

SIGMA

Leadership Series



**Great Leaders
Operate Upwards**



GREAT LEADERS OPERATE UPWARDS

“ To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.

– Anthony Robbins

There is no denying that the ability to communicate effectively is an essential skill for leaders. Communication can take many forms, but one area that may sometimes be overlooked is the ability for leaders to comfortably interact with senior management. Individuals who hold senior positions in organizations tend to be quite busy and their time may be limited. Those who are able to have relaxed, meaningful, and productive conversations with senior individuals have more opportunities to gather feedback or obtain support for important projects.

Operating upwards involves interacting comfortably with senior management using their language. It means both understanding their perspective and responding at their level. Individuals proficient in this area can convey information effectively, speak persuasively, and build positive working relationships. Research shows that employees who can skillfully interact with senior leadership are also seen as more promotable.¹

In assessing your ability to interact with senior leaders, ask yourself the following questions:

- How can I better understand the decisions made by the senior management team?
- Do I present information in a way that is familiar to senior leaders?
- Am I specific in what I need from the upper management team?
- What information is most relevant to senior management?
- Am I clear about the impact of my information and what action steps can be taken?
- How can I build stronger relationships with high-level leaders?

Improve Your Interactions with Senior Leadership

Respect their time: Senior executives are extremely busy and often have several competing priorities. Show them that you value their time by being concise and direct. When facilitating a meeting or delivering a presentation, be sure to begin on time, come prepared, and leave time for questions. Keep emails brief and clear. Senior executives do not have time to sit through lengthy meetings or read long-winded emails trying to decipher their meaning.

Understand their decisions: The factors that influence senior management’s decisions may be different from those factors that you encounter in your day-to-day work. You can begin to gain a deeper understanding of those things that impact their decisions by establishing strong foundational knowledge. Broaden your awareness of trends in the industry, competitor activities, and challenges faced by your organization. Then, pay attention to how senior management weighs these different factors when making decisions.

Speak their language: High-level executives often have a unique perspective of the organization and how it operates. As a result, their priorities are likely to be different from yours. Understanding these differences can be useful when deciding how to approach conversations. For example, you can make it easier for senior management to support your request by describing how the situation is relevant to them so they can apply it to their own work goals. Whenever possible, avoid technical jargon that is likely to obscure or complicate your message.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Operate Upwards More Effectively

The following steps can help you become better at interacting with senior leaders:

- 1. Lead with your key points.** Everyone is different, but upper-level executives tend to care more about important takeaways than about understanding every detail of a situation. You may be inclined to deliver all the information you have on a topic in order to demonstrate your expertise, but this strategy can make it difficult for management to know what to focus on first. Instead, start by outlining your key points and be clear about what the most important pieces of information are. Give others time to ask questions. These questions can be an opportunity to provide supporting details. You will still get your point across, but the message will be tailored to what others want to know.
- 2. Keep information actionable.** Members of senior management often get approached with problems or issues that need to be resolved. Looking for others to solve a problem for you can be a big ask and requires a lot of time and resource from busy executives. You might not be able to resolve issues without their input, but you can lighten their workload by coming prepared with your own suggestions and next steps. This gives others a starting point to build from and senior leaders are likely to appreciate your initiative. Research suggests that making your leaders’ life easier can improve the leader-follower relationship.² Next time you’re looking for input from others, consider what your own recommendations would be, and be prepared to speak about them.
- 3. Make informal interactions count.** Establishing a positive relationship with senior leaders is not limited to formal meetings. Practicing small talk can help you open the lines of communication and become more comfortable and confident in these interactions. Company social functions are also excellent opportunities to introduce yourself. Although you should be prepared to answer questions like “What are you working on right now?”, remember that senior leaders have interests outside of work. Don’t forget to assess the situation and leave the “shop talk” at work when appropriate.

Resources



[Communicating with Senior Management](#)



[Influencing Upwards: The Skill You Need to Get Ahead](#)



Develop your ability to operate upwards by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

References

¹ Thacker, R., & Wayne, S. (1995). An examination of the relationship between upward influence tactics and assessments of promotability. *Journal of Management*, 21, 739–756. doi:10.1177/014920639502100408

² Xu, A., Loi, R., Cai, Z., & Liden, R. (2019). Reversing the lens: How followers influence leader-member exchange quality. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 92, 475–497. doi:10.1111/joop.12268