



LEARNING "C-SPEAK" – THE LANGUAGE OF EXECUTIVES

Ideas for selling your learning initiative by targeting your message

To successfully get a training initiative up and running, you need to convince a lot of people that your ideas are worth pursuing. Ultimately, you will need to focus on convincing the "C-level" executives in your organization – CEO, CFO, CIO, CLO, etc. You will need to learn to speak their language – "C-speak" – and to tailor your message directly to the organization's business needs.

Most people talk to C-level executives the way they talk to everyone else. After all, C-level folks seem to look and act somewhat like the rest of us. They put on their pants or skirt the same way we do. They eat the same foods we do. They care about the future of the company like we do. One difference is that they set the strategic direction for the rest of us to follow. So, it's no surprise that C's live in a slightly different world than we do. They speak a slightly different language.

In larger companies, it is sometimes impossible for C-level executives to get involved in the day-to-day operation and minute details of the training department (even though we hear this is a vital component at e-learning conferences). When making a pitch for a learning initiative, it might be a mistake to think that a complex level of detail may just be the right fuel to help a CEO make that critical decision to put his/her support behind your program.

We know of a training manager who was asked to make a presentation to a CIO of a large telecommunications company. The topic was why they should convert an instructor-led series of courses to e-learning. The training manager, a frequent speaker at training conferences, had planned an extensive presentation on the topic, with 65 PowerPoint slides with great facts, figures, and examples. The time allotted for the presentation was 90 minutes, which was exactly the amount of time it took to deliver the presentation at trade shows. The conference room was reserved, a computer projector was set up specifically for the presentation, and, fortunately, a meeting was set with the manager of MIS and one of the vice presidents who reported directly to the CIO.

In the brief but extremely informative meeting, the training manager quickly clicked through his slides, showing them to the group, only to have the VP say, "You know, that's very good information, but the CIO doesn't need to hear all of the details you just showed us. She is extremely busy and has another meeting just after this one. If you'd like, we can go through and help you shorten the presentation to just the salient points that will help you make your business case for your initiative."

That day, a valuable lesson was learned. The PowerPoint presentation was shortened from 65 slides to eight slides, and a longer demonstration of the actual learning content was added, saving time for a detailed Q&A session at the end of the 90-minute time period. Most of the slides that were cut dealt with how the trainees would learn. With the slides removed, the presentation focused instead on tying the initiative to primary business drivers rather than delving into the low-level details associated with implementation.

The presentation was made with the revised agenda. The CIO not only put her full support behind the program, she also shared copies of the slides with other training departments in the company.

Phrases C's Like to Hear

Every business case in this report suggests it is imperative to have full support from your executive team. Projects that have this support are the ones that are most often successful, and, not surprisingly, the ones lacking support are generally the first to fail.

When making a presentation to C's or writing a business case proposal, try to use words that focus on the bottom line. While C's are also concerned about people and programs, they will respond more favorably to messages that appropriately link training with real business issues. Some of the phrases might include:

- "Improve our customer satisfaction"
- "Increase our market share"
- "Decrease our operating expenses"
- "Increase our revenue"
- "Beat the competition or at least keep pace"
- "Shorten our time to market"
- "Improve employee performance"
- "Reduce turn-over"

Here are some examples of translating typical "e-learning speak" to C-speak:

| As training professionals, we like to say... | What C's would rather hear | Primary business driver |
|--|---|--|
| "We've been delivering XYZ training using instructor-led classes. We know we can reach more people by conducting live e-learning classes." | "We've been delivering XYZ training using instructor-led classes to teach about 230 people per year. By moving the classes to live e-learning delivery, we should be able to reach more than 1,200 of our reps without increasing delivery costs and, in fact, decreasing travel-related expenses. We'll get more training for each training development dollar spent." | Decrease our operating expenses |
| "E-learning simulations will help our sales reps understand their jobs and our unique sales process much better." | "Using modest projections and looking at case studies for other sales situations, we feel that e-learning simulations will result in closing \$_____ in additional sales next quarter." | Increase our revenue |
| "E-learning will help us deliver training just-in-time and just enough." | "The knowledge of our employees is what keeps us ahead of our competition. In this fast-paced business, e-learning will help us ensure that our employees have the right knowledge and at the right time." [Use a specific example of a particularly difficult process, procedure, or concept from your own company situation to illustrate.] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Beat the competition or at least keep pace ▪ Improve employee performance |

E-Learning Messages with High Recognition from Actual CEOs

To reverse engineer the process, we interviewed several CEOs from large- and medium-sized companies and asked them what caught their attention when someone proposed a new learning

initiative. Here is a summary of the central messages that helped them make the decision to accept the proposal. You can use these messages to strengthen your next e-learning presentation to C-level executives:

- This training initiative can help us keep up with the rapidly changing skill sets needed by our employees to stay competitive.
- Skill sets can become obsolete every 3.5 to 4 months.
- This training initiative will help us retain employees, or at least retain their expert knowledge and skill sets.

Example: It can cost two to three times the salary of an employee each time a worker leaves. That's just the cost of recruiting and training a new employee. In reality, it can cost much more in "opportunity costs" (the cost of pulling people off the job to train them) and lost productivity on projects.

- With the proposed initiative, we can train our employees anywhere from 50-60% faster.

Example: A large hotel franchise cut an instructor-led workshop on how to make reservations from a three-day, instructor-led workshop to a one-day experience using interactive learning.

Example: A large IT company cut a five-day training event teaching teamwork skills to a blended approach of two days of e-learning, followed by a few hours of live e-learning to practice newly learned skills.

- E-learning will help us deliver consistent instruction.
- With e-learning, we can reach a much more geographically dispersed employee base (even global training programs), while avoiding expensive travel costs.
- E-learning will allow us to evolve our training program into a 24/7 operation.

Advice for Making a C-Level Presentation

Sometimes, there's more to making the business case than just what we say. Here are some tips for making that all-important, C-level presentation:

- C-level executives don't like to take a leap of faith. They'd rather know what they are doing and what the expected results might be.
- C's are focused on the bigger picture. Your presentation to them should focus on the bigger picture as well, but be prepared to answer detailed questions if asked.
- C's like to see concrete examples of what the e-learning will look like from the learner's perspective and are often not overly concerned with how the training will be developed. Avoid demonstrating the authoring process unless asked to do so.
- Some C's have a hard time viewing e-learning examples from other industries and imagining what the training will look like with "our company content." Use closely related demos or custom-created demos with your company's content for maximum impact. It doesn't need to be long, just relevant.
- Set proper expectations for what the training will and won't do. Don't withhold disadvantages and reservations about using e-learning (e.g., video bandwidth problems, etc.). C's know that there is a downside and will respect your acknowledgement of the risks involved.
- Be respectful of the C's time and don't go over your allotted time when making a presentation or reviewing a proposal.
- Approach the CEO with a plan, not just a pitch to take training online. The plan should include timelines for bringing courses online, which courses are the best candidates for going online first, etc.

- Be prepared to answer questions about "how much this will cost" versus "what the expected cost savings might be." Don't forget to point out hidden opportunity costs.
- If you use case studies, try to find ones from closely related companies – competitors, if available.
- Don't be surprised if the C tells you that you have less time for the presentation than you had anticipated. Have a back-up plan for skipping to the most relevant topics.
- Make the CIO and/or the MIS manager your best friend. This will go a long way in building your business case. Think of them as the Department of Transportation and you as the automobile maker. Your car won't go anywhere without their roads. Likewise, your e-learning initiative will go nowhere without their Internet or intranet infrastructure.
- Put your primary emphasis on making improvements to the training delivery. Avoid making e-learning technology the point and focus of the presentation. Think about what will happen two years from now when you decide to change technologies to become more efficient.
- Keep development cost projections in line. Even though you might be able to show a positive ROI, you need to make sure your company can absorb the development costs this year. It may be better to present a phased approach if training budgets may not be enough for the current year.
- Keep focused on strategic topics.

To find out more about how to get your projects accepted and funded, download a complimentary executive summary of our report, *How to Create an Internal Proposal: 10 Steps and a Template to Get Your Program Funded*.

<http://www.brandonhall.com/public/publications/10step/index.htm>.