

Building Relationships in the C-Suite

Type: Q&A Subject: Relationship Management

By Andrew Sobel

Question

I'm stuck in relationships with middle managers. How can I move up in the organization and connect with senior management?

Answer

Usually, when you are stuck at the middle-management level, it's because that's where you entered the organization and/or because the issue you are working on is not a priority for top management. To move up, you need to think about actions you can take during three different stages in the lifecycle of a project or program:

During the sale. Have you:

- Asked to meet the senior executive in whose bailiwick the work falls?
- Insisted on meeting the economic buyer—the executive who must sign off on the decision to hire you?
- Invested to understand the client's agenda, and connected your proposal to the priorities on it?
- Created a proposal that addresses the client's specific need, but which also aligns with the strategic context of the problem you're addressing?
- Ensured that the issue you are being asked to engage around is truly important to the client? Commodity work is rarely going to merit the attention of senior management.

At the start of the engagement. Have you:

- Included interviews with senior management as part of your start-up process?
- Discussed, with your immediate client, the need to gain the perspectives of key senior executives?

During the engagement. Have you:

- Tried to get on the agenda of other internal meetings or forums where the audience would find your work relevant?
- As in (2), convinced your immediate client of the need to gain the perspective and buy-in of key senior executives?
- Used your time on site with the client to network, walk the halls, and meet other executives?
- Tried to explicitly connect your work to the organization's broader agenda, therefore making it a natural step for your immediate client to want to involve more senior executives in your work?

Sometimes, the barrier to connecting with senior management is your immediate client. You need to try to convince him that it is in his interests to connect what you're doing to senior management, and that it will enhance both the chances for success and his own reputation.