



Presentation Skills



3 Ways to Nail Your Presentation to the Board

No one wants a bored board. **by Daniel Casse**

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For most executives, even those at the most senior level, a presentation to the board of directors is the most demanding test of leadership communications. Very few succeed.

Conversations with more than 100 public and private boards directors over the last decade reveal that dissatisfaction with presentations is nearly universal. PowerPoint decks are too long, too granular, or simply uninformative, they report.

Yet the feedback most senior executives receive — “Make it crisper,” “Fewer slides,” “Don’t get caught up in operational details,” or even “More details, fewer headlines” — is often generic and unhelpful. Operators are told they are insufficiently strategic; strategic leaders are criticized for having insufficient operational depth. Both directors and presenter leave frustrated.

Unfortunately, the advice offered by professional speaking coaches is just as likely to lead senior executives astray. “Enhance vocal delivery,” “Use fewer bullet points,” “Tell a story,” or similar well-worn coaching points are rooted in the belief that a board presentation is simply a matter of stagecraft — a variation of a keynote presentation to a customer audience.

This counsel reveals a misunderstanding about the purpose and value of board meetings. The boardroom is a distinct forum that requires a different type of presentation and preparation. It demands elevated exchanges that leverage both the knowledge of senior leaders and the objectivity of seasoned directors.

Having coached executives preparing board-level presentations for more than 15 years — including senior leaders auditioning to become the next CEO — I have concluded that the executive’s most important task is to share their thinking about the business they lead. The goal is not just to report the results of the last quarter. (Directors can read that on their own.) Instead, the senior leader should engage the board by discussing the most pressing challenges they face and how they intend to respond.

While each board has unique needs shaped by the company’s operating environment, below I suggest three practices every business leader

should embrace to enhance their board presentations — and their own value within the upper levels of the company.

1. Bring a compelling message.

The senior executive who arrives in the board room has typically submitted a set of slides well in advance that has been carefully vetted by the CEO and the legal team. In most cases, directors will have already studied the material, or at least flipped through the main points. What, then, is the purpose of the 10 to 30-minute slot that has been allotted to the nervous presenter?

Rushing through a slide review might be useful as a quick refresher, but it neither deepens the board's understanding of the topic nor showcases the leadership skills of the executive. Instead, every presentation should start with a governing thesis: a big idea or perspective that captures the main point of the discussion. Presentations that start this way leave the audience with a compelling message.

Anne Mulcahy, who has served on multiple boards, including J&J, Target, LPL Financial, and Williams-Sonoma, has felt frustrated by the executives who want to convey too much data and information with a series of dense slides. “It almost seems like the objective is to demonstrate how much they know about their business, she says. “It has the opposite outcome. Directors don’t know what the point of the presentation is supposed to be.”

By contrast, a “thesis mindset” forces the presenter to confront the future rather than just reciting the facts of the past. The thesis-driven board presentation doesn’t need to be an audacious proposal or a request for more funding. But it ought to frame an issue that requires board attention. At a minimum, the governing thesis tells directors: This is where I see my part of the company going. That idea can’t

be slipped into slide 19. It has to be stated unambiguously and boldly at the outset. At the very least, it provides insurance against off-topic interruptions or mid-presentation dozing.

2. Understand that the CEO is not the target audience.

By the time they are asked to present to the board, a member of a senior leadership team has had plenty of practice leading discussions with the CEO. They may even be very comfortable updating their boss, in an informal way, with little preparation. Unfortunately, bringing the same mindset and habits to the boardroom is a crucial mistake.

“I am always struck by how often business unit leaders come to the boardroom and direct their talk to their boss, rather than the directors assembled around the table,” said Scott Miller, who has been serving on public and private company boards for more than two decades. Miller’s point is not merely a criticism of presentation style, but a recognition that senior officers rarely consider the needs of directors.

The board of directors is a unique audience with no comparison to the groups most executives regularly engage. They are not customers who need to be sold. And they are not true business colleagues, where strategy alignment and deep familiarity with the operational details of the business can be assumed.

A public company board may be comprised of business leaders, academics, former CEOs, current financial officers, and executives who bring expertise from entirely different industries. As a rule, their range of knowledge about the company and any given topic will vary greatly. Some have been serving on the board for well over a decade; others may be attending their third or fourth meeting. There is also an unspoken (and sometimes unknowable) hierarchy on the board, with its own unstated group of alliances and range of authority.

Ron Sugar, the Chair of the Uber board who also serves on the boards of Apple, Chevron, and Amgen, advises that the job of the presenter “is to fly at the right altitude” in the boardroom: “Dumb it down too much, and you risk insulting the directors. On the other hand, no board wants to be a working group. They want to understand what issues need to be on their radar screen.” He suggests planning to use half the allotted time so that the main point is reached quickly and discussion can follow.

Sugar’s advice is sound. A board presentation has to provide some quick refreshers on the operating environment and — more importantly — identify the biggest problems that need fixing.

These problems will be familiar to the CEO (who should never be taken by surprise in the boardroom). The directors, however, need both a reminder of the core issues in an executive’s portfolio (talent, operations, regulation, or a particular geography) along with looming challenges. Too many executives miss the opportunity to frame problems in the right way — and make their presentations far less engaging than they should be.

The purpose of presenting challenges is not to frighten the board but to enlighten them and engage them in the operational and strategic questions that preoccupy the person presenting the material.

3. Steer the presentation toward getting valuable feedback.

In a [2022 study](#), EY’s Center for Board Matters found that public company directors felt confident they added value to discussions of capital allocation and succession. But very few felt the top value they delivered came in areas such as revenue growth, innovation, or disruption. Ironically, these latter topics are most frequently what executives are asked to address when they invited into the boardroom.

Effective leaders can help rebalance the value that directors ought to derive from a board meeting by setting up genuine discussions that invite reaction and input. Alas, too many board presentations come to an abrupt conclusion followed by a quick call for “any questions?”

Following a presentation, many business unit leaders complain they find themselves falling down a rabbit hole of technical details triggered by an unexpected and mostly irrelevant question from a persistent director. In most instances, the blame is entirely on the presenter. They are ones who failed to set up the right conversation and missed the opportunity to steer the presentation toward getting valuable feedback from the board.

Randy Foutch, the former CEO of Laredo Petroleum, who has sat on many small and large company boards, believes that many executives “miss the opportunity to solicit feedback from the directors with relevant experience.” He has seen so many executives wary of raising questions with directors that they leave directors silent.

Yet driving a sophisticated conversation that promotes “good questions” is the unspoken mandate of robust board presentations. Instead of concluding remarks that restate key business results, a confident executive should share two or three important ideas that will drive future success and concerns that could benefit from director input. In other words, the presenter must sincerely seek out the board’s point of view by posing questions that remain unresolved or business risks that will persist. The goal: Get the board’s validation or critiques of a proposed course of action. The result, invariably, is a mix of candid feedback and intelligent, probing questions that create thoughtful board engagement.

During an interview, Frank Blake, the former CEO of The Home Depot, described the typical tone of a meeting between an on-the-ground store team and chief executive who has stopped by for a visit. “What the CEO will always hear is some version of: ‘You’re doing great. We’re doing great. Now leave.’”

The same tone of forced cordiality — and unproductive feedback — has become the all-too-common standard for board presentations delivered by senior executives. They represent missed opportunities to elevate a company’s board discussions and ensure that both the top team and the directors are getting the greatest intellectual value and leadership insight from every conversation.

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