

Presenting to Boards



Practical Skills for
Corporate Presentations

Julie Garland McLellan

Presenting to Boards

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Practical skills for corporate presentations

By

Julie Garland McLellan

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Presenting to Boards

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Introduction

Presenting to a board of directors is not an everyday experience. It is quite a novel experience for most people, even senior executives and highly proficient professionals, to be in the boardroom addressing the board. Board presentations are also highly important, not just because anything that is important enough to be presented to the board is obviously very important, but because making a favourable impression in the boardroom can enhance your career prospects.

Boards are not like any other audience. They are usually senior to the presenter (or at least in a position to hire or fire him or her), informed and opinionated, rarely want to sit still and listen, and are often driven by an agenda to which the presenter is not privy.

Given the importance and strangeness of these presentations it is not surprising that many presenters find them a nerve wracking experience. However, if you take the time to understand the boardroom audience, there are some simple things that will give your presentation a greater chance of success and give you the chance to excel in the boardroom.

This book is based upon my experience presenting to boards and, as a board member, receiving presentations. It contains

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practical ideas that you can put into place to improve your presentations.

Boardroom presentations are quite unlike any other presentation. The stakes are high; the audience is small enough to interact with the presenter and powerful enough to demand the best from every presentation. This book provides a basic framework to help you think through all the issues and plan for every eventuality. Some suggested additional reading is listed at the end of this book and will assist you in taking a deeper interest in the topic.

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Understanding your audience

Boards are quite different to any other group of people that you may present to in your working life. There is no other corporate group that has the same sort of shared responsibility, power and personal liability. This difference causes boards to react differently to presentations. Understanding the board will help you to expect and understand their likely reaction and to focus your presentation so that it meets the needs of the board.

It is also very important when presenting to think about the audience rather than about yourself. This may be a big deal for you, it could result in promotions, bonuses, commissions, or increased status but thinking about those things is not going to help you to make a good presentation. On the contrary, it can make you more nervous than you would otherwise be. A board is just a group of people. Like any other group of people they will listen to your presentation if they think it will meet their needs.

To correctly identify the likely needs of the board it is necessary to understand what boards do, how they do it and what are the issues board members will most likely be worried about.

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What boards do

Boards represent the interests of the shareholders of the organisation. They are there to oversee management and to ensure that the company is doing what it was established to do. For most companies that means ‘generate wealth for shareholders’. For not-for-profit organisations it will mean generating income that can allow the company to undertake certain operations. For government sector boards there may be a balance between conflicting social, economic and environmental requirements. Regardless of whether it is a profit or non-profit organisation there is considerable scope for a board to decide what the company will, or will not, do.

Most companies are established in the hope that they will become permanent institutions¹. In this circumstance one of the key issues of concern to the board is corporate survival. When presenting to the board, wherever possible, put your presentation in terms of its effect on corporate survival and achievement of corporate objectives. The shareholders want, above all else, for their company to survive and to be successful; a good board will be obsessively focussed on ensuring the company does just that. A presentation that shows how a board can demonstrate that it is doing a good job in these two critical areas will always be well received.

¹ An exception to this rule are special purpose companies such as the ‘Olympic Games Organising Company’ that is established and disbanded in each country that hosts a games.

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Within the scope of survival and success there are six things that most boards see as being their role:

1. **Setting strategic direction:** working with management to set policies, goals, strategies and performance targets for the organisation to meet commercial and community expectations
2. **Obtaining resources:** providing management with the resources to achieve the strategic plan — the money, management, manpower and materials, the CEO's appointment and a succession plan
3. **Monitoring performance:** overseeing the organisation's performance against its strategies and targets
4. **Ensuring compliance:** making sure that there are adequate processes in place to comply with all the legal and accounting requirements of every country or state the company operates in
5. **Establishing a risk framework:** ensuring that the risks to which the organisation is exposed are clearly identified and that suitable processes are in place to manage those risks
6. **Providing accountability:** reporting progress to the shareholders and aligning the collective interests of shareholders, board, management and employees

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The law imposes a number of general and specific duties and responsibilities that affect the way directors perform their roles. The key principles underlying these legal obligations are:

- Not to misuse their position (i.e. not to gain a personal benefit from their role as a director)
- Not to misuse information they receive because of their role as a director
- To maintain confidentiality
- To avoid conflicts of duty or interest
- To act with due care and diligence.

If directors breach their duties they can be found personally liable. It is impossible to place a company in jail; directors, however can (and do) go to jail for corporate malfeasance. In some instances they can be personally liable even when they are not personally culpable.

Directors can be jailed, banned from serving as directors in future, fined and/or found liable for damages. This is why directors are often very risk averse and very concerned that all risks have been identified and will be managed.

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TOP TIPS

Put your presentation in context; refer to the corporate strategy or survival.

Address how your presentation will impact the role of the board in each of the six elements of the board's role

Be explicit about all the risks; explain how they will be managed

How boards work

Boards make their decisions collectively. Each board member is 'jointly and severally liable'² for every decision of the board. It is important that boards discuss all their decisions to ensure that the facts are clear and understood, the risks are identified and manageable, and the board members are agreed on the best way to proceed. This can be off-putting for presenters who are used to meetings where the hierarchy will establish a clear decision-maker and others in the meeting are expected to defer to that position.

There are, of course, always some board members who can sway the opinions of other board members and, if at all possible in the briefing before the meeting, you should ask who might be the influential member when your topic is

² A situation in which a creditor may sue one or more of the parties separately, or all of them together.

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discussed. You will be better able to manage the dynamics of the boardroom conversation if you understand:

- who are the board's experts in your topic, and
- who are the natural leaders of board discussion,

The obvious leader in every boardroom discussion is the chairman. Some boards are very formal and all remarks (including questions for you to answer) will be directed 'through the Chairman'.³ Other boards are less formal and members will address you directly. It is important to remember and respect the role of the chairman.

If possible (and especially if there is a break in formal proceedings, such as a coffee break, before your presentation) try to have a quick word with him about the timing of your presentation. If you are aware that he is running behind schedule offer to abbreviate your presentation or even to omit the presentation and just take questions. Ask if he would like to have you address any specific queries in your presentation. Many board members will let the chairman know before a meeting if they wish to investigate an item on the agenda. Anything you can do to help save time or reach a decision more easily will be greatly appreciated.

³ It is correct to refer to the person chairing the meeting as chairman. The 'man' is actually derived from the Latin 'manus' meaning hand or server and is not gender specific. Remarks 'through the chairman' are addressed to the Chairman who will then indicate if a response is to be given and by whom. This device assists the person taking notes for preparation of minutes.

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Board members need to discuss issues amongst themselves. They may, as soon as you stop presenting, start talking to each other and leave you standing at their table feeling like a spare part with no role to play. Don't worry. If they need additional information they will ask you for it. If they are talking among themselves it is because they are busy building and evaluating their consensus. Do not, under any circumstances, interrupt this process.

Boards may totally disrupt your presentation. This is not necessarily a bad thing⁴. The directors will be looking to reach agreement quickly and then to move on. They may leap straight to a question about something that you had planned to build up slowly towards. Don't panic, although at this point it is safest to assume your planned delivery is not going to eventuate. Mention that you will get to that point and ask if they mind waiting. Usually they will mind so you may wish to just jump to that point and then reconstruct your presentation from there.

Boards may also decide that they don't need your presentation and ask you simply to take questions. Again, don't panic. This is actually a good sign as it indicates that board members are happy with the information you gave them in writing and don't want to have it repeated.

⁴ There is a section later in this book on how to deal with bad disruptive behaviour entitled "Dealing with unproductive behaviour".

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When boards do ask questions they will always, regardless of if they ask before, during, after, or instead of, your presentation, want to know about the issues that are most important to them. Referring to the points raised in ‘What Boards do’ above will help you to prepare satisfactory answers. In addition to putting your presentation into the context of the board’s operations, board members are likely to ask questions about the issues that most worry them. These may be very different from the issues that worry you or that worry the senior executives who report to the board.

TOP TIPS

Work with the Chairman

Ask about the formality and operating style of the board

Find out who are influential the board members on your topic

Answer all questions calmly, even if they disrupt your presentation

Different types of board

Not all companies are alike. There are many different legal forms for incorporating an entity. Some common forms are limited liability companies, companies limited by guarantee, and incorporated associations.

Each legal form will have a subtly different set of legal requirements for its board. If you are presenting to a board and your presentation concerns a topic that may need different treatment depending on the constitution of the company then

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you should investigate the exact form by reading available documents such as:

- company constitution
- articles or memorandum of incorporation or association
- charter
- enabling legislation or statute of incorporation.

Boards can also vary depending on the objective or mission of the company, the independence and/or professionalism of the directors, and the nature of the shareholders or members. Here are some common types of board and some tips for tailoring a presentation to suit their needs:

- Not-for-profit boards; These companies do not distribute profits to their members. This does not mean that they can operate at a loss or that financial issues are less important to the board. NFP boards are characterised by having members who are passionate about the mission of the organisation. They may not be qualified in governance, adept at the director role, or able to dedicate a great deal of time to their duties on this board. It is very important that you put your presentation into a strategic context in terms of its impact on the organisation, the overarching legislation and the financial implications. Given that some directors may also have a full time job

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elsewhere it is especially important to be brief in your presentation but to balance that brevity with a willingness to answer questions if asked.

- Government sector boards; These boards often have very complex regulatory environments and operate under a higher level of scrutiny than commercial boards. Board composition can vary from organisation to organisation. You may encounter directors with conflicts of interest and nominee⁵ or ex-officio⁶ directors are quite common.
- Commercial boards; these boards will vary depending on whether they are listed, private, family owned, start-ups, etc. The board is usually focused on the financial success of the company so make sure you outline the financial implications.

What worries board members

Anyone presenting to a board must understand and identify the things that board members in this organisation are worried about and provide appropriate guidance in the presentation. Addressing the concerns helps board members to move away

⁵ A nominee director is someone who is appointed to a board at the request of someone or some group – for example a large company with many employees may have a board member who is elected by staff or nominated by the relevant union.

⁶ An 'ex-officio' director is one who is appointed to a board because of their other role – for example, a department secretary may be an ex-officio member of a board that acts within the portfolio area.

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from an excessively conservative position and consider the presentation in a more balanced manner.

Most presenters are happy and confident when discussing the risks that are intrinsically linked to the topic they are presenting, but these are not the risks of most concern to directors. Without identifying and discussing the risks that keep board members awake at night – the elephants in the room – there will be no way to allay board members' concerns.

Tales from the trenches

Terence is a company secretary and governance consultant. He recently reviewed the board's KPIs and said: *at all times Boards need to have clear oversight of the risks they manage at all times otherwise the risks are likely to impinge and impact on the Board's effectiveness in making sound decisions that will benefit an organisation in the long run.*

Take action: What risks are the most important ones for the board you are presenting to? How will your topic affect these risks?

It is important for the person presenting a proposed project to put forward clear strategies for managing and mitigating risks, even if they are corporate risks and not likely to fall within the purview of the project alone. It is common practice only to discuss financial risks and the risks that arise if the proposed

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project fails. However for higher proposal success rates, additional elements must be added to the conversation.

These elements must be tailored to fit the company based on whether it is a commercial, government or not-for-profit organisation. Further, the age and experience of directors must be taken into account as younger and less experienced directors will focus on different risks than older, more experienced directors.

Adjusting the presentation to focus on the likely preconceptions of the directors allows the presenter to prepare answers for issues that may be raised, and to proactively guide the conversation toward a successful conclusion.

As a guideline, the risk environment for a board member includes the following five major elements:

- **Financial** – Cashflow and the need to have sufficient money when needed, with less emphasis on fraud or financial statement inaccuracy
- **Government** – Potential changes in the legislative or regulatory environment that would prevent success. Boards need a system of monitoring likely policy developments, and an agenda for briefing politicians and their advisors on implications of change
- **Resources** – Boards, having addressed the financial resources, predominantly consider human resources. Inadequate or misapplied resources to a project can

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undermine the potential for achievement of objectives. Also frequently mentioned is the loss of Intellectual Property (IP) with departing staff

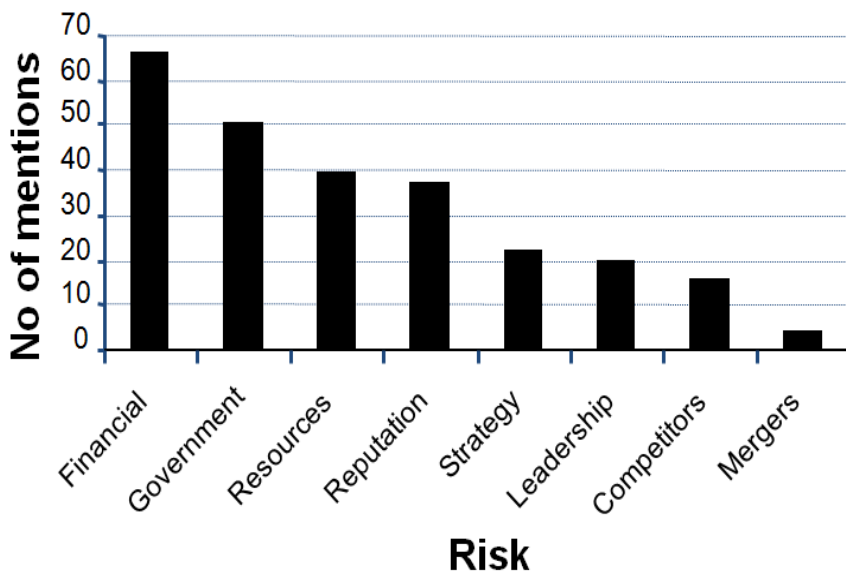
- **Strategy** – Directors need to be convinced that a project is aligned with the existing strategy and that the organisation has skills in place to implement a given project. Effective communication of the strategy throughout the company is seen by the board as essential to success.
- **Leadership** – New initiatives need management support. Also, boards themselves express the importance of leadership, characterised by the need to reach consensus, and be willing to take bold initiatives if required by the strategy.

A successful presenter will identify which of these elements is most likely to affect this board and address the relevant concerns in the presentation. This is easy if you are a person who regularly presents to this board. You will be able to glean which risks are perceived with greatest urgency by which board members. If you are only in the boardroom occasionally, or if your presentation is given once only to each board that you address, then you will need to understand the generic risk perceptions of board members.

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The graphic in Figure 1 below shows the eight risks most frequently mentioned by board members when they are asked what they worry about⁷.

Figure 1 Generic issues that board members worry about



If you have no prior access to the board or if you are addressing a group of boards together then this may be the most information you can get on the board members' concerns until after you start presenting. Address these concerns in the order in which they are most likely to arise.

⁷ Proprietary research by Julie Garland McLellan 2007.

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That structure will be most likely to reassure the board members that you understand and share their concerns.

Figure 2 Risks as perceived by different types of organisation

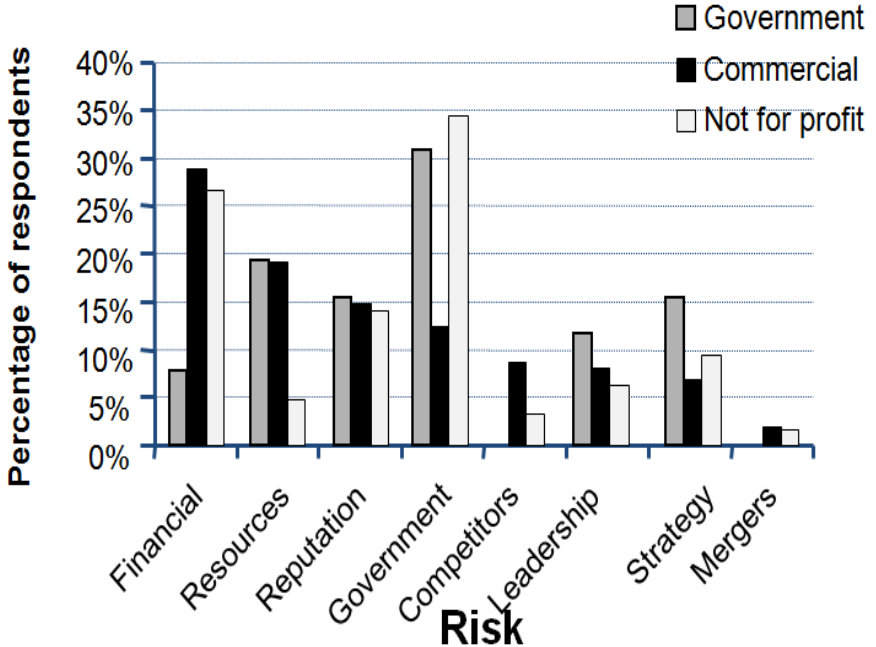


Figure 2 shows how these risks are perceived differently in different types of organisation. If you know what type of organisation you are addressing then you can change the order in which you address the concerns to suit the perceived relevance of each concern to the appropriate type of board.

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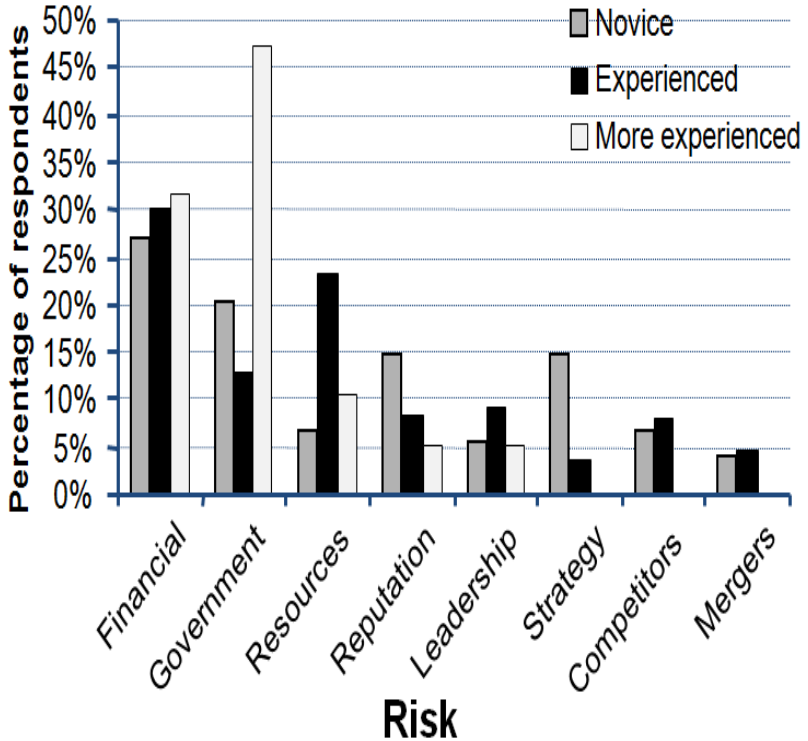
If you can have access to the board, or to an annual report that details the board members' experience, before you present then you may find it better to order your discussion of risks based on the relative experience level of the board. This is shown in figure 3 below.

Experienced board members will focus very quickly on the regulatory (government) issues and the financial impacts; novice board members will ask about anything and everything. If you can find out the experience of the board before you present to them you can prepare for the most likely questions. However, always remember that an experienced board may indulge a novice board member who wishes to ask many questions and that an experienced chairman may curtail discussion if he or she thinks the key issues have been addressed.

In many presentations it is wise to avoid discussing issues that are risky, especially if there is little that can be done to reduce the risk. With boards, however, it is wisest to address all risks fully and frankly. This is especially true if you wish to build an ongoing relationship with the board. Boards will trust people who understand their role, know how they operate and address the issues that most concern them.

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Figure 3 Risks as perceived by board members according to their experience



When discussing the risk make sure that you mention how high the risk is in its natural state, what will be done to reduce the risk to an acceptable level, and how the risk will be reported to the board in an ongoing fashion.

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Tales from the trenches

Alastair had the following experience when presenting risks to a board: *As the Risk Officer I presented the top risks to the business based on impact but one was of a very low probability. The chairman told me to stop wasting his time over trivial matters that are not likely to happen. Even though the rest were all valid and should have generated discussion, the moment was lost and my credibility was lost. From that moment, any Business Continuity type risks were confined to operating in the management rooms and not at Board level.*

Take action: How might Alastair have structured his presentation to gain the board's approval? What preparatory work might have assisted in avoiding this problem?

TOP TIPS

Talk about the risks

Order your discussion of risks in line with the board's priorities

State how risks will be managed and reported

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Personal notes

Understanding the audience

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Written Information in the boardroom

Although more people worry about the physical presentation of information in the boardroom, most boards take in their information by reading and use the meeting to discuss the information and ensure that all board members have reached the same conclusions. It is thus vitally important that boards be given good written information before, during and after the meeting.

What makes 'good' information?

According to Performance Reporting to Boards: A Guide to Best Practice published by the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA)⁸ the characteristics of good board information are:

- **Relevance** - The information should be focused on the topic at hand. It should reflect the defined objectives and strategy of the organisation. It must not obscure the big picture with detail. It must be capable of being drilled down and sufficient to allow exploration of as many alternatives as are necessary for impartial action.

⁸ http://www.cimaglobal.com/cps/rde/xbcr/SID-0AAAC564-307A53BF/live/perfrpttoboards_techguides_2003.pdf

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- **Integration** - Information presented should be consistent and should be managed in the same way as other information coming to the board in other presentations. It is important to refer to the same sources as other board reports and to use the same data in internal and external presentations.
- **Perspective** - Information should be presented in the context of a time line. Boards prefer to have a logical sequence in their information flows. Draw their attention to historical, current and future scenarios wherever possible.
- **Timeliness** - Imperfect information (within tolerance) is preferable to perfect information that is so out of date as to be useless for taking decisions.
- **Frequency** - Different information should be provided at different times:
 - Monthly or fortnightly reports should focus ‘on critical success factors’
 - Quarterly reports focus on qualitative aspects and have a broader coverage
- **Reliability** - Directors must have confidence in the information provided. Data behind information must be of good quality, trustworthy and unbiased. Name your sources and, if making personal judgements or assumptions, highlight them so that the board knows

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the information is based on your experience or expertise.

- **Comparability** - Actual performance should be assessed against benchmarks and targets. Reports should be prepared so as to allow comparisons to be made easily.
- **Clarity** - Text should be written in a clear and simple way. Verbal presentations should be given in normal conversational language.

There are three key information deliveries that most boards receive in writing for each board meeting. These are the board agenda, the board papers and the board minutes.

TOP TIPS

Check your information and make sure it is relevant, integrated, in perspective, timely, frequent, reliable, comparable and clear

Agendas

Every board meeting has a structure. At its simplest this consists of a start, a middle where the work is done, and an end. The agenda sets out what is included in each section.

The agenda is designed to assist the flow of information and to support the board's discussion. It should cover strategy, performance and compliance issues. The agenda may be prepared by the company secretary, the chairperson, the CEO,

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another designated board member, or a small team made up of any of the above. If you are presenting to the board it is useful to know where on the agenda your presentation will sit. If it is not confidential it is good to know what items have been discussed before your presentation and what items will remain for discussion after your presentation. It may help your preparation to know what business has been completed and what business is still to come; you can help the chairman to manage time-keeping based on this information.

The order in which items appear on the agenda is not random. Usually the most important issues are discussed first. However this may change to suit the preference of that board or to allow for an important item to be discussed at length by placing it last. A typical board agenda may contain the following items:

1. The title and purpose of the meeting
2. The date, time, and venue
3. Attendance and apologies
4. Presentation by invited guest speaker
5. The minutes of the previous meeting
6. Matters arising from the previous meeting
7. The CEO's report
8. The CFO's report
9. Policy and strategic issues
10. Formal approval of matters brought to the board
11. Subcommittee reports
12. Board correspondence
13. Any other business
14. Date time and venue of the next meeting
15. Presentation by invited guest speaker

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Some boards like to have strategic and open-ended discussions early in the agenda, so they are not cut short by time constraints. Others prefer to run through compliance and regular reporting before devoting time and analysis to open-ended questions. Other considerations include the timing of presentations or “guest appearances” of non-board members who may have been invited to attend for one agenda item only. In the sample agenda above these guest appearances have been scheduled at the beginning or at the end of the meeting. Some boards are very concerned that guest presenters should not encounter each other in the ante-chamber; other boards will have a presentation section and allow the presenters to stay and watch each other. It all depends on the confidentiality requirements and the board’s preference.

By including a category titled “any other business” the board can discuss any items that are urgent or any matters that require a decision that cannot be scheduled to the next meeting and that came to the notice of the board or to the person preparing the agenda after the agenda had been finalised and issued. If your presentation is slotted into this section it is possible that you will have little time to undertake the thorough preparation that goes into most board presentations. If that is the case be sure to mention it early in your presentation so that the board members can understand the reason for any ‘rough edges’.

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In his book, *Running Board Meetings: How to get the most from them*, P Dunne⁹, suggests that the meetings begin with routine matters, similar to a warm-up exercise before a sporting activity, then to move on to the significant matters for board consideration, before closing again with more routine matters, which might be likened to a warm down. The process can be illustrated as shown in figure 4 below.

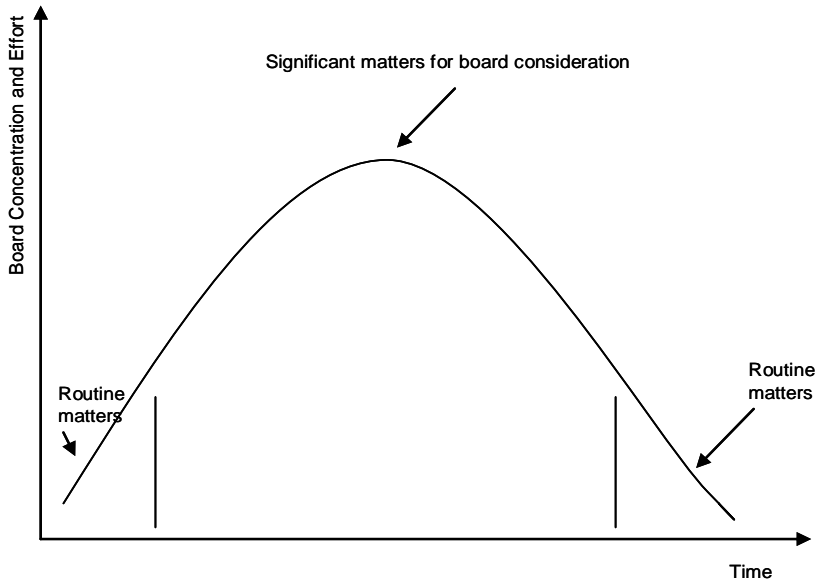
If you feel that your presentation has been placed in the wrong part of the agenda make this known to the person who organises the meeting and see if it can be rescheduled to a more appropriate position. If the board feel that your presentation has been placed in the wrong part of their agenda they will almost certainly replace it in a position that suits them better. It is not a bad sign if your presentation is brought forwards or moved backwards in time.

Another important aspect is the title that has been given to your presentation in the board agenda. Wherever possible try to find out how your presentation will be described in the agenda. A good and relevant description in the agenda will set the board up to take you seriously and to understand the importance of your presentation.

Figure 4 The agenda bell curve

⁹ Dunne, P, *Running Board Meetings: How to get the most from them*, 2nd edn, Kogan Page, London, 1999.

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The agenda is often issued to board members together with the board papers.

TOP TIPS

Make sure the topic of your presentation is appropriately described in the agenda

Know what precedes, and what follows, your presentation on the agenda

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Tales from the trenches

John invited a governance expert and professor from a prominent business school to be guest speaker at a board retreat dinner: *“I had worked the group quite hard until about 3:30 pm, when they had sun and fun time before a 7pm reception. When the quest of honour arrived, the cocktail party was well underway. The Professor came prepared to deliver a serious lecture about the industry and how effective governing boards are a strategic asset and competitive advantage. Unfortunately, the board and management had too much sun and reception. Despite a very prominent board membership and the equally prominent speaker, in a small private dining area, the crowd had no patience for the droll professor and his PowerPoint lecture. It became an ugly scene, with inebriated exchanges and behaviours. The Professor left angry and the board thought he was hateful although an acknowledged leader in the field.”*

Take action: Where in a one day agenda would you place a presentation such as the one described by John? When time commitments force you to place items in the ‘wrong slot’ on your board’s agenda how will you manage to establish a correct level of board involvement and effort?

Board papers

Boards cannot already know everything they need to know in order to make a good decision. They must become informed of all the things they need to know for each decision that they make. The main way in which boards gain information is through their board papers.

A good board paper will pave the way for a good board presentation. A bad paper, or no paper at all, can undermine

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even the most well prepared presentation because the board members will not have had time to consider the issues and to structure their approach to the presentation.

Many companies have standard templates for board reports. These help clarity, understanding and speed of reading; board members become accustomed to the template and more able to focus quickly on the key points because they are presented in an expected order.

Templates frequently specify the length, content and order of each piece of the report. For example; 'All board reports shall be preceded by an executive summary stating the purpose of the report and providing a précis of the information it contains', 'The executive summary shall be no longer than one sheet of A4 with text of normal size and spacing', 'no board report shall exceed ten pages' and 'all board reports should be preceded by a glossary of any technical terms'.

When no template is available ask if you can have a sample of a report that pleased the board. This will let you know what style and length the board prefer. You may have to sign a confidentiality agreement before they will give you access to the paper and you can guarantee that it will be a paper on a simple, non-controversial subject.

Remember that there is no 'single right way' to write a board report. A paper that pleased one board may not please another. Where possible, rewrite papers for each board presentation.

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If your paper is long and complex you may wish to consider making use of appendices. It is not uncommon for a board report to have an appendix that is longer than the report itself. The important factor is that all the information necessary for the decision should be in the main body of the report. Board members do not always read the appendices.

Graphs, charts and illustrations are always valuable additions to a board report. They can convey information more clearly than pages of prose. Most board members are sophisticated report-readers and will readily understand charts, flow-diagrams and complex graphs. Some board members have a personal preference for information to be presented in a certain format, such as a table of figures, dot points, or a graph. Ask about the preferences of each board member and of the board as a whole. If there is a wide range of preferences you may find it better to repeat information in different formats (e.g. graph and text, or numbers and graph) to meet the needs of your readers.

The paper must be written to generate the desired outcome. This does not mean that the board should be manipulated by careful selection and editing of the information included in their papers, although, sadly, that does sometimes happen. Some templates require that papers be formally classified as:

- For noting – a paper with information that the board should have regard to in discharging their duties

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- For information – a paper with information that it would be useful or nice for the board to have but that will not be required for any immediate decisions
- For decision – a paper calling for the board to take a decision based upon the information included in it
- For discussion – a paper about an issue where, although no decision is currently required, the board needs to form a shared opinion and which should be discussed until consensus is reached.

Many boards do not formally identify their papers in this way and just expect the board to understand what is required. They sometimes have problems when the board discuss an issue that requires a decision but don't make a decision as a result, or when board members don't discuss something which, when a decision is urgently needed, they find the board lacks a shared consensus on. To avoid this happening to your paper it is wise to start the first sentence with words such as "This paper calls for a decision upon the awarding of a contract ..." or "This paper will be discussed at the meeting". This will ensure that board members are properly prepared to deal with the information in your paper and that your presentation will not start in the wrong way. Board meeting time is precious and you should ensure that your paper makes it easy for the board to make effective use of the time allotted to your presentation.

Tales from the trenches

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Jane was asked to prepare a paper for her board on the implications of a change in government regulation. *“There was just so much to say. It affected our revenue model, our cost structure, our ability to deal with customers. Almost every aspect of our business was impacted by the changes. I researched and wrote a forty page paper that covered everything in what I felt was sufficient depth and was then told that board papers were a maximum of five pages long. I couldn’t get all the information into five pages.”*

Take action: How might Jane have uncovered the ‘rules’ about board papers before making so much effort to produce a paper that would not be accepted? How could you use summaries, appendices and recommended additional data sources to allow you to reduce the length of your written material?

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TOP TIPS

Always ask if there is a template and use it whenever possible

Write a paper specifically for the board – don't reuse old writing

State openly and clearly what you want to achieve from your presentation

Minutes

Boards keep formal records of their meetings. In these they record the decisions taken and, often, the basis of the discussion that preceded the decision. It is important that the minutes are accurate and that they record the decisions taken in sufficient detail to enable management to act upon those decisions without recurring to the board for additional instructions.

Writing good board minutes is an art. You can assist the minute taker by identifying in your paper a set of words that you believe would be a good record of the presentation for the minutes. If you are building a persuasive case to obtain a certain decision finish the paper with a recommendation “That the board resolve to ...” This will enable the minute taker (if you are successful in obtaining the decision that you want) to simply lift the words from the paper and use them in the minutes. If your paper sets out options you may wish to provide multiple resolutions for the minutes. You do not need to put these in the paper; just give them to the minute-taker as

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an aid to capturing the requisite information. This is particularly helpful for complex proposals.

Boards are independent and may well make a decision based upon an information paper or choose to defer a decision if they decide they don't wish to make it at that meeting. This does not mean that your presentation has failed. It is simply the board doing its job and exercising its power. Board members will still appreciate a good paper and a good presentation even if they vote against the recommended resolution. Even if the vote goes against you the presentation and paper may well help you to build a reputation as a trustworthy professional in whom the board can trust.

TOP TIPS

Think about the minutes whilst writing the papers and preparing the presentation

Provide a well worded resolution for the board to adopt

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Written Information

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Preparing to present

The old saying ‘to fail to prepare is to prepare to fail’ is as true in the boardroom as it is on the battlefield. Effective and thorough preparation is the best basis for any presentation.

Fit to Present

Many otherwise acceptable presentations have been less than effective because the presenter was clearly physically unprepared for the task. Stepping into the boardroom is an important occurrence and boards expect you to be well prepared for it.

Manage your energy levels: be sure that you are alert and fit to present. This includes having an early night, eating well and not over-indulging in alcohol the evening before the presentation. Never present when you are tired, hungry or over-full, or when under the influence of any medication.

This does not necessarily mean that you should be as fit as an Olympic athlete (although that is never a hindrance) but that you must treat the presentation and the board with respect and bring all your energy and physical abilities into the room with you.

Be especially wary when presenting to a board outside your home town. Travel is tiring and a tired present will never present with the force and persuasiveness of a well-rested one.

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If necessary plan to allow a night away from home so that you do not have the stress of an early morning start and the fatigue of a long journey before your presentation.

Tales from the trenches

Neil had the following experience when presenting to a board in Africa: *“I just plain forgot the rule about never drinking the water. On the day of the presentation I was violently unwell. It was distressing for the board members and for me. I have never felt so humiliated; I was supposed to be there to help them with their problems not to have them nurse me until I was able to return home.”*

Take action: Where do you present and what precautions do you need to take to give yourself the best chance of being physically fit to present? If you should become unwell what options do you have for postponing the presentation or arranging a substitute presenter?

Managing nerves

Many people feel stressed and nervous before and during their presentation. This is perfectly normal; experienced presenters thrive on the feeling and claim that it helps to keep them on their toes and able to perform at their best. Others find that the physical symptoms of a racing heart, shortness of breath or excessive perspiration distract them from the work at hand. Distraction in the boardroom is not good. It is imperative that you are comfortable with your level of nerves and able to focus on effective presentation of the information you need to convey.

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Stress can manifest itself in many ways from a feeling of excitement to a feeling of intense physical discomfort. Every person has a personal preferred stress level and will be uncomfortable if their current stress level is much higher than their preferred stress level. Stress is part of the body's healthy reaction to a challenging environment; as soon as a possible danger is perceived hormonal changes prepare the body to take action. This is the 'flight or fight' response and has been a part of human evolution for millennia.

If you want to become better at managing your stress levels to achieve a level that is optimal for you to perform at your peak there are several strategies that you can try. It helps to try out each strategy and see which ones work best for you. You may find that a combination works best.

Practice relaxing until you master the art of controlling your responses and slowing your heart beat and breathing rate. You can do this by meditating, yoga, listening to music or any other activity that can be fitted into your daily routine. Notice how, at first, it is difficult to calm yourself down. It will become easier with practice.

Exercise is very important in stress management. It has an added benefit in helping to improve your appearance and health. Try to incorporate a healthy level of activity into every day. Notice how you feel more relaxed after exercise. In time you will be able to recreate this feeling without exercising.

Sleeping and eating well will also help to control the hormonal responses to the stress of presenting.. As mentioned

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in the previous section, it is important to get a good night's sleep before an important presentation. Not only does this prevent fatigue but it will also help your body to tolerate higher stress levels without registering discomfort.

Of course, the best way to manage stress is to be sure that you have provided appropriate written material to inform the board prior to the meeting, prepared a good presentation, know your topic thoroughly, understand enough about the organisation and its environment, and have practised delivering the presentation and answering the questions that board members will be likely to ask. Having a presentation coach or a colleague with whom you can practice is invaluable.

If you really suffer terrible debilitating nerve attacks and these do not diminish as you gain more experience presenting then it may be best to avoid work where frequent high level presentations are required. In extreme cases it may be possible to receive prescription drugs that will reduce the hormonal stress responses. These drugs are only safe when administered by a qualified medical practitioner. Many of these drugs are in a category called 'beta blockers'. They can be addictive and have long term side effects if taken for long periods or in high doses. They can also be counter-productive as blocking the stress response can slow down your reactions and your thinking.

Remember that the adrenalin rush is part of your natural response to the situation and manage the effects in a healthy

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way. The best antidote to debilitating nerves is good preparation.

Presenting yourself favourably

People appraise your appearance and behaviour instinctively. They observe your demeanour, mannerisms, and body language and even assess your grooming and accessories – hair, nails, watch, pen, and briefcase. Within only three seconds, you make an indelible first impression. Board members are usually confident and decisive; they will likely make their assumptions faster than most people.

This first impression process occurs in every new situation. Within the first few seconds, people pass judgment on you – looking for common surface clues. Once the first impression is made, it is virtually irreversible.

The process works like this:

- If you appear to be of comparable business or social level, you are considered suitable for further interaction.
- If you appear to be of higher business or social status, you are considered as a valuable contact.
- If you appear to be of lower business or social standing, you may be tolerated but will be kept at arm's length.

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- If you are in a sales situation, you can either appear to match the corporate culture or not, and this will affect the outcome.

You may not have said a word, but once the impression is made, the content of your presentation will not change it. When you make a good first impression, you have an audience eager to hear what you will say. When you make a poor first impression, you lose your audience's esteem, no matter how hard you scramble to recover it.

Board members carry a lot of personal liability for the decisions that they make as part of the board. This can make them very risk averse. It is important that your personal appearance and behaviour should inspire confidence. There are several simple things that you can do to ensure that you make a good impression:

- **Arrive early:** Inform the person making the arrangements that you will be there 15 minutes before the scheduled time and ensure they know where you will be sitting whilst you wait. Board meetings sometimes run ahead of schedule and you may be called in early. It is never advisable to look harassed or rushed as you walk into the room. You need time to compose your thoughts, run through the key points in your mind, and check your personal appearance before the meeting.
- **Dress appropriately:** Do not over- or under-dress for the occasion. Find out how the board members dress

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and aim to be just slightly more formal than they are. You need to demonstrate that you are taking their business seriously but that you are approachable and neither too far above nor below their social and business status. Make sure that accessories are appropriate and don't undermine your appearance.

- Keep your materials neatly: Appearing with a sheaf of handouts under your arm, a Lap-top computer bag swinging from your shoulder, magazine in one hand and business cards in the other hand, will undermine your professional status. Organise handouts to be either in the board papers (preferable) or handed out by the company secretary on your behalf (let him or her manage the administrative tasks), have your computer and projector already set up in the room or ready on a trolley that the company secretary can wheel into the room for you.
- Focus your communication in a professional and purposeful manner. Don't gush, tell jokes or share gossip. A little rapport building is fine; but once you have rapport the best way to keep it is by getting on with the task.

Tales from the trenches

Nicole sneezed and the button of her skirt flew off and landed somewhere where it clinked pretty loudly. She paused, red-faced, then said: *In just another minute my skirt falls off - but it's not a distraction, I actually have good news to report.* She

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got the laugh, got her composure back, and then moved on to present her 'good news'. Nicole is lucky that she is highly confident, the skirt was reasonably stable without the button, and she was facing a reasonably relaxed and informal board; most presenters aren't that lucky.

Take action: Have you worn the outfit that you intend to wear for your presentation? Does it fit comfortably and well? Have you checked the security of all closures? Is the style of your outfit appropriate to the expected style of the board?

TOP TIPS

Arrive early and be ready to start on time

Dress to suit the occasion

Aim to inspire confidence with a professional demeanour

Focus on the task not on yourself

Be prepared

Gather your material and make sure that you are able to provide additional verbal information on each of the key points covered in your written board paper. A good way to prepare is to go through the board paper and, for each paragraph, ask yourself 'Yes, but?' or 'Yes, and?' These two questions will get you thinking about ideas that could contradict your arguments or that will extend your line of reasoning.

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If your aim is to provide the board with information then both sets of answers are suitable for use in your presentation; if your aim is to persuade the board to accept your recommendations then you have more work to do. The ‘Yes, and’ answers are suitable for use in either case. The ‘Yes, but’ answers will need to be countered if you are to build a persuasive case.

Think about other information that may be useful. Make sure that you have a list of publications that you can recommend for additional reading on the topic and that you are aware of recent press coverage related to your topic.

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See the examples below:

Statement	Yes, and ...	Yes, but ...	‘Yes, but’ countered
XYZ Co. Is the market leader in these widgets	Because of their market coverage they have the largest network of after sales service	We will not be big enough to be an important customer for XYZ Co.	XYZ Co. Are looking to increase their penetration into our industry sector and we will be a reference site for them
The regulator is investigating insider trades by directors	The penalties include fines, prison sentences and banning orders	ABC Co. announces director trades within 48 hours in accordance with exchange guidelines	The key issue is the information directors had before making a trade, not the speed with which trades are reported
Our preferred candidate has extensive experience with a major competitor	She knows your industry very well	We operate in a very different way to our competitor	She has been wanting to try new ways of operating but has been unable to get support for her ideas

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Practice makes perfect

Think about how you will be dressed and how you will behave. Visualise a successful presentation. Then practice delivering your presentation. A first practice in front of a mirror is essential. You may then wish to video yourself delivering your presentation. Practice each segment until it looks right; experiment with different emphasis and different orders of delivering the information. Try to watch the video as if you were watching a total stranger present a topic that is completely new to you. Ask yourself how clearly each essential piece of information is expressed.

The ‘private rehearsals’ in front of the mirror and/or video camera should be followed by at least two more practice runs in front of real people. Choose people who know what a boardroom is like and who understand your topic well enough to ask questions or point out areas of weakness.

Where possible practice your presentation in front of people who have also presented to this board and who know what the board members are likely to focus on. A presentations coach or a specialist in board presentations can assist you in preparing for the most important presentations.

Know where you will sit or stand and where each board member is likely to be sitting. If possible ask to visit the boardroom in advance so you can check the site-lines and visual the scene of your presentation when you are practising.

Some boards have a lectern towards the front of the room; whilst this may seem the most obvious place from which to

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deliver your presentation be careful as it will instantly set you part from your audience. The best place for presenting to a board is from a seat at their table. It puts you physically on a par with the directors and encourages them to interact with you. Practice speaking from a sitting position. Notice how your voice is less powerful when you sit than when you stand.

Glance round the table from time to time; that will help you to keep the directors engaged in your presentation and will also alert you to any warning signs in their body language or facial expressions.

TOP TIPS

Manage your energy

Extend your information; be able to go further if asked

Practice, practice and practice

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Personal notes

Preparing to present

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Delivering your presentation

This is the moment that you have been preparing for: the moment when you walk up to your allotted position at the boardroom table and start to speak with the board. Boards do not receive many presentations at each meeting. Just being in the room to present is an indication that you, and your topic, have captured the board's interest and been deemed more important than other presentations that they could have held in your place.

Not everyone gets to speak to the board. You have been assessed by someone before the presentation and will have at least one supporter in the room. The process of 'screening out' happens long before you get to the board. By the time you reach the board room you have been selected as the best person for the board to hear from. The board will know that and will be (mostly) well disposed towards you. They will be 'screening in'; checking that you are as good as whoever recommended you thought you were. They will be looking for reasons to like and trust you; not for reasons to dislike or distrust you.

Put simply: you cannot win a sale in the boardroom; you have already won it in the screening process before your presentation was requested. You can only lose in your presentation. Boards do not waste their time seeing the three shortlisted candidates; that is management's job. The board

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will want to meet management's recommended choice to assure themselves that it is a good one. As long as you live up to management's portrayal of you, you will do fine. If you surprise or shock the board you may not do well.

You do not need to oversell yourself in the presentation. Wasting time on a long process of reciting your credentials will lose you more than it could ever gain you. Let management or the person making your introduction do the big build up. You may need to write this for him or her, but it is always preferable to have someone else introduce you before your presentation. That way you are seen as the expert who speaks only about the topic, rather than as a self promoter. Your introduction should set out:

- Why this topic is relevant for the board at this time
- Why you are a good choice to give the board this information
- What the board are expected to do, have, or know after your presentation (what's in it for them).

Watch your language. The board know you are an expert. They have just heard your introduction and have also read some of your work in their board papers. They do not need to be impressed with your repertoire of technical jargon or complex grammar. Use normal speech patterns and don't talk more quickly or slowly than you normally would. Avoid ritual phases and legalistic terminology. Make eye contact when you are talking to an individual. Check the expressions and

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body language of the group; if you see something that bothers you ask how they are feeling or what they are concerned about. Tell them that you have noticed their reaction and that you want to understand it so that you can help them to have a more productive conversation.

Do not assume that, because you said something, the board heard or understood it. Make sure you check their understanding by providing opportunities for you to ask them what they think, feel or wish to do about your information.

Tales from the trenches

I feel terribly intimidated by the board," an unhappy Executive Director confided, "These are the names in our community. They're powerful money people, movers and shakers. Whenever I stand in front of them I become so nervous I'm not even sure of what I'm saying."

This is such a common complaint. It is important to remember that nobody gets into the boardroom unless the board want them to get in. If you are nervous remind yourself of why you were invited and concentrate on meeting that need.

Take action: Can you control the pre-reading and your introduction to the board so that you are presented in a way that builds your confidence and establishes your credibility? Can you practice some calming techniques that will help you manage your nerves? Have you dressed in a way that is appropriate and comfortable for you so that you can be relaxed about your physical appearance?

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TOP TIPS

Do not 'over-sell' – you are already selected

Control your introduction

Speak clearly and simply

Check that you have been heard and understood

Excellence in presentations

Too many books on presentations are about how to do an adequate job. In the board room adequate is not good enough. You must do an excellent job if you are to have a meaningful impact on the board's discussion and decision-making. John F Kennedy once said 'The only reason to give a speech is to change the world.' The only reason to present to a board is to change their world.

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Tales from the trenches

Julie is a strategic planner and professional board adviser who have given many board presentations; as a director she has also been on the receiving end of a large number of presentations. Here are some attributes that, for her, separate the ‘merely acceptable’ presentations from the ‘truly excellent’ presentations:

- Demonstrable personal commitment of the presenter. This commitment must be both to the board, in aiming to help them make the best possible decision, and to the project or information that is being presented. Authenticity is immediately attractive. Slick presentations from cynical presenters are very unattractive.
- A compelling plot, structure or story so that the presentations seems to flow naturally (even though it has been carefully designed and constructed) and the audience is engaged throughout.
- A presenter who can give 50 times more data than is presented (available from memory upon request) but who has edited the presentation down to the essentials.
- Clear illustrations, demonstrations or useful similes and metaphors to help understanding.

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- A feeling of connection between the presenter and the audience. Recognition that body language is being read and acted upon and that delivery is being tailored to suit the recipients rather than ‘flying on autopilot’. The presenter should be sure enough of the material to call an unscheduled break or to allow a board member to make a necessary diversion to a related topic if needed.
- Even though the pre-reading has been thorough there should still be something new in the presentation. If there is nothing new then there is no need to waste the board’s time presenting! For most boards the ‘newness’ is elicited through their own discussion. Excellent presenters allow the board to interact with the material.
- The presenter should be appropriately credentialed but should not ‘grandstand’ or oversell.
- The board must reach the desired conclusion; not just the presentation. It is important that the board members own the process, accept the information and form the required decisions. Quiet receptiveness is not a good reaction from a board.
- The audio visual system, any multimedia or props, etc. all work as intended.
- If a board member asks a question and the presenter doesn’t know the answer it is not a problem unless the

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presenter pretends they do know. Admitting the limits of your knowledge is essential to helping a board gain confidence in your ability to guide them.

- The presenter looks and acts as if he or she is really enjoying being there and sharing the information or decision with the board. Yes, it is serious hard work, but that still doesn't mean it can't be fun. There is joy in a job well done. If the joy is missing it leads to a suspicion that the job may not be well done.

Take action: Read through the dots points outlined above and consider if each statement could be truthfully applied to your presentation. What will you change to make your presentation truly excellent?

Board's preferred mode of presentation

Boards make their decisions using consensus. They develop consensus through discussion. The more time they can spend discussing the more easily they will reach consensus. The best way to get the board to discuss your presentation is to make it an interactive experience rather than a passive 'sit still and listen' type of experience. Boards would prefer to have a facilitated discussion rather than a presentation.

Facilitation is very different to presentation. It requires a different blend of skills. A facilitator uses group dynamics to formulate and deliver an effective structure for meeting interactions. The facilitator focuses on the meeting or

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conversation processes. This allows the board members to focus on the content or substance of their consensus. A presenter delivers the content in an effective manner so that board members can understand and use it.

In boardroom presentations the most effective engagement with your audience is facilitation. However, you must have the subject matter expertise or knowledge of your topic, to be able to provide content whenever the board members require it in their discussion. Boards do not react well to ‘pure process’ facilitators who have no knowledge of the topic; they react worse to ‘experts’ who come in and deliver a torrent of topic information without allowing time for the board to discuss the information and develop consensus. The most effective model is a discussion involving the whole board where most of the time you are facilitating and occasionally you are providing information.

Many presenters find that this style suits them. It is often far less daunting to think of the boardroom interaction as a situation where you will talk about a topic that you are knowledgeable on with a group of people who are interested in that topic than it is to think about it as a situation where you will have to stand up and prove how much you know about a topic to a critically evaluating audience. You are not likely to be invited into the boardroom to talk with the board members about something that you know very little about. The strong probability is that you are well able to discuss your topic even if you feel nervous about presenting it.

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Tales from the trenches

Jim suffered the following embarrassment when he failed to understand the operating culture of a board: *The president entered the room where we had all been chatting happily and upon his entrance everyone instantly became silent. I playfully remarked, "Wow, I wish I could have that effect on a group." And he was not amused. Evidently I had misunderstood the autocratic management style that he used. I apologized but it was still very awkward.*

Take action: How might Jim have found out if the board had a formal or informal operating culture before he made his faux pas? What steps will you take to determine the culture of boards that you present to before you make your presentation? If you cannot determine beforehand whether the board is formal or informal, how will you behave to lessen your risk of inappropriate utterances and behaviours?

TOP TIPS

Don't present – Discuss!

Help the board to have an effective conversation about the topic

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Structuring material

Think about the material that you will present. What is the most logical arrangement of the material? What arrangement will be most persuasive? What information is necessary at the start of the presentation for participants to be able to understand points that arise later? You should, by the time you come to prepare a presentation for a board, have a depth of expertise and a wealth of information on your topic.

Choosing what to put in and what to leave out can make the difference between a successful presentation and a dismal failure.

Consider where in the board agenda your presentation has been scheduled. What are the likely energy levels of the board at this time? Are they warming up to their task or starting to tire? Adjust your energy level to suit. What was the item before your presentation? How is it likely to impact the board's emotional mood? If you are following a report of poor performance you will need to act quite differently and to design very compelling opening statements to draw the board's attention than if you are following a report of good performance.

Once you know the physical and emotional landscape you are traversing you need to decide on the best possible structure to convey your message to the board.

There are many different ways in which to order your material. It is more effective to design a suitable structure and

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then to place the material into that structure rather than to gather the material and then rearrange it in the hope that one of your arrangements will miraculously make sense. Some of my favourite structures are:

- Threes – Three main topics each with three sub headings each with about 3 paragraphs of text. People can remember threes very easily. It is also good to advertise to the audience ‘there are three key points ...’ as then they will concentrate and look for the threes. Many politicians use this structure. A beginning, middle and end, are a prime example of a simple ‘three’ structure.
- The middle ground – this is a great structure for justifying a choice. You outline three possibilities, the two ‘outliers’ are each unacceptable for one reason or another and so the middle option becomes the preferred option. For example “we could provide a Hyundai Getz for our CEO but it might not be big enough if he had to drive customers, we could also provide a Mercedes which would confer status but may give the impression that we will charge high fees, therefore we have decided that the CEO should drive a Holden Statesman which will confer status without being extravagant.”
- Concentric circles – zeroing in on an action or extrapolating out from it are also persuasive structures. For example “if our maintenance

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workshop is untidy customers may think that we don't pay attention to detail, that would infer that we might do a poor job and they would take their business elsewhere, therefore we will require the fitters to tidy their workplaces before they leave each evening."

Having a structure will help you to edit the material. Anything that does not logically fit in the structure should be left out.

Do not distort the clarity of your structure to include additional data.

Tales from the trenches

Dale had the following experience with a board presentation:

Just before I started a grant application presentation to a Foundation board of directors, I was told that my time had been reduced from 45 minutes to 15 minutes. Luckily, my experience as a professional speaker had shown me the value of constructing presentations in 15 minute blocks. I used the block that included the most critical information, modified my opening and concluding remarks, and walked away with \$150,000 for key programs. Lesson learned - anticipate the worst and prepare for it.

Take action: Can you structure your presentation so that you can cut the time required to less than half the time expected?

TOP TIPS

Structure your presentation to suit your purpose

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Be prepared to change your structure to suit the board's time requirements
Place material into the structure – if it doesn't fit; Leave it out!

Clarity of purpose

Start with the end in mind and keep it in mind for the entire presentation. Boards are busy and will not be pleased if you distract them from the important business of reaching consensus and making decisions.

It is always helpful to remind boards of the desired outcome as you start your presentation. Set the tone for a productive and focussed discussion with statements such as:

- I am here to help you to understand the new guidelines on ...
- My company has been recommended to the board as preferred contractor for ...
- You requested a briefing on ...
- The board needs to develop a strategy for ...

Be sure that the purpose you state at the beginning of your presentation is the same as the one that was stated in the board paper.

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Now that the purpose of the presentation is clear state the two or three key points that the board must know in order to understand and/or decide upon the issue. Invite any questions about the written material. Answer any queries the board may have before outlining the structure of your presentation. It is important to address any issues or misunderstandings before you launch into your topic. Board members with a nagging doubt about an issue will find it hard to relax and absorb the information.

Once the presentation is underway it is best to follow your practiced structure. Sometimes boards will insist on asking questions that derail your structure and force you to provide information in a different order to the one you had planned. If that happens, don't panic. Remember the purpose of the presentation. Remind the board of that purpose and make a statement such as 'it will be more effective if we address the issues in the order proposed; may I ask you to hold your questions/discussion until we reach that issue?'

Only if the board are adamant should you allow them to rearrange the order of presentation of your material.

Present reasonably quickly. Speed is stunning. Board members are usually very good at taking on new information quickly and very impatient if the delivery is too slow.

Remember that most people can speak at only two hundred words per minute but can listen and understand at closer to six hundred words per minute. Thinking is generally faster than words and you do not want the board members to get bored

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whilst they are waiting for your speech to catch up with their thoughts.

Never, ever, read from your slides. If it is on the screen the board members can see it as well as (and usually better than) you can. Reading and listening is not comfortable and board members will generally do one or the other but not both.

TOP TIPS

State the purpose of your presentation

Provide an agenda or contents slide/page

Ask if there are any queries arising from the board paper and deal with these before starting the presentation

Use an appropriate structure

Proceed at a good pace

Dealing with unproductive behaviour

There are some rules for productive discussion in the board room. The key rules concern confidentiality, one conversation at a time, no personal animosity, and no 'harping on' when a subject is closed. It is the Chairman's job to ensure that board discussions are productive and, if these behaviours arise during your presentation it is the Chairman who should deal with them. If the Chairman does not deal with them there are some techniques that you may like to try to deal with them yourself.

Confidentiality

Presenting to Boards

Board discussions are usually highly confidential and you should be able to rely on board members not to divulge information. However, if you are giving information that is sensitive or if the board members have other associations where the information may be useful then it is a good idea to remind them of the need for confidentiality. Generally a document signed by an authorised representative of the company will be binding upon all the directors and officers of that company. If you have a signed non-disclosure document then you may wish, just before mentioning the sensitive data, to remind the board members of this. If you have no signed document you may wish to set out some 'rule' at the start of your presentation by talking about the nature of the information and asking for an agreement that 'Chatham House' rules will apply¹⁰.

If you are particularly concerned about one board member you should mention this concern to the person who is helping with the arrangements before the meeting. A serious conflict of interest¹¹ can be managed by having that board member not receive your board paper and not be present during your presentation and the subsequent discussion.

¹⁰ Chatham House is home to the Royal Institute of International Affairs. - . The Rule is "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed".

¹¹ A 'conflict of interest' arises where a board member has an interest in the matters discussed that is not the legitimate interest of this board.

Presenting to Boards

One Conversation

Board members will often discuss an item on the board's agenda with a colleague before the meeting; they will also know if a board member is likely to have a strong reaction to a piece of information. It is fairly common for a board member to whisper a comment to a colleague when something is said that they know will be of particular interest to that person.

It is best to ignore this if it happens only once or twice, and only for a brief period.

If a 'side-bar' conversation continues look to the Chairman to see if he or she will say something. If that does not get the reaction you need (or if it is the chairman holding the conversation), stop talking and wait for the attention to revert to you. Ask if there is an issue of concern that you need to address. If there is a question either answer it briefly or tell them when you will get to that information in your presentation. Then continue.

If there are several instances of this behaviour it is worth calling a halt and asking the board members if they need to take a comfort break and relax for a while before resuming.

Do not raise your voice and try to talk over a side conversation. Equally; do not be upset or daunted by these conversations. They are bad boardroom practice and very bad manners but boards have to concentrate for long periods of time and occasionally they display bad behaviour.

Presenting to Boards

Personal animosity

This is another symptom of a poorly disciplined board. If a board member makes a personal attack against another board member, or against you, look to the Chairman immediately. This is definitely the Chairman's job to sort out.

If the in-fighting continues stop presenting and wait for silence. Then ask the Chairman if you may continue in the absence of such behaviour. Make it clear that this behaviour is not tolerable.

If a board member makes personal attacks on a person who is not present remind them that, although the board discussions are confidential, defamation laws still apply and state that you have no wish to be embroiled in such activities. Address your remarks to the Chairman rather than to the board member who is behaving badly.

Presenting to Boards

Harping On

Some board members will become personally attached to discussions and will not stop referring back to them or talking about them, even after the rest of the board has moved on. This can be very off-putting when you are trying to present.

If the discussions are centred upon something that happened before you entered the room (there are some board members who are still discussing issues that happened years before at every opportunity) ask the Chairman if the board needs a break to allow the board members to refocus their energies on the matter now at hand: your presentation.

If a board member fixates upon something that you have mentioned and keeps dragging the conversation back to that issue, effectively preventing you from progressing with your presentation, look to the Chairman and ask if you could finish the presentation and take questions at the end. Refer to the need to keep the meeting running on time. Most Chairmen are acutely aware of timekeeping and will be happy to call their board to order, especially if you have made it clear that there will be a chance for all to ask questions at the end. It is a shame to abandon the interactive style that is most effective in boardrooms but, if you are constantly being interrupted and dragged back to an issue that cannot be resolved, it is better to move to a 'shut up and listen' style for a while. If other board members then ask questions that are not related to the repetitive question of their colleague you can answer briefly

Presenting to Boards

and gradually revert to an interactive discussion as the presentation progresses.

It is not likely that you will meet with these behaviours. They are rare. If, however, you do meet them it is always good to have thought through the possibility beforehand and devised a plan for regaining the correct dynamics.

Tales from the trenches

Digby had the following experience with a board presentation:

I was asked to present some board training to a group of directors that had not really accepted their personal need for training. They remained accessible to other organisations, answering phone calls, ducking out for short meetings and handling emails on blackberries throughout the presentation.

He felt frustrated because the organisation really needed a highly skilled and effective board but he just was not able to help move the directors towards meeting that need.

Take action: Can you identify some possible actions that Digby might have taken to regain control of the session? Which actions would you be able to implement?

Presenting to Boards

TOP TIPS

Be ready to respond positively if the board reacts badly to your presentation

Try to support the Chairman and work through the Chair if possible

Do not continue talking if the board is not listening. Stop and wait for them to come back to you and your topic.

Use of technology

Presentations, in business, have become synonymous with PowerPoint™. Many presenters feel that they are lacking something if they go in to talk without a slide show or computer presentation to accompany their discussion.

Many board members have been subjected to too many bad slideshow presentations where they were expected to sit still and listen as the presenter read from slides or watch as slides flashed past too quickly to really focus upon. They have become suspicious of the technology because of these past abuses. If you suspect that the members of the board you are presenting to are unfavourably disposed to slide shows then do not use a slide show. Print your slides and use them as handouts if there are graphs or charts or other visual elements that you will need to refer to if you are to keep board members attention focused on your key points.

Boards need detailed information to support their decision-making. Detail does not always look good on slides. You may find that it is more appropriate to prepare two slide packs:

Presenting to Boards

- One with charts, graphics and summaries in brief dot point form for presenting
- One with tables, process diagrams, flow charts and brief paragraphs of text to provide as a handout.

If you are using this technique be sure that you introduce it to the board so that they do not feel worried that you are presenting something they do not expect. You will need to put extra effort into crafting the presentations to ensure that each slide on the screen conveys the same information as the corresponding slide in the director's handout.

If you do use slides make sure that you know your slide presentation well. This means knowing the number of each slide and being able to 'jump' straight to it if a board member asks a question that the information on the slide will help you to answer. To jump to a slide in PowerPoint™ simply type in the number of the slide and hit 'enter'.

Don't be satisfied with a 'plain vanilla slide show'. PowerPoint is not just a slide production and viewing software; it is a multimedia platform. Use it to show photographs, short videos or other effects that will add to and reinforce your message. Make use of the 'hidden slide' feature to place back up information where you can call upon it if needed but where the audience will not see it unless they request clarification or additional detail that requires it. Hitting the "b" key gives you a blank screen. This can be useful if the discussion has temporarily moved away from your planned order.

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Where possible use a remote slide advancer or wireless mouse and keyboard. This allows you to stand or sit with your audience and not be anchored at the laptop computer because you need to keep advancing slides.

TOP TIPS

Use technology to support and enhance but not to deliver your presentation

Videos and pictures are more effective than words

Be able to navigate within your slide pack without looking

If in doubt; don't use technology

Presenting to Boards

Tales from the trenches

Julie is a frequenter presenter and, in spite of her experience, still practices each presentation thoroughly before making it. She says: *“Many people believe that they need to see the presentation as they deliver it. This is a sure sign that they have not practiced enough. I can deliver my board presentations without reference to the slides. I know what comes next and where I am in the presentation. I can skip elements if we are running behind schedule or add elements if there is more time than anticipated. Boards appreciate a presenter who is able to sit at the table with them and hold a decent conversation whilst having a few slides to illustrate key points as they come up but that don’t distract attention from the audience. If you are tempted to read from your slides go into the boardroom without them!”*

Take action: Are you confident that you know what information is on each slide in your presentation and how to reach it quickly if you need to access it out of sequence? Have you practiced using the technology so that it appears a natural way of expressing yourself?

Presenting to Boards

Personal notes

Delivering the presentation

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Other board interactions

This book is all about formal presentations delivered in the context of a board meeting. There will be times when you are called upon to present to the board in some other context. The dynamics will be subtly different when you are not in a board meeting. It is important to adapt your presentation style to suit the different circumstances. The most common other situations where you may be called upon to address the board are seminars or workshops, tours of facilities or sites, and meetings between the board and an external third party.

Workshops and seminars

Every well run board will have regular education, strategy and risk workshops. These provide an opportunity for the board to investigate issues in greater depth than is possible in a board meeting. They are often more informal than board meetings and may be conducted ‘off-site’ at a conference centre, hotel or educational facility.

The most important thing to know about a seminar or workshop is the desired outcome. What do the board want to know or have at the end of the seminar or workshop that they do not have at the beginning? It is wise to design the workshop with the outcome in mind. Each workshop will be unique. You will need different people, activities and presentation styles for workshops designed to elicit:

Presenting to Boards

- The selection of one from a list of several potential projects for funding
- An understanding of the risks associated with a strategy or project
- Shared vision
- New ideas for products and services
- A review of performance
- Goal setting
- Stronger interpersonal relationships and higher levels of trust.

Once you are clear on the board's intentions you can select the appropriate participants and design the agenda, processes and environment to deliver their precise required outcome.

Often, outside of formal meetings, there will be a facilitator who is not the chairman. This is very good practice. When the chairman facilitates a meeting then the board members have a natural tendency to accept his or her ideas and to submit to his or her assessment. This can stifle innovation or constructive dissent in a forum with creative aspirations and can lead to personal bias in a forum where a selection is to be made.

If you are asked to facilitate you will need to control the discussion; this can be difficult when the chairman is in the room. Where possible, you should meet the chairman before

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the session and agree some ground rules for your facilitation. Most chairmen are anxious to ensure that the workshop goes as well as possible and will be keen to help you to take the focus away from them and direct it onto the task at hand.

Other tasks for the workshop facilitator are:

- Explaining the purpose, nature and rules of the workshop
- Allocating time to speak to each participant and ensuring that the quieter participants are encouraged to participate
- Summarising progress so that participants know that they are on track and making progress in the right direction
- Capturing any agreed points so that at the end of the session they are not overlooked
- Capturing any points that cannot be addressed immediately so that they are not forgotten and can be addressed in due course (often referred to as ‘parking lot’ issues)
- Enforcing the rules (see the section on Dealing with unproductive behaviour)
- Thanking participants and acknowledging their contribution

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- Keeping notes or writing minutes (these may be part of the formal board minutes or may be less formal but will always be important)
- Following up after the workshop to reiterate the thanks and inform participants of what the next steps in the process will be.

If you are asked to present in a workshop it is crucial that you talk with the workshop convenor and/or facilitator to ascertain exactly what their expectations are. A workshop is not a conference or a lecture. Board members who attend a workshop will expect to be working most of the time; not sitting listening!

Get agreement on the length, style and format of your presentation. A good guide for board workshops is no more than 15 minutes of presentation in every hour. This allows for forty minutes of creative discussion and five minutes of summarising and recording progress. Find out what is expected in terms of pre-reading. The rules for workshop pre-reading may well be different to those for board meetings. Often greater length and complexity is encouraged as well as copious amounts of additional reading which board members may or may not read, depending on their personal preference.

Many boards combine their hard work at annual strategy retreats or workshops with team building and social activities. Do not let these activities fool you into thinking this is an unimportant or purely social occasion; board workshops are serious even if they are also fun!

Presenting to Boards

Tours

Because boards are responsible for every aspect of the business they need to understand every aspect of the business. Many boards increase and enhance their understanding by conducting site visits or tours of operating facilities. Board members are often concerned that the company should develop an appropriate culture. To determine what the culture is, board members need to see the employees, contractors and even customers interacting in their normal way. They will often ask to meet new, young or technical staff members so that they can hear first-hand accounts of how the day to day business is transacted.

If you are asked to present to the board or to guide them as they tour your workplace it is important to remember that, whilst they will be checking out every aspect of what is done, they are not looking to criticise or find fault. Individual board members will ask many questions. They are trained business observers and have a personal interest in this business; expect to be asked about everything they see. If a board member does not quite understand something, or if they just find it fascinating, they will ask a lot of questions. This volume of inquiry does not mean that there is anything wrong. Nor does it mean that you should change anything just because a board member demonstrates interest in it.

Individual board members (unless they are executive board members who work full time for the company as well as being on the board) do not have any individual managerial power. Board members can only make decisions and issue directives

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in the context of a properly constituted board meeting (with an agenda and minutes to record the decisions). Any directives given by the board should be given to the CEO and passed down through the proper channels to the people who will implement the decision. Even if a board member does say something that sounds like an instruction you should not take it as an order. Board members often forget that their exalted position can lead to people acting on their whims. If the suggestion sounds like good sense you should tell your supervisor or (if he or she is accompanying the board) the CEO. They will be able to make it an official order.

Board members are human; if you are hosting a board visit make sure that you have investigated the needs of the board members and that suitable food, drink, toilet facilities, etc. are available. Inform the board of the arrangements made for their comfort and/or safety as soon as possible after the visit starts.

Board meetings with external parties

Boards are considered important by an organisation's trading partners, customers and the political communities and residents of places where the company operates. From time to time there will be requirements for boards to meet other boards, visiting dignitaries or local people. There are also occasions when boards travel and wish to meet people at their destination.

If you are asked to host or to accompany a visit by a board it is important to be very sure of the role that you are expected to play. Ask for explicit instructions. If you are just a

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technical resource, or a back-up who can be used to run errands or help out in an emergency, you need do little more than be early and be ready to assist if called upon.

If you are expected to perform introductions you will need to do some more homework. It is customary to introduce the younger person to the older person and the more junior person to the more senior person. The problems arise when the more senior person is younger than the more junior person. Most boards (and their Chairmen) are willing to defer to the other party out of politeness. If there is any doubt about the order of introductions ask the Chairman for instructions and, if the Chairman is unsure, suggest that the Board defer.

Be especially alert to protocol when dealing with royalty, titled persons and international royalty, nobility or politicians. You should normally introduce the senior older board member to the younger royal but with elected persons and lesser nobility it is not always clear. You should be able to liaise with the other party's staff to ascertain their expectations and preferences. If you are asked to use a title or specific form of address you should comply and continue to use this unless the other person specifically requests that you desist.

These protocols are a matter of respect. Even if they seem exaggeratedly formal it is wise to follow protocol as to do otherwise may cause offense.

Presenting to Boards

Personal notes
Other interactions

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Presenting to Boards

Reaching the board via an intermediary

Unless you regularly present to boards it is likely that your presentation to the board will be arranged by an intermediary. Sometimes this intermediary is a person who has regular contact with the board and is familiar with the board members' expectations of presenters. Sometimes the intermediary is not at all familiar with boards and their concerns.

Check that your intermediary does understand your need to gather information, prepare acceptable papers and present effectively. I have seen many consultants and junior executives ushered into boardrooms completely or partially unprepared for the process or scrutiny of their presentation. Nobody will put you in front of the board in the hope that you will fail. That would reflect badly upon them. However, many people in senior roles have little idea of board operations and may think that just because you are an expert in your field you will instinctively meet the board's needs.

Wherever possible try to arrange for your intermediary and yourself to meet with the board secretary and go through the protocols and templates for presenting to this board. Use the information in the section on preparing to present to assist you in developing an agenda for your meeting with the company secretary.

Presenting to Boards

Tales from the trenches

Peter had an uncomfortable experience when presenting to a board after extensive discussions with the Chief Operating Officer (COO): *I presented the answer to the wrong question because the COO wanted to push for a solution that the board had already dismissed. The COO wanted to push A. The board rejected A. The board wanted hear about B. The COO asked me to present A so I did. Just as the board started to fall asleep, I presented A versus B versus C and they started asking questions. If I had been properly briefed I could have moved the positioning part of the presentation up front and found out exactly what they were looking for. They eventually purchased C.*

Take action: Where did Peter source his information about the board and its priorities? How could he gain access to multiple sources of information so that he could cross check? Could he have built flexibility into his presentation so that he could verify the board's needs and adapt his presentation to suit?

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Personal notes

Using an intermediary

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Some 'standard' presentations

Although every presentation that you will make in a boardroom will be unique there are some broad categories. Within each category there are a few generic issues for consideration. Some of the most common categories are listed in this section together with advice for tailoring your presentation, including specific relevant information and preparing for the discussion that will follow the presentation.

Project Implementation Reviews

Boards delegate to management the authority to implement the projects that the board has approved. They remain responsible for the implementation and, as a result, need to ensure that they have up to date information on how implementation is progressing or how closely the results resemble those intended. They do this through their ongoing performance monitoring and, for larger or more important project, through special project reporting or project implementation reviews.

If you are asked to perform a project implementation review it is important to read through the board papers for the meeting at which the project was authorised and also any prior meetings at which the board may have been briefed about the project.

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Start your presentation with a brief statement of the intentions of the project. It is not enough that the project is on schedule and within budget; if it does not achieve its objectives then it is a failure. Address the objectives first because if they have been met then any issues of budget, schedule or 'learnings'¹² will be of secondary importance.

If the project has been a success in achieving objectives, budget, and time requirements state simply the reasons for each type of success and provide the board with some insights into how these will be incorporated into the planning and running of other projects.

Many successful projects were delivered late or suffered cost overruns but still managed to meet their objectives. These projects often deliver the greatest learning for the company as it is easier to talk about a project that was successful even though it suffered in implementation than it is to talk about a project that was unsuccessful.

If your project has failed in any respect do not gloss over or attempt to hide the failure. That will only lead the board to ask difficult questions that you may not have prepared a good answer for.

Look closely at the assumptions upon which the project approval was granted. Have any assumptions changed? What was the effect of each change upon the project? What can you

¹² Usually these come from mistakes!

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do about monitoring similar assumptions to provide options to terminate or alter future projects if they should also vary?

Look also at the actions that were to have been taken to implement the project. Were any actions taken out of sequence or late? Seek the reasons rather than to assign blame.

Look also at the relationships that enabled the project. Did any of these work out different to the plan? What contracts were in place to deliver parts of the project and were there any breaches? What can be done in future to improve the chances of success in future projects?

Where possible try to calculate the degree of deviation from desired results that is attributable to each cause.

Finally, sum up the implications of the failures; state how they will affect the company in its strategy from this point forwards and what changes management will put in place to bring overall performance back towards the original plan.

Understanding how the project fitted into the overall strategy will allow you to assess the implications of any performance deviation and to discuss these in a proactive manner at a strategic level.

Financial reporting

There is a strange tendency when reporting financial information to rely upon columns of numbers and little else. That is not good.

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Financial reporting must focus on the important strategic issues. The first item in a finance report should be a brief statement of the results of the period being reported compared with the results expected in the plan for that period. Any major deviation from plan should be highlighted with an explanation of its cause. Most boards like to see this information in their papers in the form of a paragraph of text or bullet points. Graphical representation is also useful, with column charts to show planned (or budgeted) and actual performance being particularly useful. Another useful representation is a bar or column chart to show variances, positive on one side of the axis and negative on the other. Variances should be stated in % as well as currency amounts so that the board can appreciate if it is a large variance in a small item or a small variance in a large item.

Use of colour can also help board members to see what is happening. Try highlighting any figure that is more than 10% from plan in red (if the variation is negative) or green (if the variation is positive). You will need to use different colours if you have directors on your board who are red-green colour blind.

Line charts are a good way to show trends for items such as projected cashflow or actual versus planned cashflow.

Be prepared to discuss the implications of the figures being reported. Don't just mention an overrun of costs; state what caused the overrun, what is being done to contain costs in the

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future and what implications this cost overrun will have for other elements of the strategic plan.

To present financial results well in the boardroom it is important to liaise with line management and understand the facts behind the figures. This will allow you to assist the board in making decisions as a result of the information presented to them. Remember that financial information is the result of ‘real-world’ actions and that the board will need to move, as a result of your presentation, into a decision-making state where tangible actions are directed.

Tales from the trenches

John is the treasurer of a small not for profit organisation. For a few years financial results had been good but, in the course of one over-ambitious year during which coincided with a market downturn, the company squandered most of its resources. Substantial cuts in plans and budgets were required to be made for the following year. John had to present this information to a board where he was the only financially literate member in a way that they would all understand: *I knew that if I just started with the numbers half the board would ‘tune out’ and many of the others would struggle to follow the story. Instead, I used an analogy to a bathtub where the funds carefully amassed over previous years had raised the water level, then a rapid plunge into the bath had splashed the water out and left us with barely enough to maintain basic cleanliness.*

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Continuing the bathroom theme I used pictures of a normal bathroom to show our investment levels over most of the past, a luxurious bathroom to show our investment in the previous year, and an outside toilet to indicate what we could afford in the coming year. The board immediately grasped the need for restraint and reduced investment. A fundraising project was started to raise money to recapitalise the company (Operation Water Level) and a cautious budget for the following year (New Foundations Plan) was adopted and adhered to. This was a major achievement as the board was comprised of headstrong individuals who had previously ignored budgets and entered into commitments the organisation could ill afford.

Take action: What complex information do you need to present to your board? Is there a visual analogy to help them rapidly assimilate the meaning of the information you are about to present?

Requesting Investment

Seeking budget for a course of action, investment or expenditure is a common cause of boardroom presentations. As with the project implementation review presentations, it is important to start from the strategic context. State what the investment means in terms of number and size of the opportunities created, percentage of cashflow, revenue, profit, or staff.

Explain what alternatives have been considered and how the proposed expenditure represents better strategic value than

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those alternatives. This is the point at which it is best to discuss the risks. It is never good to omit the risks from a presentation requesting authorisation for a new project or continuance of an existing project as that will lead the directors to think about risks and ask you questions for which you may not be prepared. It is better to analyse the risks and rewards of several viable alternatives and recommend the one that offers the best balance. This will allow the board to consider the risks in an appropriate strategic context.

If your board is sophisticated enough to have articulated a statement of risk appetite then make sure that your proposal suits the desired appetite. If there is no statement to guide you read the section on 'What Worries Board Members' and address the concerns that are most likely to be relevant to this particular board.

Give a plan of activities and cashflows over time and explain the assumptions upon which the plan is based. Provide the board with a proposed system for monitoring the project, state what you propose to monitor, how frequently you will monitor, what deviation from plan will be acceptable, and how you will report back to the board on progress.

It is also good to have some contingency plans to implement if any deviations exceed the tolerance levels that have been set and to discuss these with the board so that the directors are comfortable that the project still allows some control even if events should not proceed as planned.

Presenting to Boards

Committee Reporting

It is good practice for the Chairman of a board committee to provide a report to the board at the next board meeting after each committee meeting. These are difficult reports to give because you are moving from a position of being a board member into a position of reporting to the board. Be aware of the emotional context so that your subconscious reactions do not subtly undermine your good intentions.

Some boards maintain a specific chair for people to sit in when they are reporting to the board. If your board follows this practice, make sure you sit in that chair when giving your report and move back to your own chair afterwards. You will find that this helps you to switch from the mental states of a board (team) member and a reporter (individual) with specific responsibilities to the board. Experienced directors often talk about visualising themselves taking off or assuming different hats to assist in switching states.

Many boards expect all directors to receive all the papers for each board committee, even if they are not members of that particular committee. Most boards include the minutes of committee meetings with the papers for the next board meeting. That is a good practice as it ensures that directors have time to consider the work of the committee and prepare some questions to ensure they give good oversight to that work. In these circumstances it is sufficient for the committee Chairman to provide a single paragraph overview, or a set of brief dot points, setting out the key points covered in the meeting (which may not be the ones that have most volume in

Presenting to Boards

the minutes), and achievements, risks or recommendations for the board to consider. If required you can read that paragraph aloud at the meeting or simply mention that everyone has seen it and invite questions.

If your board does not provide copies of the minutes to all directors you may wish to ask the Chairman to consider doing so. If the request is denied or if you feel your minutes are too detailed for easy assimilation into the board papers then you will need to provide a longer report with a little more substantiating detail. If you have complex ideas to discuss it is worth the time and effort of using diagrams or charts to support the verbal information. These can be given as printed handouts, in the board papers, or shown as overheads.

Interviewing for a directorship

Standard practice for board interviews is still evolving and some boards have not yet developed rigorous processes with interviews for board candidates.

In the boards where interviews are performed there is a wide variety of different styles of interview used. Boards may choose to have the Chairman or a consultant conduct preliminary interviews, to select a panel from among the existing board members, to allow shareholders to participate in the selection process, to use the nominations committee members, to meet in formal or social surroundings, to interview on a site visit, or any combination of these techniques.

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For a board interview you must display good director behaviours; listening, asking open questions, and engaging with the interviewer. This is not the time to talk of your achievements. Your CV and/or reference checking before the interview should have provided that information. Now is the time to demonstrate how you would fit in with and complement the other board members. Your interpersonal skills, personal style and speed of information uptake will be assessed.

Preparation is very important. You should also have done enough homework to be confident that you can identify some of the strategies being implemented and talk about how you might assist in their governance.

This is also the time to demonstrate some keenness for the job in prospect as boards want directors who are passionate about the company. Your personal values will assist and you should seek to demonstrate these with practical examples.

Small things, such as politeness, respect and gratitude for the opportunity will make a good impression. Interruptions, distractions, inappropriate dress or mannerisms will count against you. Read the chapter on preparing to present for more detailed information on preparation.

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Tales from the trenches

Malcolm (not his real name) had a disastrous interview for the role of chairman of the board of a waste recycling corporation: *I was informed that the interview would take place at the site office and would be preceded by a site tour encompassing the landfill (tip) and recycling operations. The consultant assisting the shareholders with the recruitment did not know that the shareholders were only visiting the office, not participating in the site tour. I turned up in jeans and a sweater; they were in business suits and highly polished shoes. All my carefully prepared questions were met with the shortest possible answers and the interviewers had almost no questions to ask of me.*

Going into that interview I was the favoured candidate. After it I was off the list of candidates and onto the list of rejects. The feedback from the shareholders indicated that they believed I did not take the role seriously or treat the process with appropriate respect.

I heard afterwards that all the successful applicants (including the female ones) had made their site tours in business attire. Failure to check expectations cost me a coveted role with a great company.

Take action: Where did Malcolm source his information about the recruitment process and its priorities? Could he have dressed to suit both the site tour and a formal interview in the office?

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Background Briefing

Many boards like to receive briefings from experts on topics that may become strategically important to the organisation in the future. Some examples of topics for these briefings are:

- Climate change
- The economic outlook
- Generation X, Y or next
- Social media trends
- Doing business in a certain country
- Regulatory changes and trends

These briefings are often given by people who do not regularly interact with the board and are unfamiliar with the characters and behaviours that will be encountered in the boardroom.

If you are asked to provide a briefing for a board seek as much information as possible from the company before you present. It would be advantageous to know who will be present at the briefing, where your briefing sits in the agenda, what lies before and after the briefing on the agenda, why the board wish to be briefed on this topic, how soon they will have to make a decision involving information from the briefing, what information the board (or individual directors) may already possess, and how much written information they

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would like prior to your briefing and as additional reading post the briefing.

The more information you can get the better you will be able to target your presentation to meet the needs of the board.

As this is likely to be a new topic for the board you can expect the questions to cover a wide range of perspectives on the information presented. Do not be perturbed if the board ask questions that appear to be out of sequence; the directors are likely to tackle this presentation individually rather than as a group and the chairman will rarely direct the board to act in concert for a briefing.

Do not assume that, as the board are new to this topic, you will get an easy audience. Directors can, will and do ask their peers for information and will often come to the briefing having gathered as much information as they could prior to the meeting. Your role is to assist the board to reach a shared agreement as to which information is relevant and where they need to seek more detail.

Another important issue to consider is the likely strategic imperative behind the board's desire for your information. Put your data into the board's strategic context as much as is possible based on external research and information from management gained prior to the meeting.

Even though you are an expert on your own topic it is important to become familiar with the board environment to present well to boards. Read the sections on 'What Boards

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Do' and 'How Boards Operate' to help you to understand the role of the board. This will allow you to develop empathy and structure your presentation so that it is most useful and effective.

TOP TIPS

Think carefully about the purpose of your presentation.
Be aware of time constraints.
Focus on the information that is most relevant.
Respond to the board's requests for information.
Do not be concerned by apparently unfocussed questions.
Focus on the needs of the board, not on yourself, and you will succeed.

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Standard Presentations

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Prepared to succeed

This manual covers basic information required for presenting to governing boards. The ideas and information in this manual have been gathered from a lifetime of experience. This experience is often hard won and uncomfortably gained. Hopefully the learning from reading will assist you in avoiding many of these mistakes. Do not be discouraged however, if you find that in avoiding the pitfalls and setbacks outlined here you discover other, alternative, ways to mismanage the situation. Everyone learns through mistakes and experience. Good judgement comes from bad experiences and cannot be learnt by looking over another person's shoulder.

A personal message to you from Julie:

“As a veteran presenter in boardrooms and as a board member who has seen numerous presentations I have witnessed successes and failures. As a consultant I have coached and assisted many presenters to give their presentations the best chance of success. Not every presentation will elicit the reaction that was intended or hoped for by the presenter. Boards can, will and do form their own independent judgements.

By thinking through the issues outlined in this book and by following a well thought out plan to address the issues you

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can ensure that your presentation is pitched at the right level, supported by the right board papers, and delivered in the right way to grant yourself the best possible chance that your presentation will succeed.

You are now prepared to succeed in boardroom presentations. I wish you:

Good luck and great presentations! ”

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Recommended additional reading

Assertiveness and Diversity, Anni Townend

Boardrooms that work; a guide to board dynamics, Margot Cairns

Don't Picture me Naked! Michelle Bowden

Influencer: The power to change anything, K Patterson, J Grenny, D Maxfield, R MacMillan and A Switzer

Inside the Boardroom, Richard Leblanc and James Gillies

Perfect Phrases for Executive Presentations, Alan Perlman

Powerful Questions that Every Director, Executive and Manager Must Ask, Christo Nordern-Powers

Presentation Zen, Garr Reynolds

Presenting Phenomenally, Derek Arden

Running Board Meetings, Patrick Dunne

World Class Presenter; How to design and deliver awesome presentations, Matt Church

Write to Govern; How to write effective senior management reports and Board Papers, Mary Morel

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About the author



Julie Garland McLellan is a professional company director. She receives many presentations each year from staff, consultants, high level sales people and expert presenters. She is also a professional adviser to boards and makes many boardroom presentations, both to sell her services and to deliver information.

Julie has mentored many successful presenters to assist them in reaching the desired level of proficiency for boardroom presentations. This book is written from personal experience, personal observation, and long study of the topic.

Additional information is available online at www.mclellan.com.au

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Other publications by this author

All Above Board; Great Governance for the Government Sector, published by The Australian Institute of Company Directors, Sydney 2005.

Dilemmas, Dilemmas; Practical Case Studies for Company Directors, published by Great Governance, Sydney 2009.

The Director's Dilemma, an online newsletter for company directors, published by The Directors Dilemma, available online at www.mclellan.com.au/newsletter.html