

Speaking the Language of Your Business: How to Present HR Initiatives to Your CEO

As human resources professionals set their sights on becoming respected strategic partners to top-level management, it is essential that they learn effective techniques to discuss ideas with executives. Why? Because HR and business executives have differing priorities and perspectives and often speak in different business languages.

The following situation we experienced serves as a great example and demonstrates the necessity for planning your approach. The HR manager at a local company decided that he wanted to implement an employee recognition program. He went to his CEO and asked her if he could have a monthly budget of \$1,000 to provide rewards for positive performance and to hold monthly lunches to improve office morale. The CEO had more questions than the HR manager had answers for: 1) Is there a problem with morale? 2) How is this impacting productivity? 3) How does this tie to our strategic plan? 4) What kinds of performance are we rewarding? 5) Don't we provide merit increases and bonuses for performance? 6) What return can we expect from this investment? 7) Is this the right solution? and 8) Have you fully defined what the actual problem is?

The HR manager went back to the department complaining that the CEO always blocks his initiatives, which shows her lack of support for HR as a valuable partner.

After talking with the HR manager in greater detail, it was apparent how disconnected the CEO and HR manager were. It was as if they weren't speaking the same language. In reality the CEO was not disinterested in her employees, but rather she had a keen interest in the impact of this decision on the business. The CEO might have considered the initiative if the HR manager had presented it in a different context.

The lesson here is that to be thought of as a strategic partner, HR professionals must act strategically. If you are not speaking the language of your business, it will be hard for your fellow executives to think of you as part of the team. To advance your reputation and contribution, you must at a minimum know the key drivers of your business, understand your customers, be continuously prepared, show analytical problem solving, and get to know senior leadership's priorities and objectives.

Here are a few techniques to review:

Preparation

- ▶▶ Determine which issues would be most meaningful and relevant to bring up with your CEO.
- ▶▶ Through your ongoing interactions with your CEO, pay attention to verbal and silent cues to help you determine the best way to communicate with him or her.
- ▶▶ Learn to avoid the issues or phrases that your CEO dislikes.
- ▶▶ Show that your initiative is relevant to your CEO's and organization's goals and priorities.
- ▶▶ Develop a strong track record to lend yourself credibility.
- ▶▶ Present your ideas in the way the CEO prefers, whether verbal or written, short or long.
- ▶▶ Realize that when it comes to involving colleagues, there is a difference between getting support for your idea and appearing to gang up on the boss.
- ▶▶ Before your discussion, practice to make sure it flows clearly and sounds logical.

Discussion

- ▶ Present your idea and allow your CEO to think about it rather than expecting a decision right away.
- ▶ Know your facts and be prepared to give concrete information, such as examples of best practices, that support your position.
- ▶ Do not get emotionally involved; remain calm even if you are upset with things that are said.

After the Meeting

- ▶ If you receive consensus, follow up with your CEO to review the outcome of your discussion and the next steps.
- ▶ If things don't go as you'd hoped, don't take it personally; there may be other factors unknown to you that influenced the decision.
- ▶ Try to understand the opposing viewpoint to help strengthen your future discussions.
- ▶ Be open to changing parts of your plan if needed.
- ▶ Be patient and don't give up. It may simply not be the right time now, but your initiative may be a good fit for the organization one day.

Techniques section adapted from Pamela Babcock, "Throwing the Switch," *HR Magazine*, December 2003