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## **How to talk to management**

**By Andrew Birmingham**

Being the Alpha geek doesn't necessarily mean you will thrive outside of your own discipline. The best IT managers ditch the tech talk and speak human when presenting to other executives on the management team.

CIO spoke to Peter Wilson, the national president of the Australian Human Resources Institute and chairman of Yarra Valley Water Limited, and Angus Macalister, chief operating officer of the Australian Institute of Management (AIM) NSW and ACT, to put together these 10 tips for talking human — how to speak to senior executives.

ONE: Preparation.

[ Step-by-step guides on how to create plans or how other organisations have implemented solutions in CIO's Project Management newsletter ]

Sure, there are executives who rode the Peter Principle all the way to the chairman's lounge or who bullied their way to the top. But in reality, most people you meet around the executive table got there through talent, persistence, risk taking and a reasonable dash of rat cunning.

Most of them are made of scar tissue so if they act like they have heard it all before, it's best to assume they probably have.

Get to know the members of your executive team, understand what motivates them and how they are judged by their boss. Best of all, get them to tell you their individual and team KPI's. If you help them make their personal profit plans, you have made an ally for life.

TWO: Take your cues from the real world.

According to Wilson: "I think IT leaders can learn a lot from the way the major media outlets operate. The daily broadsheets write in the language of a nine year old, and the business press writes in the language of a 12 year old. Despite this (and maybe because of it) there's no loss of communication or power in either of those media forms for either of their audiences."

"In practical terms, use simple language and think about the relevance that simple language can provide to the key things you would like to communicate," he says.

Three: Talk to the bottom line.

Here's a hint: No one really cares about the LAN, or the SAN or the WAN, or frankly whatever TLA or Three Letter Acronyms is popular this week. Senior business leaders are interested in the language of business.

They want your communication to show business savvy and relevance. So as well as keeping it simple, use forms of expression that show the commercial relevance of what you are talking about. Try this tactic; explain problems or necessary upgrades in terms of the customer impact, not the system impact. For instance:

Bad: Instability in the load balancer is causing cascading failure across the web caches leading to systemic outages.

Better: Customers can't see our web site half of the time. Here's what it will cost to fix and here's how long it will take. And here's the other work we won't be able to do in the meantime.

"Business people aren't interested in technical nuances," Wilson says.

"They want to know, what does it mean not so much for them personally, but for all of us in this business."

FOUR: So ditch the geek speak, fast.

"Based on my own experience it's the number one thing that IT, digital, and systems guys continually get wrong," Macalister says.

"They focus on the technical aspects of the implementation without describing the key benefits associated with the audience. If it sounds technical, strip it out and make it simple."

FIVE: Be respectful of time.

Make sure you get to the point. Don't disrespect the value of the person's time by going on and on, otherwise you risk losing them.

"You really have to be short, sharp, focused and to the point, and keep the language simple," Wilson says.

In other words, don't jerk them around by being late or spending 15 minutes setting up a video link at the start of a meeting.

Want to know why? Well, here's a hint: All the time you waste fiddling with that dongle to make the projector work can be converted into man minutes lost. And right now, all those busy execs watching you waste their time are doing the maths.

SIX: Walk a mile in their shoes.

Always tailor your communication both to the level of management and the particular management discipline, says Macalister.

“Generally when communicating across any of the functional disciplines you have to think about what the benefits of the communication look like to them,” he says.

"For instance, if you are talking to general manager of sales, you want them to understand how the message you have for them will help to land the next big sale or make their next pitch pack more punch.

“That’s very different say, to finance, where you want to focus back on the direct and recordable profit and loss benefits such as net savings or headcount reductions.”

"Take some time to understand your company’s P&L and how different things like annual leave accruals or product subscriptions are brought to account. Finance guys love talking about this stuff. With any luck, the only problem you have will be getting them to shut up.”

SEVEN: Life ain’t fair. Build a bridge and get over it, cupcake.

Don’t assume too much knowledge and don’t assume too little, either. The boss thinks you’re Goldilocks, so get it just right.

I once watched a very well-known CEO ball out an IT manager for giving a technical answer (It wasn’t even that technical) to a query. A few minutes later, the IT manager politely premised his response to another enquiry with, “To answer your question I need to talk about the technology.”

A few angry seconds of silence was finally broken by an explosive retort from the CEO, “Don’t you f\*\*king patronise me.”

So just in case if you haven't figured it out yet, nobody cares about your feelings. Take that insight into and away from every meeting. It’s a liberating idea.

EIGHT: Don’t be the other guy.

Develop your own unique style of presenting and don’t try to mimic the presentation styles of others.

“Be authentic when you communicate, we stress that all the time at AIM, says Macalister.

“Technical information can be transferred in a style where people understand the information, there’s almost an entertainment value in keeping the core audience engaged.

“You have to be engaging, keep the audience interested and it will help you get the information across.

“My experience with technologists is that they can lose their audience in a very short space of time by focusing on the technology and not on the key benefits.”

NINE: It’s not just a presentation, it’s an experience.

According to Macalister, leadership is best communicated by insight and insight comes from experience. The good news is you can recreate those experiences in your communications. "It's the old adage that you remember 10 per cent of what you're told, you remember 30 per cent of what you read and see, and you remember 70 per cent of what you do."

It can be nerve wracking putting someone on the spot in a meeting but they will remember that communication because of the experience and therefore, they are more likely to retain the knowledge.

And just in case you are wondering, no that's not a license to bully or humiliate anyone.

TEN: Know thyself.

Forget everything you ever learned about the golden rule.

Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you breaks down pretty quickly once you realise other people don't know or even care what you want.

If you work for a company that is willing to make the investment in management training, there are plenty of toolkits that help you get a better understanding not only of how your colleagues tick but also of yourself.

Wilson says: "There's a famous test called Myers Briggs, which has 16 different personality types. Young business managers and leaders could do well to do a work shop on Myers Briggs with a group of colleagues. It's amazing to see the scales lift off their eyes when you go through that experience.

"I am afraid one of the presumptions that many people have is that everyone else thinks like them and wants to be treated like they want to be treated."

That's why many managers (especially those who deal with logic — ring any bells?) experience great frustration dealing with people whose personality types are at the other end of the spectrum to their own.

"Personality profiles help you to understand that it's not just technological illiteracy that separates you from your peers," Wilson says.

"They also have a different way of thinking to yours.

"Good Myers Briggs workshops get into the reconciliation of viewpoints and strategies for dealing with different types of people. We have often found that people's leadership and communication steps up when they have done these workshops."

So there you have it. The best IT managers have the attributes of knowing the software and the systems, and they have an intrinsic understanding of the business. You need to pick the essence out of the big picture so that you know what issues to bring to the table with the senior executive group.

"That's why the CIOs who are very good get very large salaries," Wilson says.

"Because if you don't do those things well, you cost an organisation dearly."

TALKING HUMAN: A 10-point cheat sheet.

- 1.Preparation: Take time to learn everyone's KPI's.
- 2.Newspapers break down really complex ideas into simple messages every day. So can you
- 3.Frame everything you say around the business benefit. Ask yourself what does it mean to the customer?
- 4.Ditch the geek speak. And in case you missed it, here it is again: Ditch the geek speak.
- 5.Be respectful of other people's time. Get to the point. If they want more, they'll ask.
- 6.Tailor what you say to both the level and professional discipline of the manager.
- 7.Executives can seem unreasonable and abrupt. Teaspoon. Cement. Harden up.
- 8.Develop your own style, don't try to be what you're not.
- 9.Engage the audience, if they actively experience your message they will assimilate the knowledge better.
- 10.Know thyself — and then recognize that everyone else is probably different.