

# How to Blow a Presentation to the C-Suite

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Divya, a director who leads a large engineering team, was invited to a two-day retreat with the CEO and senior executives of her Fortune 50 company. She and 30 of her high-potential peers were excited to rub shoulders with the leadership team.

The purpose of the retreat was to expose up-and-coming leaders to broader challenges, expand their network across silos, and, of course, give them an opportunity to connect personally with C-suite executives.

The session kicked off with participants dividing into small teams to tackle company-wide strategic challenges. This was a rare opportunity to present directly in front of the CEO, so Divya and her teammates worked hard to research their assigned topic, frame the specific challenge, and debate different ideas and solutions. Instead of hanging out at the bar after dinner, they worked far into the night finalizing their presentation. Divya was selected as the spokesperson for her group, and the next morning, she made their pitch.

The team's idea was met with a lukewarm reaction and what, at best, could be called a polite round of applause. Naturally, they were disappointed in the tepid response.

Divya and her team are all smart, do great work in their current jobs, and have promising careers ahead of them. So, what went wrong?

Based on my experience watching hundreds of presentations made by high-potential leaders, I can tell you that Divya and her colleagues are not alone in failing to land a key pitch. When presenting ideas to the CEO, even seasoned leaders who don't regularly interact with the C-suite fall into a few common traps that can be easily avoided.

### **Trap #1: An Idea Without Its Problem**

Smart, successful people tend to have great ideas. It's natural for you to be excited about your ideas and eager to share them with your executives. But place yourself in your CEO's shoes: She's on the receiving end of endless smart ideas. For yours to stand out and be useful to the CEO, it must solve a problem.

Begin the presentation with the problem you've identified and spend time upfront creating context, surfacing the pain points, and building a sense of urgency around addressing the challenge. Many presenters often move straight to solution and neglect to build a sound case for immediate action. It's the problem, not the idea, that executives want to hear first. Spend the first quarter of your allotted time calling out the problem and the next quarter on the idea. The more urgent the problem appears, the more eager your audience will be for the solution.

Unfortunately, in Divya's case, her presentation started with an idea. She didn't realize that pitching a solution outside the context of its founding problem left it wide open to criticism. In a world where executives have a host of responsibilities and crises to manage, they need to triage

which ones they'll act on. They'll be more motivated to prioritize your idea if they can see a direct connection to a problem that won't go away or that will become more significant without their attention.

### **Trap #2: An Idea Without a Clear ROI**

Once you've established the problem in your presentation, the next step is to prove that your idea will not only solve it, but do so in ways that grow the business. First, show how your initiative will self-fund within a short period of time. Next, project how it will grow in revenue to support both its expansion and begin to fund other parts of the organization. Make sure you include estimates for the often-overlooked money needed for infrastructure and setup.

Divya's team started with an idea and proceeded to explain the way they would implement it. They were excited about the technical merits of this idea but didn't mention how the solution might be helpful to the company in the marketplace or against the competition. What's more, the idea would require a heavy investment in tools that currently didn't exist.

### **Trap #3: A Presentation Without Interaction**

As with all good presentations, you want to meet your audience where they are. But when speaking with the C-suite, presenters often overexplain obvious things and don't leave enough time for interaction.

Divya spent four minutes out of their allotted 20-minute slot reviewing their research process and what the group learned. Since none of this was new information to the executives, she lost their attention. The entire presentation took 17 minutes, leaving a precious few minutes for questions and follow-up.

Reserve the second half of your allotted time for questions. While that seems like an outsized chunk, used well, it can be the most valuable part of your talk. Rapid-fire, blunt questions are a sign that executives are interested in your idea. They're processing what you said, testing various angles and hypotheses, and generally want to know more. A common misconception is that if there are no questions, then things went well. The opposite is usually true. The more questions you receive, the better the presentation.

One word of caution: Don't count critiques framed as questions as healthy interaction. For example, "How can this possibly work? You haven't accounted for extra headcount." That's not really a question. If your audience is curious and engaged a genuine question will sound more

like, “How would you deal with headcount if your growth projections are accurate?”

### **Trap #4: Data Without Attention to Detail**

Even when you set aside enough time for interaction, you can run into trouble if you don’t have the correct answer to an executive’s question. Presenters can be imprecise or sloppy with details when questioned, especially when it comes to numbers.

During the Q&A, Divya’s teammate Josh made a claim about the number of current customers using a particular product. He missed the actual number by 12% because of a calculation error.

Once you present an incorrect number, your executives will tend to write off the rest of your data. Be sure of your facts, be prepared with the source of your information, and, if there’s an error, be ready to quickly follow up with a correction. And if you don’t know the answer, don’t waste time. Simply admit to that, and tell them you’ll look into it and follow up.

If you’re in a position to present to the most senior executives in your organization, you’re already considered smart and capable. You don’t need to prove it by launching directly into your idea and sharing endless details. Instead, give your audience what it really wants: an overview of the problem and how you think it can be solved for the benefit of the company. Give them plenty of time to interact with you, and you’ll prove that you’re as smart and capable as they thought.



Sabina Nawaz is a global CEO coach, leadership keynote speaker, and writer working in over 26 countries. She advises C-level executives in Fortune 500 corporations, government agencies, non-profits, and academic organizations. Sabina has spoken at hundreds of seminars, events, and conferences including TEDx and has written for FastCompany.com, Inc.com, and Forbes.com, in addition to HBR.org. Follow her on Twitter.

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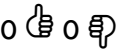
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VAKUL MALHOTRA 10 hours ago

One of the major points that I'd like to stress is that keep it simple for executives. It's often very hard to explain a very complicated issue in a simple manner. If you get into the weeds or complexity, you'd lose the executive in the 3 mins.

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