

BTN Blueprint: How (And What) To Communicate With The Executive Suite

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The C-suite is under immense pressure these days to increase revenue by making the right decisions involving their organizations. Executives are looking for individuals in the organization they can rely on and trust to assist them to make these decisions. As one of the top variable and controllable expense items in an organization, making smart travel spend decisions is critical to achieving better returns.

Did you know that how you say something affects the perception of trust regarding that information and the trust in the person delivering that message?

If you have ever experienced the impact of an executive making a seemingly illogical decision regarding travel spend, then you can understand that facts, even comparative metrics, alone do not drive decisions.

Linguistics is the study of language. Research into sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics has revealed the words, structure and mannerisms that create an environment of trust by demonstrating "understanding." Research shows that demonstrating understanding with your language patterns dramatically increases the connections of trust you create in communications.

Since the words you choose, the structure in which you deliver those words and the manner in which you deliver those words ALL affect the understanding you convey and the trust you create, it is important for you to incorporate these patterns into your delivery—be it written or spoken. As the expert in your organization regarding travel spend, you owe it to yourself and to your organization to be an effective leader in the decision-

making process. Even if you are not in a position of power within your organization, you can be in a position of power regarding decisions by incorporating language patterns that create trust.

The Sept. 6 issue of *Business Travel News* had a great article by Andy Menkes, "[How To Be Prepared To Communicate About Travel In The Executive Suite—Or On The Elevator.](#)" The main point of Andy's article is: "If you wish to be effective with the executive level and gain credibility, then speak about travel spend points of interest to the executives in your organization, and what is of interest to them are comparative metrics."

Here are the three examples with their comparative data that Andy used. Since they offer powerful examples of comparative metrics, I will use them for this article as well:

1. **Ten citypairs equals 80 percent of our total airfare spend of \$40 million. Thirty percent of our employees are not flying on the preferred airlines, which has increased our costs by 22 percent or \$8.8 million.**
2. **Of our total hotel spend of \$22 million, only 60 percent of our employees are booking their hotel via the approved travel agency, and therefore we are not collecting up to \$800,000 in potential hotel commissions.**
3. **Our travel management company fee is \$40 by phone and \$20 when using an online tool. If we were at 70 percent online adoption, that would save us \$500,000 per year in travel management company fees.**

After you develop the comparative metrics regarding your travel spend, the next step in working with the executive suite is to incorporate the language skills that lend credibility and trust to your information.

The following are only four of the many language tools travel managers (and anyone else) can build into their conversations and reports to build the respect and influence they deserve. These four language tools demonstrate understanding and increase the trust factor. This is the "how" of language.

Use agreement language to demonstrate understanding

The word "but" is an eliminator, effectively discounting everything said prior to it.

Consider this statement: "Ten citypairs equals 80 percent of our total airfare spend of \$40 million, but 30 percent of our employees are not flying on the preferred airlines, which has increased our costs by 22 percent or \$8.8 million."

There is no need for the "but." It's usually said because of language habits, and it weakens the statement. Instead, say: "Ten citypairs equals 80 percent of our total airfare spend of \$40 million, and 30 percent of our employees are not flying on the preferred airlines, which has increased our costs by 22 percent or \$8.8 million."

Lead them to comparative metrics with questions, not statements

The executives have so much coming at them, it becomes easy for them to take in data and not take action. At the same time, people do not typically respond well being told how to do their job.

The following statement is unlikely to be received well: "Of our total hotel spend of \$22 million, only 60 percent of our employees are booking their hotel via the approved travel agency, and therefore it means we are not collecting up to \$800,000 in potential hotel commissions. We should enforce our mandatory booking policy with written reprimands."

Shifting your suggestion to a question opens up many possibilities for immediate action: "Do you think enforcing our mandatory booking policy with written reprimands would be the best action to take now?"

Listen to their word choices to gain insight into their processes

After poring through an enormous amount of scientific research papers regarding communication, I discovered and eventually developed a simple model to aid listening and demonstrate understanding in your communication.

Decisions are made in the limbic system, an older part of our brains designed to respond to the chemicals flowing through our body for survival. It is basically a binary system: fight or flight, do or don't do, yes or no. The limbic system does not understand logic or language. These functions are handled by the neocortex. So how does the limbic system respond to information and facts? It applies an emotional—chemical—value to words. These words fall into three meta-value categories: relationship, accomplishment and peace of mind.

By listening for the meta-value category of the person with whom you are communicating and responding with words from that category, you establish a powerful connection of understanding with that individual.

Here are three different ways an executive might ask a travel management question:

1. **Relationship:** "How are our people utilizing our online booking tool?"
2. **Accomplishment:** "How can we achieve an edge over our competitors with our online booking tool?"
3. **Peace of mind:** "Are we comfortable with our online booking tool?"

The best way to build trust and connect is to respond with words from the same meta-value category. Though they are not much different in word choice at the conscious level, you will find through experience the following are perceived very differently at the subconscious level:

1. **Relationship:** "If we could *get our people* to 70 percent online adoption, that would save us \$500,000 per year in travel management company fees."
2. **Accomplishment:** "*With the power of* 70 percent online adoption, that would save us \$500,000 per year in travel management company fees."
3. **Peace of mind:** "*Our organization has created a system with the freedom* to easily reach 70 percent online adoption, which would save us \$500,000 per year in travel management company fees."

Be confident and concise

As much as we'd like to be prepared in all situations, life does not always work out that way.

Todd Rogers, senior researcher at Ideas42, a Harvard think tank, and Michael Norton, an associate professor of business administration at Harvard Business School, recently did a study that showed "eloquence" carries more credibility than "honesty."

If you do happen to be caught off-guard in the elevator with an executive asking you for information for which you don't have a response, respond with, "That's a great question, and I want to check the data before I answer you. Can I meet you at your office in at 3:00 to give it to you?" rather than "Uh, um, I'm glad you, um, asked me that. I don't know."

Language is not only your connection to the world around you, it defines you. The words you use, the structure you build for those words and the manner in which you deliver your words will, to a great extent, determine your relationship with the executives in your organization. Awareness of the best language patterns to use and practice with the language patterns that demonstrate understanding and build trust are the keys to success and your future.

Hansler, a speaker, educator and consultant, is the author of "Sell Little Red Hen! Sell!"

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