

CFOs: Do you find yourself feeling uncomfortable when asked to present to the Board of Directors?

Learn easy-to-implement strategies to communicate more effectively with your senior managers

Many technical experts find a glass ceiling prevents future promotions

While you are technically excellent and have risen through the ranks smoothly until now, you sense resistance to your future promotion prospects. Your last two performance reviews have flagged up communication skills as a development area. But to be honest, you are not entirely convinced that you need to improve - you have been successful in your career, so why change now?

You have to give opinions on complex issues to directors who may not fully understand all the technical aspects. As you are not sure how much they know about the technical issues, you have tended to explain all the basic processes in a logical fashion so that the directors will understand your conclusions. This approach often results in your presentation being interrupted and you sense that the directors get impatient the longer you speak. Although you are comfortable in one-to-one interactions, when you are standing in front of your superiors and getting asked a question, you find it difficult to find the words to adequately express your ideas concisely.

You are not always fully certain that you understand the motivations of the people in the meeting or on the conference call. Some directors you only see once a year and others you have never met before. It's difficult to know how to prepare a presentation for people you don't know well and who may have different expectations. The result is that you sense a lot of frustration and tension when communicating with your senior managers. It doesn't have to be that way. You don't need to be stuck here forever.

Finance executives who switch their mindset can become valued business partners

Imagine a situation where you are able to engage with your directors on an equal footing. Shatter the glass ceiling that is preventing your promotion by grasping the essentials of executive communication. Switch your mindset from a technical expert to an effective executive by understanding how future leaders all have superior communication skills. Adapt to how top executives think so that you layer your presentation and deliver just the right amount of technical detail. Handle question and answer sessions with confidence and use a framework to manage unexpected questions. Anticipate the motivations of senior executives and how to deliver on these expectations to a diverse audience.

You are not alone.

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Advance your career by learning how to speak like an executive

If any of the above sounds familiar, don't worry, you are not alone. In fact, you are in good company. Most senior finance people have similar issues. Being technical experts means that you are excellent with process, procedure, the integrity of data, and especially paying attention to very small details. All of which is essential - and desirable - in finance executives. However, when you reach a certain level in the organisation, these technical skills become less important as the core task of an executive is to make decisions and communicate them throughout the organisation. All highly effective executives are superb communicators and presenters and they set the benchmark for others to follow. Today, when decisions are made on who to hire as a CFO, CEO or other key role -the ability to engage with internal and external stakeholders is one of the top two or three competencies.

With the right support you can become a confident presenter

However, as a finance expert, you can't be expected to automatically know what it takes to be an engaging and confident presenter - you are not an executive speech coach - and with the demands on finance executives already very much more than they were a few years ago, your time is squeezed so that executive communication skills has probably been relegated to only a couple days of training if at all. The good news is that help is here.

To take a step away from being a technical expert and learning the craft of an effective executive communicator, here are five things you need to do and a couple of things not to do:

Tip 1: Always stand up to deliver a speech of importance.

An engaging speaking voice is very relevant today, as many business presentations are given through teleconferences. The lack of visual cues makes it harder for listeners to catch the message and tougher for speakers to read the audience. Standing up places you in an assertive posture and allows deeper breathing from your diaphragm which aids better vocal quality projection. Opera singers could not deliver with such a wide range while sitting. Strengthening your abdominal muscles enables you to better fill your lungs with air. So you now have another reason to get to the gym.

Tip 2: Gradually expand your ability to project your voice.

Adding strength and authority starts with becoming comfortable with the sound of your own voice. Before I became a professional speaker, I was incredibly shy and self-conscious when speaking to groups. Partly this is because I am a natural introvert like many professionals in finance, IT and engineering. This can't be changed overnight but like any skill can be developed. Practise your presentation out aloud, ideally in a meeting room, and project your voice so that someone at the back of the room would hear. While you don't need to sing out your windows, find fun excuses to raise your voice, like playing sports or refereeing a football match at your children's school.

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Tip 3: Great speakers are made, not born.

No infant starts with a fear of public speaking. Conversely, no one is born a natural public speaker. Circumstances, experiences and environment all play a key part in how people develop. I had a bad experience in a school drama class that put me off public speaking for decades. The good news is that these fears can be overcome. Hard work and determination to improve are the greatest success factors in becoming an effective public speaker. Many presenters do not allocate *any* time to rehearse their speech. If you have three weeks to prepare a totally new 20 minute presentation allow between 30 minutes and 1 hour a day for preparation and time-block it in your calendar. You wouldn't expect to become a better swimmer if you never went to the pool, so find the time to practice your speaking skills.

Tip 4: Learn to self-evaluate

You don't learn by doing, you learn by re-doing. Accelerate your learning by listening to your presentation on a video or audio recorder. This highly effective way makes you more aware of the areas you need to focus on - if you can get over the embarrassment of looking or listening to yourself! After watching a recording, take a piece of paper and divide it into two halves. Write down all your strengths on one side and areas that you would like to improve on the other. You will be surprised after this exercise, sometimes you sound better than you imagined. Most audiences don't judge us as harshly as we critique ourselves.

Tip 5: Visit the venue for larger conference speaking

For important talks, consider simulating the environment or actually visiting the venue where you will speak. This is important for all presenters because by walking on the stage you get a feel for the microphone, the seat arrangements and the acoustics. Every room is different, so the best business presenters, like Steve Jobs, work live rehearsals at the venue into their preparations.

Don't do this...

The Oscar winning film, *The King's Speech* showed some bizarre therapies to improve public speaking. Best to avoid things like:

- Relaxing your throat by smoking deeply into your lungs! Voice care is important so drink plenty of water and add lemon or honey. You can also lightly massage your vocal chords before you start presenting.
- A piece of bad advice is "*always start with a joke*". While humour can connect with your audience, it's such a high risk approach. You might offend, not deliver it with the best timing or just not tell a funny joke. Not the best way to start your presentation.

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- Another bizarre technique in the film saw a speech therapist ask King George to fill his mouth with marbles and start speaking. This was supposed to improve his articulation. While I wouldn't recommend this technique, clear articulation is an important aspect of a good speaking voice. Instead find some private space and practice reading your script or a book out aloud at half your normal speed taking care to pronounce every single syllable in every single word. This exercise brings attention to clear pronunciation and will help you deliver your speech more crisply when you return to normal speed.

In addition to the above tips, remember these two key lessons. Firstly, only you can change you. If you don't want to improve or if you don't think it's that important then your progress will reflect that. Secondly, being consistent and realistic about changing an engrained behaviour is essential. Put some time aside to rehearse and the improvements will follow.

Case study: Many CFOs have benefited from The One Minute Presenter coaching
I work with many CFOs from multinationals around Greater China. Here is a case study of a typical challenge we face:

Background

Chinese national, 15 year veteran from a Big 4 consulting firm, now an in-house tax specialist with a high end real estate investor and project manager. Project-based with high pressure from commercial directors based all across China and a global CFO in New York.

One big difference that affects executives when they change companies and industries is the change in working style. The main different in working style was that John was used to provide advice to the client and then the client would choose to use it or not. Either way, John was not usually involved in the implementation. In his new role, he was expected to not only provide advice, but to do so in grey areas where there were no clear mandates from tax authorities, then supply a recommendation and once the commercial director had made a decision, drive this plan forward.

A common issue inside multinationals based in China is that executives are not proactive enough. This is due to a mixture of reasons ranging from personality, culture, education and previous working environments. When working with senior executives who have already obtained a measure of success in their careers, it can be difficult to switch their mindset. A common reaction is "why should I change? I have already reached a high position in the company and am happy with my compensation." this is true and with the current talent situation in China, qualified executives can easily find a new position. However, most executives are still driven to improve and do better and this is the hook that needs to be found to make the change stick. As Marshall Goldsmith says, "what got you here, won't get you there". Once executives make the mindset switch, they are

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more open to work with.

The pain

Although everyone regarded John as a subject matter expert, frustrations emerged in meetings and telephone calls with the business directors. John used his consultant's approach to give detailed, sometimes rambling presentations that went into tax legislations in great depth. This is a common symptom when the presenter feels that they need to continually establish their credentials as an expert. In this situation, his audience just wished he would get to the point quickly and directly. With millions of dollars investment on the line and time-pressure a major factor, they needed to get the best advice, make a decision and make it happen.

The lack of face to face contact of teleconferences adds more stress on executives who are operating in their second language. In face to face settings, they can pick up more meaning from non verbal cues like facial gestures and more clearly hearing tone of voice. Down the line this information is lost and executives are less reluctant to commit themselves.

What we did?

After a few coaching sessions, John realised that he needed to find a new approach. We introduced a framework - a structure in which John could slot in his content. We work with about 12 presentation frames and we selected one that enabled him to cut out the technical details which his audience didn't want, and complete his presentation with a firm recommendation.

A major point was the change in mindset that took place when John realised that even seemingly simple engagements like conference calls needed a great deal of preparation - far more than he had previously thought necessary. The "ah-ha" moment came when John said "This really needs a lot of preparation!" After he 'got it', we could then work on the techniques to help him prepared more effectively.

Outcome

His commercial directors appreciated this approach as their meetings were shorter, they didn't have to drag the information out of him and they could focus their efforts on driving their project forward.

An important take-away is that often executives underestimate the preparation time required to have a masterful grasp of their content. This is a basic entry point before you can start applying tools and techniques to arrange, express and deliver a clear message.

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So what now?

If you are ready to take a step up in your career, contact us for a initial complimentary strategy session where we can outline approaches to help you starting speaking like an executive.

About Warwick J Fahy

Warwick works with high-potential senior finance executives who struggle to get their point across and influence their key stakeholders. Warwick helps the executive gain respect by quickly and powerfully expressing their opinions - even when under pressure. Warwick is the author of "The One Minute Presenter: 8 steps to successful business presentations in a short attention span world. Warwick can be reached on warwick@oneminutepresenter.com and +86 21 6101 0486.

Links:

More about Warwick John Fahy at www.warwickjohnfahy.com
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