

/// Gaining Executive Respect

At a recent QMD conference, I had the distinct pleasure to meet with many of our members and ask them about topics they would like to see in this column. It is clear it is not just our processes that need continual improvement, we do as well! One of the questions was *“How do I gain the respect of my executive team?”* One of the most frustrating things in the world is to know you have the right answer or approach to solving a problem or achieving an objective and not being able to get approval to proceed! After all, what are they paying you for if they won’t listen to you? It’s hard not to take this personally as it feels like (and often is) a repudiation of your professional opinion and experience. First of all, realize you can’t demand respect, it must be earned. The best way to earn respect is with action; not words. The quickest way I know of to gain an executive’s trust and respect is to accomplish three things:

1. Know what you are talking about but don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know”. If they are effective at all, they know they don’t know it all either and few things destroy credibility as quickly as getting caught “blowing smoke”.
2. Keep your interactions with them short, concise and to the point. If they want more information, trust me, they will ask!
3. Follow through with what you’ve told them you will do. Few things tarnish your reputation and destroy credibility/respect as much as disappointing someone who is counting on you to take care of something or deliver on a commitment. It’s an old adage but remarkably relevant in today’s culture of business: *Under-Promise and Over-Deliver!* The best way to develop the respect you need to be an effective Quality professional is to become known as the “go to” person to get things done; somebody who can be trusted to keep their commitments.

Let’s dig into this a little deeper. You begin each day at a certain level of trust and respect from everyone around you. Everything you do and say today will add to or take away from their perceived level of trust and respect for you. You end the same day at a different level. It may be higher, it may be lower. But one thing is certain: it will never be the same! Are your actions geared towards building those perceptions, or are you simply trying to get through the day as quickly as possible? You and only you know your true attitude and level of effort. Everyone else simply sees your results. Ask yourself as you are driving home at the end of the day “did my actions today increase or decrease my effectiveness in the eyes of others?” Don’t feel like a failure if the answer occasionally is no. No one is perfect. But an honest evaluation of ourselves each day helps us learn from that situation and know how to improve going forward.

There are often a number of other factors at play in understanding why you may not be getting the respect you feel you deserve. Knowing how to interact with execs is often key to getting them to respect you and your professional opinion. All executives have different personalities, different perspectives, and different “response curves”. As a population, they have a strong preference for crisp, concise, “get to the point” delivery of our information and ideas. Contrast this with a very large percentage of our Quality professionals who are very effective at our jobs because we are highly detailed, strongly analytical, and very precise people. We go to great lengths to ensure the accuracy and precision of our results. We want to “show our work” so the

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execs can see how our recommendations or solutions will effectively solve the problem. Remember, they just want us to “cut to the chase”. Learn to answer the question asked and have the supporting data ready if they have any other questions for you. Volunteering information may be exactly what you would want in their position but remember they most often are only looking for enough information or “comfort” to make a decision.

Another issue affecting their perception of us is we often speak to them in our “language” and not theirs. We talk about probabilities, regression analysis, Pareto charts, p factors, and our risk alpha. Most execs understand those concepts, but seldom their true context. They are however, fluent in the language of the ‘Big Five’: Costs, Sales, Orders, EBIT (or EBITDA), and ROI. That is their “comfort zone” and where they find value and context. It is our responsibility to “translate” our requests for permission or approval into their language instead of “dragging” them into our comfort zone! Far too often I witness a presentation made to a room of execs and at the end they seem to have no way to evaluate what they just heard or understand how it helps them. So they make a decision based on what they know and value even though it may be diametrically opposed to what we just showed them! We failed to make them comfortable with where we knew they needed to go so we got “disrespected”.

Ask a trusted coach or a mentor how they would present the information if it was them. Take advantage of all your resources to evaluate the best way to show them how your recommendations affect the “Big Five”. A good coach can also help you enhance your “executive presence” to improve your ability to influence them. Remember, they are not another Quality professional! It’s time to use our tools on ourselves to learn how to listen to the Voice of Our Customer, who in this case are the people we need to respect us and our opinions!

If you have a question or a topic you would like to see in this column, e-mail me at akscoachjr@x-slg.com