

**Presenting To The Big Dogs:
How To Hold Your Own In Executive Ranks**
By Marsha Redmon

If you work in a corporate training department or consult to one, odds are you're expected to make presentations to the company's executive team or board of directors. If you aren't now, you soon will be. One reason is that training departments and training consultants are being asked with more frequency to tie their learning and performance goals to their company's overall business goals, and they're being asked to participate in executive-level strategic planning sessions.

Are you ready to present to your organization's executive management team? Imagine this:

You're standing in your company's richly paneled boardroom, surrounded by executives, in front of the largest conference table you've ever seen. You're prepared with your 12-slide, 35-minute PowerPoint presentation. After all, you train trainers and you've been leading seminars for years. You tell yourself, "this is just another audience."

You begin. Less than three minutes into your presentation, the executives start asking questions -- questions you'd planned to answer near the end. You know what you'd do if this were a class of trainees, but what do you do when your CEO wants you to skip to the end -- now?

Here are several techniques for making your ascent into the thin air of the executive strata faster and more comfortable.

Get the inside scoop. That probably sounds suspiciously like "know your audience." It is but to a new degree. Of course you need to know your top executives' expectations. Double check your understanding

of what information they want and in how much detail.

Now the new wrinkle: Gather as much inside information as you can about the executives' personal preferences regarding presentations. Do they like 20-minute PowerPoint shows, or do they think PowerPoint's a prop for bad speakers. Maybe they prefer to listen for two minutes and then ask rapid-fire questions. Imagine the nightmare of creating a 20-minute presentation with PowerPoint and the exec team turns out to be a rapid-fire question kind of group. Start polishing your resume.

But just how do you gather that kind of information? Ask anyone who has been to executive or board meetings regularly, and talk with the CEO's assistant. He knows his boss's preferences and has probably heard her and the board complain about poor presentations. Ask other division heads who've made the kind of presentation you're being asked to make, with the caveat that people without the skills at reading an audience might not know all of the answers about why some presenters bombed before the board.

If you think that's a waste of time, consider that one *Fortune* 50 firm traditionally using only overhead projectors in board meetings, long after PowerPoint became common. PowerPoint wasn't welcome, and anyone who used it was considered an outsider. In another example, a *Fortune* 100 CEO was known to flip to the last page of any presentation to see the summary slide with the bottom-line figures. A savvy manager noticed and put the bottom-line figures on the front page the next time she presented. Her credibility soared.

In my first year of law school, I had a street-smart study partner who spent time talking to

the top third-year students who'd had our professors during their first year. The scoop was that our torts professor gave grade points every time you indented a paragraph on the handwritten essay exams. We tried it and aced torts. Inside scoop plus preparation is an unbeatable combination.

Make it short. Executives tend to be busy, pressured people with the attention span of a gnat. In my work as a media consultant, I've conducted media training with hundreds of executives and lawyers – two tough audiences. I can tell you without hesitation that higher-level professionals will think you're competent and worth listening to if you get to the bottom line fast and know when to stop talking. They don't like to suffer through longwinded explanations or reams of detail.

Respond immediately to body language. As a seasoned trainer, you know how to do this better than anyone. Reading the members of your executive audience throughout your presentation is the most important thing you can do. If you notice them squirming or looking distracted, change tactics or topics immediately.

For instance, you can skip to the end if you're speaking on a minor issue or you're almost finished. Or stop and ask, "Any questions?" That lets them steer you back onto the track they want. It also shows you're responsive to their needs.

Be flexible but organized. Trainers are used to being in charge of the room. That's obvious, but it bears mentioning. We run the show. We organize our workshops the way we want to, and usually the people we work with do things our way. But the dynamics of presenting to executives are different.

Training traditionally requires some rigid organization and control, but those approaches don't work in boardrooms these days. Flexibility and simplicity are in. I speak from the experience of training a lot of executives.

Go with their flow. If their body language shows that they don't want to hear any more about e-learning, move on – even if you have five more slides and some nifty numbers.

Towards the end, say "I have a few minutes left and want to make sure I'm addressing exactly what you want to know. What would you like me to cover in our remaining time?"

Don't forget your roots. Even though executives may be a different audience than you're used to, don't abandon what has worked for you in the past. Simple is best: Include one or two main points with one or two great supporting facts or statistics and a story to illustrate your point and make it interesting. Deliver your bottom line up front. State your support. Tell your story. Summarize. Re-state your main points and then ask what they'd like more information on.

You know as well as I do that people, even executives, retain long-term only 5 to 10 percent of what they hear and see. Make sure what they remember is the main point you want them to.

If your senior-level audience peppers you with questions right off the bat, a simple organization of your material won't desert you. You can keep coming back to your bottom-line points, backed up by your statistics. A rigid organization that depends on your PowerPoint slides being shown in order will sink you if you start getting bombarded by questions. A few well-illustrated and supported points are better than the dreaded TMI (too much information).

Make them ask for deep detail. Right about now, you may be thinking, "OK, but our executives expect me to know all of the answers. Won't they think me or my presentation is inadequate if I keep it elementary?" Good question. The key is to give them your bottom-line numbers and most important statistics or facts. If they want deep detail, they'll ask for it. Bring along detailed numbers and charts in a binder, tabbed clearly

so you can quickly find the numbers or other data they want. If you're still uncomfortable with keeping it simple, provide detailed background in writing. Put only the bottom-line numbers on page 1 of the handouts, and tell your audience that's where those numbers are.

Remember the billboard rule. Let this become second nature to you: Don't put more on a slide than you could read if it were printed on a billboard and you were driving by at 40 miles an hour. One of the most effective presentations I ever saw was given by a man who stood up before a group of investors and showed them one visual – a flipchart with one number printed on it. It was a big number with a bunch of zeroes. It was the estimated market size for his company's new product. No one could forget the number or the man's presentation.

Consider highlighting one meaningful number in your next presentation to executives, especially if they're "Just the facts, ma'am" types. Put your best statistic or fact on a flipchart and hold it up for a few seconds without saying anything. Silence can be effective. Then present your bottom line. I bet

they'll remember your presentation for a long time.

Prepare for questions as if you're on trial. You are on trial, sort of. Remember that people are more interested in the answers to their questions than they are in your presentation -- sad but true. As a former TV reporter who covered many press conferences, take my word for it. My question was all I wanted answered because I felt it was the best one. Executives are like reporters in that respect.

Anticipate questions. Get your team together and think of possible questions you may be asked. Organize the questions into three categories: good, neutral, and bad. Good questions are ones that lead you to give positive answers that are part of your main message. Neutral questions neither help nor hurt you. Bad questions raise controversy or uncover negative issues.

Practice using good questions to reinforce your main message. Practice answering neutral questions in a short, concise way. And practice answering bad questions honestly, but keep your answers short so as not to appear defensive or that you're protesting too much.

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