



WHEN YOUR CEO OR BOSS FALLS FLAT ON HIS/HER FACE, CAN THE SITUATION BE SAVED?

By Suzanne Bates

Have you ever been disappointed by your boss's presentation to employees, customers or the board of directors? There may be nothing more uncomfortable than squirming in the audience while a senior person stumbles, fumbles, mumbles or fails to make a point. That person not only damages his or her own reputation; less-than-impressive presentations also reflect poorly on the entire organization.

Can this kind of failure be prevented or turned around? This article offers tips on how to talk to your CEO or boss about it, how to help the boss prepare beforehand, and what resources and techniques to suggest.

Too often the top person fumbles a key presentation because he or she never knows what others think. No one steps up to offer feedback, because the boss doesn't appear to invite candid critiques. People follow the "don't ask, don't tell" policy because it's too big a risk to speak up. It's so much easier to say, "Great job!" and hope someone else will do the dirty work.

Here's an example of how this happens. The new CEO of an underperforming company had a low-key approach. In the first six months on the job she rarely gave a formal presentation; mostly she answered questions. Grumbling was heard from the ranks; people were already writing her off. The vice president of communications tried hinting that she should deliver a big message, but she was less than receptive to criticism so he dropped it. Eighteen months later that CEO was gone, and the company was still hobbling along.

The first step in either preventing or resolving this problem is to recognize that communication is not a "soft" skill. It is essential to organizational success, and few skills are more important to leaders than good communication.

Our surveys show that 99% of employees believe communication is important to a leader's success, yet almost 40% would be surprised if the head of their company were to speak to the organization and clearly articulate a message or inspire others to follow. Clearly a huge gap exists. The question is how to address it. Here are six steps to help your boss raise the bar on presentation performance:



Assess Skill Gaps

Put together a targeted plan for training by starting with an accurate snapshot of current development needs. An extroverted leader may be comfortable and confident “winging” a presentation but lack a clear, powerful message. An introverted leader may spend hours crafting a solid message but fail to deliver it so people “get it.” Assessment tools that measure leadership communication skills will help you measure gaps and target the development plan.

Create a Safe Environment

Most leaders want to know where they stand. However, they will be more responsive to helpful, constructive advice delivered in a safe environment. If communications isn’t your area of expertise, provide your boss with access to experts as well as good information and resources. Videotape a presentation and suggest that the leader review it with someone – either from inside or outside the company – who can offer concrete, helpful suggestions. Recommend books, courses, coaching, or training. Make it easy and safe for the leader to say “yes” to the next step.

Include Communication in Professional Development Plans

While most leaders complete professional development plans, communications is often at the bottom of the list. Even if it is a priority, the plan is filed and forgotten. If you make presentation skills a priority, you send a clear signal about what it takes to succeed in your organization. While it’s human nature to focus on developing skills we already have, leaders will limit their career growth if they don’t become better at communicating the message.

Make Coaching and Training a Benefit

When I began coaching senior leaders after twenty years in television news, I was struck by how little formal communications training they had and how they regarded it as “remedial.” This stigma meant few bothered to take presentation courses or hire a coach. Make coaching a benefit, and watch requests for help soar. Leaders who see other top leaders “getting to go” to courses and training tend to clamor for the same opportunities.



Put it on the Calendar

Most leaders are far too busy running their businesses and managing people. Meetings and e-mail alone steal so much time that they can't carve out time for what is important to their careers. Encourage your boss to set aside time to think, write, and practice before a presentation. We recommend that our clients delegate or delete many meetings and activities so they can block off time for this. While it may be painful at first to change habits, in the end it is a relief for everyone when the boss delivers a great presentation.

Conclusion

When the organization demands more from everyone, especially the top people, a rising tide lifts all boats. CEOs that get behind this effort will start looking at their own performance. Setting the bar higher encourages everyone from the top down to focus on developing this crucial business skill.