily a bad thing but one you must pay attention to lest it bite you unawares.

Make your communications session as interactive as possible with the executives. They are there because they have demonstrated high intelligence (OK maybe not all of them…) and the capability to learn very fast. It is not uncommon for one or more of the group to grasp where you are heading very quickly and begin to "run with your story". Be prepared to go along with this as long as they stay on message. Demonstrating that you can keep up with them is a very good sign and one they will be watching for during your interaction with them. Also be prepared to guide them back on track if it goes too far afield of what you need in order to be successful. Occasionally, they can stray completely out into left field. Your ability to keep them focused is also on trial here!

Avoid "Death by PowerPoint" and most assuredly **DO NOT READ THE SLIDES** to them. Assume they have at least a high school education and can read. The reality is that they can read your slides much faster than you can recite them out loud and reading to them is viewed (rightfully) as insulting. Know your material well enough you only need your slides to prompt you to engage in a conversation with them about what you want them to know.

Construct your session so that even if you do not get the result you desired they learn something about you that is persuasive and valuable. Remember to be sincere and avoid arrogance like the plague. They will sense it immediately if you are using this opportunity to "showcase yourself" or if you have motives other than what is best for the organization. Not only will this turn them off, it will limit your future opportunities to be able to influence them in the future when you may need it most.

Last but not least, be prepared to learn more about the organizational "big picture" from them during the Q&A. They get paid to think strategically and often are privy to information you may not have or did not know. Reacting positively to this as opposed to reacting defensively will be a big asset and will let them know you continue to remain open to new ideas and approaches as long as they lead to an improvement in what you are trying to accomplish.

What if you get no decision from your session? Be prepared to quickly ascertain what else they need or want and give them a specific time frame they can expect your reply with the requested material. They may also need additional time to think about what you provided them and may want to discuss it among themselves. If it is a complex issue and you have been successful in conducting your session as a conversation or a discussion as opposed to a sales pitch don't be surprised if they want to continue the conversation with you in more detail at a later date if it is a complex issue. They will be looking for responsiveness, openness (as opposed to a defensive reaction), and results from you.

Develop Your Own Approach Conveying Messages / Being Influential

No one approach works for every person in every situation. Don't be afraid to develop your own personal approach to working with "C" Levels and Key Decision makers. Following the fundamental steps and ensuring you address the vital questions and issues with a sound approach in your own style or manner will be appreciated by everyone, no matter their position in the organization.

Building Success and Driving Business Results

It is ironic but true that the higher you move in an organization, the less you can depend on authority to ensure your success. This is counter-intuitive for most people and a stumbling block for others. ***X-Stream LEAN*** firmly believes that **"*True Leadership is the Use of Influence in the Absence of Authority*"©.** Being able to influence those over whom you exert no authority is a critical business and social skill we must learn in today's world. Those who master it are assured a role in shaping our world and creating an environment for success. Our ability to achieve significant results and achieve stretch goals is becoming more dependent upon our ability to work with those outside our traditional sphere of influence and demanding more of each of us in the workplace and in our social circles.

Influence…we all have it. It's what we do with it that makes the difference! How are you going to use your influence to create something of value today?

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