



YOUR GUIDE TO COMMUNICATING WITH UPPER MANAGEMENT

GETTING WHAT YOU WANT FROM HIGH-LEVEL SUPERVISORS IS TRICKY, BUT YOU CAN BOOST YOUR ODDS WITH THESE TACTICS.

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You walk into your boss's office with more confidence than you've ever had before. You've never been more prepared. You know exactly what you're going to say and how you're going to say it. You close the door, you sit down.

But after your talk, you walk out without the raise you asked for. Without the approval you wanted for that new initiative. Without the promotion you've been gunning for for over a year.

What happened? Intense preparation and practice might make you confident, but confidence and a big smile aren't always enough. If you want to make the most of these make-or-break opportunities, you need to understand how your boss thinks. These six rules for "upward communication"—that is, with superiors in your organization—can improve your chances of getting what you're after.

1. FOCUS ON IMPACT, NOT PROCESS

One of the keys to successful upward communication is to emphasize outcomes rather than processes and background details. The higher the level of the person you're addressing, the less they'll likely be concerned about your methodology. When you speak upward, your audience wants you to actually address the questions that are most relevant to them—not how you got here—so make your connections clear and precise. For example, rather than explaining how you reached the conclusion that your sales force needs to be expanded, focus on the impact more staff will have on labor costs and sales targets.

2. LOOK TO THE FUTURE, NOT THE PAST

Show off your vision of what's ahead, not your ability to rationalize the past. It isn't that precedent and past experiences don't count at all, but those in upper management are thinking into the future—from the next quarter to the next decade. Unless you're asked directly to defend a past action or say how your plan compares with something that's already been tried, stay laser-focused on what comes next.

3. KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

When you're speaking seriously with high-level decision-makers, anecdotes and explanations aren't enough. You need to have a strong grasp of the facts and data behind your claims. While you can make broad statements and predictions, you have to follow up with quantitative information that supports your conclusions. But don't just use data for the sake of using data—make sure it's relevant both to the short- and long-term impact of whatever changes you're pushing for.

4. AVOID BUSINESS IDIOMS

"Think outside the box."

"Hit the nail on the head."

"Run it up the flagpole."

What do these phrases have in common? Besides being cliché, they're too informal, euphemistic, and empty of actual meaning. Every word counts; don't waste your time on tired phraseology. What's more, business idioms don't always translate well for a global audience. If the superiors you're appealing to aren't native English speakers, some expressions can even cause confusion—certainly not the impression you want to leave.

5. GET TO THE POINT

Another key to successful upward communication is to get to the point immediately. Speak with precision and clarity. "Time is money" has become a cliché, but it's true. The higher-level your listeners, the less patience they'll have for big windups before you throw your pitch. Don't put your conclusion last—state it right from the beginning then spend the rest of your energy explaining why it's the right one.

6. FOCUS ON MANAGEMENT'S TOP CONCERNS

Communicating with upper management demands showing how your goals are aligned with the vision and priorities of your listeners—and subsequently the company's. It's great to have innovative ideas, but if they don't square with the objectives of the people you're speaking with, they won't go very far. For instance, if your company is focused on cutting costs but you want approval for an expensive software program, don't just talk about how amazing the features are. Instead, explain how it will have a rapid return on investment and keep saving money in the long run.

Whether you're speaking to your manager, your CEO, or your board, the ability to communicate with power and precision is crucial for getting anything done. By using these six strategies, you'll maximize your chances of gaining the support you need to score big on your approvals, and even bigger in propelling your career forward.