



Speaking Up: 10 Tips for Making a C-Level Presentation

What do bungee jumping and presenting to C-level executives have in common? Both typically strike fear into the hearts of the people daring to attempt them.

By Kathy Reiffenstein

Presentations to C-level executives are renowned for their high visibility, reputation to make or break a career, and ability to create nerve-wracking anticipation. Executive-suite audiences have a short attention span, a “show-me” attitude, and no problem interrupting your carefully crafted words. Learning professionals must be prepared to deliver presentations uniquely tailored to this audience’s characteristics and needs.

In my presentation skills training work, C-level executives tell me that, too often, presentations do not persuade them for three key reasons. Presenters

- provide too much detail
- don’t link to corporate objectives
- can’t answer challenging questions.

As a result of inadequate presentations, trainers can damage their professional credibility, their department’s reputation, and ultimately, the business goals at stake. So how do you deliver a senior-level presentation and keep your composure, confidence, and career intact? Here are 10 tips for making your C-level presentations outstanding.

1 | Analyze your audience

Know how the people in your audience like to receive information. Does the CFO, for example, need time to analyze the financial implications of what you’ve presented before being asked to make a decision? Does the CEO prefer to see an agenda before the presentation?

Uncover this information by analyzing previous presentations you’ve made to this audience or by asking for insight from colleagues who have presented to them. Understanding C-level needs helps you to structure your presentation to address them and minimizes unpleasant surprises.

2| Link to C-level challenges and overarching business issues

Every audience, no matter how senior, asks the “What’s in it for me?” questions: Why should I listen? What benefit will I get from this presentation versus all of the other things I need to do right now?

Clearly show how your message is relevant to issues the audience is focused on, be it corporate strategy, profitability, revenue, or ROI. Don’t leave it up to them to figure this out. Demonstrate the business links through specific statements, examples, and metaphors.

3| Start with conclusions

C-level audiences are results focused. Start with the conclusions of your presentation, and then support those conclusions with the necessary details and facts.

For example, begin your presentation with the following information: “Approximately 50 percent of our business currently comes through referrals from existing customers. The referral training and tracking program I am recommending will increase that number to 70 percent and increase our revenue by \$500,000 annually. The benefits will include a greater number of prospects for the salesforce and higher customer satisfaction scores. Let me show you how this will work.”

You’ve told your audience the bottom line, clarified their expectations, and outlined briefly the benefits they can expect. Now you can proceed to support your recommendations with more detail, linking back to the conclusion as you move through the presentation.

4| Beware of too much detail

Senior-level executives think more strategically than operationally. When considering a topic, they want to understand pretty quickly what the impact is on the big picture without wading through a pile of details.

Structure your presentation around high-level concepts, but be sure to have lots of facts and supporting data ready so that you can fill in the gaps with examples, figures, and analysis when your audience wants them. If you have little

knowledge about how your audience prefers to receive information, you will have to experiment with this balance between concepts and details.

It is far better to allow the audience to interrupt you and discuss something that interests them than to stick rigidly to your script. If you have sparked a lively discussion, your audience is engaged.

5| Beware of too many slides

Keep slides to a minimum, keep them clean and simple, and use them only where they can add value or further explain what you are saying. Favor charts and graphics more than bullet points. You want the audience focused on you—your expertise and your passion—not the screen.

6| Expect and welcome interruptions

When you are interrupted, either you’ve sparked an idea that the audience wants to talk about, or you’ve confused them and they are seeking clarification. Strive for the former.

Be attentive to your audience to determine what they want to pursue further, and when. It is far better to allow the audience to interrupt you and discuss something in your presentation that interests them than to stick rigidly to your script. If you have sparked a lively discussion, your audience is engaged.

The key to comfortably managing interruptions is to know your material forward and backward so that you can determine when a spontaneous discussion is productive, when it isn’t, and how to get back on track.

You can corral a chatty audience by saying, “This has been a great discussion.

I want to now cover the final two benefits of this proposal so that you will have all of the information you need to make a decision,” or, “We’ve generated some great ideas here. I’d like to use that last point as a springboard to tell you about the next phase of the implementation.” Use transitional statements such as these as bridges between what’s been discussed and the next point in your presentation.

7| Anticipate tough questions

Difficult questions can be a huge landmine in senior-level presentations because most presenters don’t spend adequate time preparing for them. When you are preparing your presentation, write down every question you can think of that might be asked. Look at your material through the executives’ eyes:

- What might not be clear?
- What might she disagree with?
- What are his hot buttons?

Play devil’s advocate. What might be the arguments on the other side of the issue? Then, prepare your responses. When faced with challenging questions or opposing points of view during the presentation, you’ll be ready.

The following techniques are useful in handling questions:

- **Redirect.** It may be perfectly appropriate to ask if someone in the audience would like to comment on what’s been asked.
- **Rephrase or confirm.** Ensure that you have understood the question correctly and are therefore providing the correct answer. For example, clarify by saying, “So what I hear you asking is...”
- **Resist the fear of saying “I don’t know.”** You will get far more respect by admitting that you don’t know an answer than by trying to bluff. But always follow up with the answer or clarifying details after the presentation.

8| Use stories and examples

Stories, examples, anecdotes, and metaphors humanize flat facts and figures, making them more engaging and your message more memorable.

They can also be helpful in dealing with a sensitive subject.

Stories must be relevant to the point you are making. Do not rely on your improvisational skills in the moment; as with the rest of your presentation, prepare the stories ahead of time and practice them until they are perfect and your delivery is crisp.

9| Plan to use less than your allotted time

A good rule of thumb is that your presentation should take only 70 percent of the allotted time. This adequately allows for interruptions, discussion, question and answer time, and unexpected delays. For example, if you have a 60-minute time slot, make your presentation 40 minutes. That extra 20 minutes might seem like a lot, but think about the number of presentations you've attended that

run out of time because of energetic dialogue. And what executive was ever upset when a presentation ended a few minutes early?

10| Practice, practice, practice

This is the single reason why most senior-level presentations implode or simply don't go as well as expected. Your credibility, reputation, and perhaps career are at stake when you make a presentation to executives. Aren't they important enough to find the time to rehearse?

Audiotape or, even better, videotape yourself delivering the presentation at least six times. You want to know your material and the flow so well that during the actual presentation you can concentrate on reacting to your audience, not worrying about forgetting your next point. Communicating powerfully and persuasively in any presentation can be a career-making skill, and

nowhere is it more critical than in the executive suite or boardroom.

The stakes for learning professionals are at their highest when presenting to the C-level. Every element of the presentation must be planned and practiced to ensure audience understanding, buy-in, and application of the information shared. Embrace these 10 tips, and your C-level presentation will be a thrilling bungee jump, not a terrifying drop off a cliff.

Kathy Reiffenstein is the founder and president of And...Now Presenting!, a business communications firm focused on creating confident, persuasive speakers; kathy@andnowpresenting.us.

INTERESTED IN ORDERING E-PRINTS?

Would a digital version of this article be a great fit for your next course, presentation, or event? Are you interested in e-prints of several *T+D* articles on a specific topic? Visit astd.org/TD/eprints for more information.



Can you answer "yes" to these questions ...

Do your employees think Critically and Creatively?

Do your managers lead people in "Thinking" as well as "Doing"?

Is "Working Smarter" just a phrase, or do you have a program to implement this?

Benefits of Critical Thinking:

- Faster, higher quality decisions
- Creative solutions to problems
- Increased productivity, quality and accountability
- Clarity of thought and communication
- More effective Leadership and Management

Critical Thinking skills gained can be applied to:

- General problem solving and decision making
- New product ideas and creation
- Business and product planning
- Improved development processes and quality
- Improved operational efficiency
- Crisis management
- Customer Care improvement
- Managing people and situations

Critical Thinking Workshops

On-Site and Open Enrollment
Customized • Interactive • Engaging
Curriculums for individuals, managers,
teams and executives

www.headscratchers.com 720-493-8567

Critical Thinking Workshops for Problem Solving, Decision Making and Creativity

*Critical Thinking Training
will immediately raise the
overall performance and leadership
of an individual and organization*



T+D

TRAINING + DEVELOPMENT

YES!

I would like to subscribe to **T+D** magazine—12 monthly issues that keep me at the forefront of workplace learning and performance.

- Individual rate \$150 (\$216 outside the U.S.)
- Institutional rate \$300 (\$366 outside the U.S.)

Order Information

TD0833

Name: _____

Title: _____ Company: _____

Address: _____ City: _____

State/Province: _____ Zip/Postal Code: _____

Country: _____ Email: _____

Phone: _____ Fax: _____

- Check One:**
- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$150 (Individual USA) | <input type="checkbox"/> \$216 (Individual Outside the US) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$300 (Institutional USA) | <input type="checkbox"/> \$366 (Institutional Outside the US) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> VISA | <input type="checkbox"/> MasterCard |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Amex | <input type="checkbox"/> Discover |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Check (USD)
(Payable to T+D) |

Card Number: _____ Expiration Date: _____

Signature: _____

Fax this form to 1.205.995.1588 OR Mail to:

American Society for Training & Development

Subscription Office, P.O. Box 11806
Birmingham, Alabama 35202-1806, USA

Order online at store.astd.org

Phone: 1.866.802.7059

Orders processed within three business days.

If you have questions, please contact td@subscriptionoffice.com

Prices valid through 12/31/2010. If you should wish to cancel your subscription for any reason, you will receive a refund on all unmailed issues. Your subscription to T+D may be a tax deductible business expense. Please allow 6 to 8 weeks to receive your first issue.

T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

090938.63250

