

Gaining Access to Senior Management

Question

How can I move up in my client's organization?

Answer

Usually, when you are stuck at the middle-management level, it's because that's where you entered the organization. Unfortunately, it's much harder to move up than to be referred downwards to a middle manager by a senior executive. Some companies grant significant budgetary authority to middle managers, however, and this may have been your natural route into the organization.

Many ingredients must come into play for you to successfully connect with executive decision makers. I'm going to focus here on some small but meaningful actions you can take during three different stages in the lifecycle of a project, program, or transaction:

1. 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.

2. 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. He may feel threatened that if you will go over his head he'll lose control of the project and also lose power as your singular 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.

Finally, there may be other, more indirect and non-threatening ways of meeting senior management. Your

firm, for example, could put on an event to which you would invite your work-with client, and your CEO would invite the client's CEO.