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'Managing Up' In the EHS Arena

How to Talk to Senior Management

by Gail Golden, MBA, Ph.D.

According to a recent online survey conducted by Business & Legal Reports, dealing with upper management was identified as the major environmental, health, and safety (EHS) challenge by 60 percent of the respondents. Becoming more effective at "selling" your ideas and influencing people over whom you have no authority is a critical leadership capability for managers at all levels of an organization.

In most ways, EHS managers have the same challenges and opportunities as other department managers when trying to develop solid working relationships with executives of the firm. One difference is that executives are often less familiar with the nuts and bolts of EHS, particularly environmental management and technology, than they are with better known departments, such as finance, human

resources, and marketing. But to be effective, all departments must sooner or later seek to drive change and innovation. This article is based on the premise that the understanding and techniques to ensure that top management buys in to a proposal are consistent across all departments.

The World of the Senior Executive

Part of the challenge of persuading someone else to adopt your point of view is that the rightness of what you are proposing is so obvious to you. As an expert, you have technical knowledge and real-life experience that enables you to understand the problem and present the best solution. You understand the critical questions and decisions to be made, and you address them before finalizing your recommendation. So when you meet resistance, it can seem incomprehensible. Why doesn't this smart guy understand what I am saying? Why doesn't he get it?

To answer these questions and prepare yourself for dealing with resistance, it is critical to understand the world of the executives with whom you are interacting. What are their primary goals and objectives? How do they and others measure their success? What keeps them up at night?

Most senior executives have two intertwined business goals. The first is to help their businesses flourish, to improve performance on the relevant metrics: stock price, P/E ratio, ROI, top line, bottom line, employee surveys, etc. Which of these metrics

is "top of the mind" for a particular executive depends both on the state of the business and on the executive's preferred way of measuring business results. Understanding the critical challenges facing the business and how the executive intends to address them provides a framework for predicting how your proposal is going to be received and where the probable resistance will be.

The second goal of most senior execs is to advance their own careers. What that means varies from one leader to another. It may be about money, fame, power, impact, being on the cutting edge, security, doing good, or any number of other ways success can be defined. People rarely rise to senior roles in corporations without being ambitious, competitive, and driven.

You will be much more effective in persuading senior leaders if you keep these two goals in mind when drafting your message. How is your proposal going to make the business more successful, as measured by the metrics the leaders are paying attention to? How is it going to help them advance their own careers and be successful on the dimensions that are most meaningful to them? If your proposition clearly addresses those issues, you are much more likely to get a receptive hearing.

What Does Convincing Sound Like?

Everyone has been in the situation where someone is trying to convince you to change your point of view. Whether it is in a sales situation,



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a teacher-student relationship, or a conversation with a professional expert, others are constantly trying to persuade you to change your position and incorporate what they are offering. For the persuasive effort to be successful, three elements are essential:

- The content of the message has to be relevant, meaningful, and understandable.
- The style of the message has to be engaging and appropriate.
- The messenger has to have credibility and likability.

Imagine—if someone you do not like or respect speaks to you in a manner that is boring or offensive about something that seems irrelevant to your needs or incomprehensible, how likely are you to adopt his point of view? Unless the speaker has direct authority over you and has the power to reward and punish your behavior, you are not going to pay any attention to her opinion and may, in fact, increase your opposition to what she is proposing. So being an effective change agent with senior leaders means skillfully managing the above three aspects of your communication with them.

Sharpen the Content Of Your Message

Say it in simple English. Many experts have real difficulty expressing their ideas in language that is accessible to lay people. Whether it is *parametric emissions monitoring*, *discounted cash flow projections*, or *macular degeneration*, if your audience doesn't know what you're talking about, they aren't going to be persuaded. In fact, they may become hostile if they feel you are talking down to them. Although most business leaders are intelligent, they are not necessarily fluent in your jargon. Practice your proposal with someone who doesn't share your

technical background to ensure that it is comprehensible.

Make the business case. Most senior executives are interested in data and dollars. Promote your ideas by focusing on what is most important to them, not what matters to you. What problem will you solve for them? Will you lower costs, increase revenue, or reduce risk? Use case studies to provide real-life examples of how your proposal will benefit their business.

Address the personal benefits indirectly. Executives adopt initiatives that make them look good and advance their careers. However, most leaders prefer not to acknowledge this directly and may, in fact, deny it. One way to get around this is to tell a success story which includes as a sidebar that the responsible executive was promoted or otherwise rewarded.

Ratchet up the Style Of Your Message

Target the right person. It is critically important to identify the real decision maker. In general, gaining buy-in from the most senior person gives you and your ideas the greatest clout. But some executives are very hands-on, and others prefer to delegate decisions to their subordinates. Sometimes, there is a “power behind the throne” who really makes the decisions. Use your organizational contacts and political savvy to figure out whom you really need to persuade.

Brush up your presentation skills. In many corporate environments, highly polished presentation skills are expected at senior levels. That means coming in very well-prepared, presenting your ideas fluently and efficiently, and using visual aids effectively. If you are not a highly skilled presenter, find a course and/or a coach to help you. Before you give your presentation, practice in front of

someone you trust to give you candid feedback. If you suffer from performance anxiety (and nearly everyone does), learn behavioral and cognitive techniques to manage it. You can have the most powerful content, but if you don't present it with confidence and energy, you won't be heard.

Use the channel that the executive tunes in to. Pete Drucker, the highly regarded management consultant, classified leaders as “listeners” and “readers.” Listeners like information presented verbally so they can ask questions; readers prefer to read and study reports. Find out which channel your target prefers and lead with that channel. Similarly, some executives like in-person meetings, some like phone calls, and some prefer e-mail. Use the channel your target pays the most attention to.

Be sensitive to the company culture. Organizations vary greatly in their unspoken rules about communication. Characteristics such as formality, humor, and directness can enhance or undermine the power of your message. Watch the people in the company who are effective influencers and take your cue from them.

Be a good listener. People often make the mistake of thinking that presentation skills are only about delivering your message. Ensuring that the message is heard requires equal attention to what the audience is saying, both verbally and nonverbally. Take careful notice of the response you are getting. Shifting your style or focus accordingly, rather than sticking to a prepared script, greatly enhances the impact of your message.

Make Yourself an Effective Messenger

Build your network of strategic relationships. Becoming an effective change agent with senior leaders doesn't just happen in formal meetings

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and presentations. Developing ongoing relationships with the critical decision makers builds their trust in you, makes you more likable, and greatly enhances the likelihood that they will listen to what you have to say. Strategic relationships are not only about managing up; it is also important to build strong relationships with peers and subordinates. The goal is to be known, liked, and respected, so that when you speak, people pay attention right from the start.

Be a giver. If you approach someone only when you want or need something from him or her, you are a pest. Finding ways to be helpful and generous to your business associates is not only ethically admirable—it's also good business. Supporting others' projects and agendas, offering your help or expertise, and providing a listening ear are a few of the multitude of ways to build mutually loyal relationships that will increase your persuasive power.

Ensure that your integrity and professional expertise are unassailable. People listen to others they trust. Trust is earned by demonstrating your values and your knowledge and is very difficult to regain when it has been lost.

Know yourself. Each person has his or her own style of dealing with authority. Do you have a tendency to be rebellious or overly compliant? Are you emotionally reactive or very calm? Do certain people or issues tend to "get your goat"? Knowing your strengths and challenges and managing your emotions and behaviors is an important part of being an effective persuader.

Summary

Recent research about advertising estimated that the average American consumer is exposed to approximately 3,000 advertising messages a day. Needless to say, consumers tune most of them out. The ones they pay attention to are likely to have clear, relevant content delivered in a

lively, engaging manner by sources they trust.

The same can be said of typical busy business executives. They are confronted with numerous competing proposals for how best to use the limited resources they command. Why should they choose your project over the competition? To land your message and create the changes you know are in the company's best interest, start by looking at the issues from the executive's point of view. Then sharpen your content, fine-tune your delivery style, and build your reputation as a knowledgeable, trustworthy expert. Your voice will be much more likely to be heard by the people who count.

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