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# The Key To Presenting To Senior Executives

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Careers - Old

*I write about inspiring leadership and building a meaningful career.*

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A common refrain I hear from professionals who are climbing in their careers and starting to get more visibility in their companies is that they do not know how to effectively present to the C-Suite and other senior executives.

They have spent their careers presenting project updates and briefings and receiving feedback from multiple stakeholders who helped them refine the presentation narrative. Now they are in the position of being the chief storyteller, and an impromptu problem solver when the C-Suite executives ask them questions they have not prepared for.

Most professionals in this position will improve over time as they develop pattern recognition over what the executives will want to know, and how to tailor a synthesized story that proactively answers those questions. However, if you want to accelerate this

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## 1. How can we get there more quickly?

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I recently sat in a meeting where a CMO was being pitched on a variety of growth marketing strategies, and the first slide showed a roadmap with a six-month timeline. Immediately the CMO asked “How can we do this in one month?” and we spent the entire hour just discussing that first page, and strategies to accelerate the timeline. No matter how smart and thoughtful the presentation was, the CMO knew we could not wait six months to see if the proposed plan would succeed.

If you are presenting a plan to an executive committee you should think through what you would need to execute two to three times faster and be ready to explain the factors that are mitigating speed of delivery. Additionally, it is good practice to think through opportunities to break down the scope into smaller chunks to help you identify opportunities to realize value more quickly. Another benefit of this approach is you can also find ways to simply fail faster, which also unlocks tremendous value as you now have more time to iterate and revise your approach.

## 2. What do you need from me?

Imagine you just finished presenting a stellar strategy, and your CEO is excited to move forward. She simply asks “What do you need from me?” or “How can I help?”, and you can only manage a “ummm...nothing.” This is exactly what I saw play out recently when a VP presented a new product their company should release onto the market, and the CEO was left perplexed as to how there could be no role for her to play in galvanizing the organization to support the initiative or work with marketing on generating buzz with the public and potential customers.

This is a common situation that stems from the presenter's mindset which is typically to convince the audience of their brilliance. However, instead, the objective function of these presentations should be to push the company forward, and to support that mission it is critical to outline what you need not just in terms of resources and budget, but also in terms of participation from others. Ultimately, people want to be connected to the success of the company, and your success hinges on getting others involved.

## 3. What happens if we do nothing?

Executives are inundated with proposals and pitches from internal and external stakeholders, and they have a finite amount of resources to allocate to these opportunities. Moreover, an organization can get overwhelmed by a large portfolio of

As such, executives will often ask about the impact of not pursuing an initiative, and often when the presenter is faced with this question they realize that the lofty business benefits they pitched may have been overstated. For example, a sales director may pitch a chief revenue officer (CRO) on the need to do a roadshow and attach a sales growth figure to the initiative, let's say 20%. However, when the CRO probes further, and asks what the sales growth would be without the roadshow, the sales director is unlikely to say 0%, which pushes the conversation into the right direction as they both problem-solve on the true incrementality, and thus criticality, of the initiative.

#### 4. How will our competitors react?

Nothing is done in a vacuum, and in a world where the speed of innovation is growing exponentially, competitors can react swiftly to your organization's changes. As such, it is critical to think through the second-order effects that may occur after your strategy is implemented. [Loyalty programs are a great example](#), as competitors can replicate these programs which could, in turn, reduce profits.

As such, it is a good idea to at least have a conceptual framework to discuss potential reactions in the market that could impact the efficacy of your recommendation. In some cases, where the stakes are very high and there is significant uncertainty, this could mean doing a more [sophisticated simulation](#).

#### 5. What is your suggestion?

It is a common occurrence for someone to present a very thoughtful analysis, with pros and cons of competing options, and in the end not have a point of view on the best option. It is important to remember that when you are presenting to executives, it is not enough to present data and analysis in a synthesized manner, but also to reduce the [cognitive overhead](#) the executive has to bear, by providing a clear perspective on "the answer." It is common for people to fear presenting the "wrong answer," but this is a mistake, as presenting any answer helps to have a more meaningful dialogue as you can pressure test something specific, and revisit the assumptions and analyses that led to it.

Finally, presenting a perspective on the answer also shows senior executives that you have the ability to make decisions, and are confident in your logic, while also being open to having your ideas challenged. This bodes well for your trajectory as you are showing an ability to continue to grow in your career.

#### 6. What are your assumptions?

For anyone that has done a [case interview](#), they know it is critical to externalize your assumptions as they provide important context for how you have shaped the problem.

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have a slide on assumptions, it is common to miss the most important assumptions - that is, the ones that bear the most leverage on the answer. You can elucidate what these hidden assumptions are by asking yourself:

- What do I have to believe for this to be the best answer?
- What information would change my opinion?
- Which assumptions, if changed even modestly, would impact the answer significantly? (e.g., sensitivity analysis)

## 7. How will this help our customers, and not just us?

Jeff Bezos has famously focused Amazon on an obsession with the customer, and he has extolled the [virtues of this approach](#), and how it can create a competitive advantage. In this vein, many executives are similarly asking how strategic initiatives, even those that are focused on internal operations, will benefit the customer. Thinking through how your work will ultimately impact the end customer is a powerful way of garnering support, generating enthusiasm, and demonstrating strategic clarity in your presentations.

As such, it is good practice to think about not only the audience of your presentation, but also the customers you serve as critical stakeholders, and connecting the dots to how the customers win, which in turn will help your company succeed.



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I am passionate about developing inspiring leaders and helping companies build their digital capabilities. I am a McKinsey alum and now serve as an executive coach in re... **Read More**