

# Communicating with Executives

*Travis Kimmel*



Early in my career as an engineering manager, I would become frustrated when upper management seemingly brushed off challenges in engineering or asked me questions that seemed irrelevant. My perception was that the non-technical side of the business was out of touch or even at odds against technical initiatives—to the detriment of the business as I saw it.

In hindsight this all makes a bit more sense. As organizations grow, an inevitable amount of complexity is introduced. The sheer variety of projects, people, and responsibilities on the minds of those at the top can be overwhelming.

In my tenure as CEO, I've learned how to navigate a constant stream of demands competing for my attention, where it is not possible to unpack complex topics in real time. I now recognize the problem was probably two-fold. First, senior leaders faced raw, demanding items and were often fighting fires where mine wasn't the priority. Second, I probably didn't communicate in a way that got their attention.

Here are a few tips for communicating with and presenting to executives that have held true for me in the years since joining the ranks of management:

*The granularity of your conversations should scale to match your company size*

On the smallest teams, you might spend time talking about specific tasks. A bit larger, and you're talking about sprints or collections of tasks. At hundreds or thousands of employees, you're likely talking in terms of broad themes of work or long-term initiatives and resource allocation. As the company scales, you'll be expected to be more independent when it comes to managing tactical concerns, and focusing your communication on larger themes as the company grows (while continuing to handle

lower-level items autonomously) is an important signal that you as a leader are scaling with the company.

*Push information up frequently without being asked to do so*

Depending on your role, you might not be speaking directly to senior leadership on a regular basis. Your manager might be, however, so it's helpful to consider them as a communication channel. Keep your manager in the loop proactively even when things are going well. It's easy to slip into firefighting mode, but pushing bursty updates about things being on track is often just as valuable, and it gives you an opportunity to showcase the work your team is doing.

*The patterns for communicating upward are almost the inverse of communication with your team*

Team-centric communication is often about fostering autonomy, and overcommunication at that layer can be distracting or come off as condescending. Upward communication is the opposite: rarely will you run into a problem overcommunicating, and the larger the company, the more bursty updates serve as valuable reminders to your stakeholders about everything currently in play.

*Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them*

It's a natural tendency to want to build the story before finally landing on the thesis. That might work for a TED talk, but it doesn't really work in an executive setting. Tell them what you're going to tell them. "We'd like to spend three weeks paying down technical debt. Today I'm going to discuss why we'd like to do that and what we're focusing on, and I would like to leave with a 'go' or a 'no-go' decision." Do that and then provide a summary of what you told them (ideally in written form) and restate the goals of your communication with a concrete ask or information about when the next update will happen.

Think of it as a three-step process that does the following:

1. I'm telling you about X because of Y.
2. Here are the details on X.
3. I need you to do Z so that I can accomplish X because of Y.

This pattern is very effective with executives; it helps frontload your message with information about why the conversation is important as well as what you need in terms of executive backing and mandate:

### *Write the narrative first*

Before you begin thinking about the presentation, write a narrative explaining your argument and recommendation. Organize your thoughts in writing first as if your manager were going to review it. This will help identify gaps in your understanding of the problem and give you a template for following up in writing after the conversation. Done well, it will help you sufficiently consider and address the various perspectives and constraints of the problem—and after you’ve prepped at this level you will rarely be caught out when you’re advocating to a larger audience.

Creating a presentation is much easier after the narrative is written. I like to write out the narrative, trim the fat, and build slides around it.

### *Don’t be evasive, and prepare for detours*

Senior leaders will frequently pierce into areas that they see as potential problems, sometimes uncovering gaps in the presenter’s understanding of the problem. These unexpected questions can quickly derail the entire presentation toward a thread of follow-up questions as they dig even further. Presentations to executives that take an unexpected turn are common; their experience has helped tune their radar for knowing when to dive in further.

Along the same vein, answer their questions directly. Executive radar quickly picks up on evasive answers, so err on the side of “I don’t know but I’ll find out” as opposed to vamping. It’s generally fine not to know something, and if you take detailed notes and follow up after this will almost always work to your advantage.

### *Numbers are the language of business*

Use data to explain the current constraints, context, or progress of the problem. If you don’t provide data and instead skip to the analysis, you’re relying on trust and persuasion to get the information, guidance, or resources that you need. Executives are by nature very results oriented, so make sure anything you propose is coupled with data that will allow them to process the problem themselves in a “show your work” fashion.

The ideal outcome of a meeting is one where everyone leaves with shared understanding of the path ahead, and the surest way to get there is inclusion of the data that led you to your own conclusions.

### *Lead with the ask*

Go into the meeting with a clear goal. Start the meeting by explicitly framing the goal, and then return to the ask at the end of the meeting. Executive time is precious, so make sure to be respectful of that by having a clear outcome for the meeting. It's generally better to be a little over-ambitious in your ask than it is to meander about without obvious action items.