

Earn the CEO's respect by anticipating employee issues and voicing their concerns

## BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CEO

Gaining access to the leader makes the communicator's job easier. But how do you initiate and sustain a relationship that's mutually beneficial for both of you? Based on past experience, Aniko Czinege shares some practical ideas for improving relations with the CEO.

### Become a sounding board

Get to know your CEO's agenda by understanding the issues they deal with. These will include business drivers and how sales are made; key customers; common complaints and how they're resolved; products and services; the company's finances; and what the research or strategy development team is working on. Remember, the CEO's biggest concern is always the numbers.

Develop reliable contacts on the ground so when you're asked how employees are feeling, you know or can quickly find out. And speak up, especially about potential people issues. Voice what you've heard and the implications, and suggest solutions. Make a habit of doing this and you'll soon be asked for input as a matter of course.

### Sell your ideas

Use basic selling techniques to show that you understand your CEO's agenda. When presenting ideas, always be aware of the "what's in it for them" factor. Sell the benefits of the work by focusing on how it will help achieve organizational goals.

During my time at GE Healthcare, for example, the division's goal was to recover from a loss of UK£35m within a year. So I focused all our communication activities on supporting that.

When I needed the CEO to buy

into a leadership visibility program, I explained that face-to-face communication with employees would make them feel more involved in cost-saving initiatives. I used the "FAB" approach; explaining the Feature, Action and Benefits of the program. For example:

- *Feature – what is the activity?* Employee lunches.
- *Action – what does it do?* It enables employees to ask direct questions of the executive team in a relaxed environment.
- *Benefit – how will it benefit the organization?* It gives leadership the opportunity to explain how employees can make a vital difference in achieving profitability and enables executives to be more aware of employee concerns.

### Plan your moments to talk

Find out what days and times work best for the CEO in terms of availability. My last CEO asked me not to schedule meetings on Mondays as he was still in "weekend mode." But Friday was a better day for him.

Talk little but often – 30 minutes a week is often better than two hours a month. That way you keep the rapport going.

### Be accommodating

Be flexible. I remember having an important meeting cut from three hours to a 15-minute discussion over lunch. I smiled, cut the presentation and summarized the top points that needed agreement.

To help ease a busy schedule, be prepared to meet anywhere. I've accompanied my CEO to the airport and then headed back to the office when he jetted off. And skip the detail when necessary. Have it ready just in case, but only cover the top-

line issues if time is limited.

Summarize previous discussions at the start of each meeting. My last CEO explained that he had so much to think of, he only thought about one topic at a time, then pushed it to the back of his mind.

Challenge when necessary, but know your CEO's tolerance level and when to concede.

### Make life easier

Simplify processes and events that involve the CEO. For example:

- Create a framework for sign-off when preparing drafts so you both know you're on track.
- Provide the CEO with a timetable of all forthcoming events they're involved in, and re-brief them the day before.
- Have contingency plans in place for events involving the CEO, such as back-up presentations, standby presenters or opening questions.
- Attend CEO events to make sure they run smoothly and walk around afterwards to get immediate employee feedback.
- Coach and give feedback on communication, but do it with a smile. I once had to tell the CEO that he'd taken 15 minutes to answer a question and had answered several unasked questions in the process. It became our "in joke," but he didn't do it again.

### Befriend the CEO's assistant

Build a good working relationship with the CEO's assistant with an aim to getting five minutes in the diary when you really need it, or a warning if the CEO is "having a bad day." This person will also help get material or messages to the CEO anywhere in the world, or secure approvals that could be holding up your plans. [scm](#)



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